

Argument on an issue of the novel a personal matter by kenzaburo

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



Name: Course: Lecturer: Date: Argument on an Issue of the Novel: A

Personal Matter by Kenzaburo Oe A Personal Matter is the story of a man who is forced by the circumstances in his life to grow up and take responsibility.

He is divided between either taking care of his wife and child who has a brain damage or fulfilling his fantasy of going to Africa with his girlfriend. Bird is unable to confront his problems because his whole life has been a fantasy and is now frustrated that he cannot cope with the grim realities of his life. The themes of individualism and escape recur throughout the novel. Because of Bird's escapism and individualism, he is initially incapable of loving his son and puts the life of his son in danger. He eventually changes and becomes a mature man, and is able to take responsibility for his life and that of his family. Bird's egotism is first seen as he looks at the map of Africa dreamily while his wife is deep in labor at the hospital about to give birth to their child. It is unusual that instead of being anxious or excited about the arrival of their first child, he is fantasizing about Africa, which in this novel is metaphoric for freedom and escape. Bird had been saving money to go to Africa since he was a child and the arrival of the baby would force him to forego his dream and stay at home fulfilling his duties as a husband to his wife and a father to his child.

This is because it would mean diverting the finances that he was going to use for his African adventure to caring for his new family. When he gets a phone call from his mother-in-law informing him that his wife has delivered an abnormal baby, he "shuts his eyes tight and tries to submerge in the

warmth of his bed as if denying reality.... But nothing changed” (Oe 14). This statement strongly proves that Bird was emotionally weak and that his escapism was a major problem. Bird is an escapist because he dreams of going to Africa but he seemed not to have structured his life to accomplish his dream. If he were determined to accomplish his dream, he would have put off marriage until when he was ready. He is discontent at not being able to travel, but instead of blaming the child and his wife, he should blame himself for his lack of planning. He uses his wife and child as scapegoats, and this further highlights his selfishness.

While contemplating his lost ‘freedom’ he says, “I’ve been in the cage ever since my marriage but until now the door has always seemed open; the baby on its way into the world may clang that door shut” (Oe 12). This proves that he is a selfish man, unable to willingly step up and take responsibility for his actions. Bird’s escapism and selfishness are also illustrated by his way of life before he got married. He had opportunities that he did not take advantage of due to his heavy drinking and lack of hard work and focus. He does not graduate from college; instead, he drops out and takes on a job that he feels does not match the potential that he had.

Dropping out of college without an alternative plan reveals his escapist tendencies; he runs away from responsibilities without second thought on the consequences of his actions. Alcoholism and laziness are both a form of escapism. His rampant self-indulgence shows that he is immature, and this is the main reason why he struggles after marriage because he has to face the stark realities of life. He was irresponsible before marriage and even after

marriage, he is appalled by the idea of eternally being responsible for a wife and child; he incessantly dreams of Africa because he feels trapped.

The author also gives the character the name ' Bird' to symbolize his tendency to ' fly away' from the real situations in life and build a nest in his mind where he can daydream and fantasize about his ideal life instead of accepting reality and facing challenges as they are. Bird's self-indulgence and escapism is also evidenced by his having an affair with an old girlfriend, Himiko, while his wife is still in hospital with their newborn son. He remembers her as soon as he thinks of the unpleasantness of having an abnormal son, and rushes to her house immediately. Himiko therefore is metaphoric for escapism; she provides him with a release from real-life's pressures and challenges. He is overwhelmed by the fact that firstly, his son has a brain deformity and secondly, he has to abandon all his dreams of freedom now that he is a father. At this point, Bird contemplates suicide because he is too absorbed in his own world to show any real care or maturity; suicide is a means of escaping the difficulties in his life (Wilson 29).

The sexual affair is also another symbol of escapism. This is because he uses it to numb himself and divert his attention to something more pleasurable than thinking of his wife and the newborn with a deformity. After the birth of his son, he also resorts to heavy drinking, in addition to the sexual affair with Himiko.

His escapism and selfishness do not go unnoticed by his wife, who comments that one day something critical would happen but he would be too lost in

alcohol and daydreams to even act. Bird does not change after the birth of his son, he becomes even worse, addicted to his African fantasy, which has no chance of materializing. Upon being told that his son had a herniated head, he immediately wishes he could go to the Nigerian plateau of his dreams to enjoy the freedoms and pleasures of his ideal life (Oe 52). This effectively reveals to the reader that his African dream is not just an ambition but is an obsession that allows him to escape life's difficulties.

Bird's relationship with Himiko represents his escape world, where he is free to act as he wants with no consequences. His relationship with his wife represents his real world, which is forcing him to be mature and take responsibility. He enjoys having sex with his ex-girlfriend more than he ever did with his wife and even becomes disdainful of his wife; this is metaphoric for his fantasy life versus his real life. Himiko represents his African dream; pleasurable and satisfying, she also helps him escape from daily life struggles and routines, albeit temporarily. After sex with Himiko, he says that he feels immense peace, while sex with his wife is not in the least bit pleasurable. This is symbolic of how he feels about his actual life in comparison to how he feels about his dream life. His fantasies leave him feeling happily satiated while his real life is gloomy and unpleasant. His fantasies go as far as imagining how he would divorce his wife once the baby dies.

He is disgusted with his baby and goes as far as referring to him as a monster. He hates the baby so much because it has ruined his plans of going to Africa and wishes it would die so that he could leave for Africa; his land of

complete escape and freedom. The child represents his loss of freedom and the force that catapults him to maturity. Because of his escapism, Bird is forced to face the consequences, which include his loss of employment; he went to work with a hangover after a night of alcohol, sex and African fantasies (Oe 35). Himiko is an escapist as well; her sexual adventures provide an escape from the troubles of daily life as a widow whose husband committed suicide. She also takes up the idea of traveling to Africa enthusiastically, because she thinks it will help her forget about the suicide of her husband. Through her influence, Bird concludes that he could get rid of the baby by taking it to an abortionist to be murdered.

Killing the baby would enable them to escape to Africa unencumbered. When Bird eventually changes his mind about going to Africa, she is so taken by the idea that she travels to Africa herself. Through her sexual escapades and determination to go to Africa, she embodies an individual struggling with escapism and an inability to confront reality. Her husband commits suicide in order to escape life's pain and troubles, hence is also an escapist. During Bird and Himiko's affair, Himiko's house represents a safe haven where Bird could find peace and solace from his life, just like the African dreams. Bird's individualism is evident in his relationship with Himiko, where he remembers her when he has problems and needs an escape.

During his misery, he plays out his sexual fantasies on her and promises her that they will go to Africa together, only to leave her when he realizes that he cannot run away from his problems long enough, and thus goes back to his wife and child. Bird is unable to think of anyone but himself and this is

well illustrated when he is trying to kill the abnormal baby so that he can have a chance to lead the easy life of his fantasies. He cannot imagine abandoning his utopian dreams for a 'monster', which the doctors have little doubt will ever live a normal life.

Bird's first attempt to kill the baby is shown when he conspires with a doctor to reduce the baby's food gradually until it eventually starves and dies. He is dismayed when the baby does not die and steals the baby from hospital to deliver him to a quack doctor who would kill the baby. Bird does all this so that he does not have to sacrifice his life to take care of a deformed child (Rahim 63). Bird's frustration is caused by the fact that he had idealized his perfect life from when he was a young boy. His plans were so rigid, such that when they failed to materialize, he gets so frustrated, and being immature, instead of facing up to his failures and mistakes, begins to fantasize even more, such that it becomes obsessive and affects the people around him such as his wife and his newborn son.

His escapism tendencies lead to him seriously contemplating the death of his son, such that he conspires with a doctor and even an abortionist to help him get rid of the 'monster'. Bird is a repulsive character, because he acts so selfishly and immaturely yet he is 27 years old. He still clings to his childhood dreams and ambitions yet now he is man with a wife and a child who need his special care and attention. His inability to confront the realities of life is made even worse by the fact that he is not ready to work actively towards making his dreams a reality. For instance, if he really wanted to

move to Africa, he should have postponed marriage, finished his degree and looked for a better job in an African country.

Now he mulls over his lost opportunities and causes his family misery in the process. Bird however decides to make a moral decision concerning his wife and child eventually and abandons his dreams of going to Africa to be with them. Works Cited Oe, Kenzaburo. *A personal matter*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1969. Print. Rahim, Fazul. *Thesis writing: a manual for researchers*.

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