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# PLOT AND COMPOSITION ORGANIZATION OF THE NOVEL "THE EMISSARY" BY MODERN JAPANESE-GERMAN WRITER YOKO TAWADA

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#### ABSTRACT

This article examines the narrative structure and arrangement of elements in Yoko Tawada's novel, "The Emissary," authored by a contemporary Japanese-German writer. The novel delves into a dystopian future, albeit with a distinct emphasis on exploring the human experiences within this setting rather than solely dwelling on its dystopian aspects. Through the portrayal of a select group of characters, the novel adeptly captures the essence of humanity amidst the impending apocalypse. Tawada's work serves as a contemplative piece that contemplates the themes of mortality and hope within an uncertain future, skillfully intertwining humor and darkness to create a unique literary experience.

# **K**EYWORDS

Yoko Tawada, Japan, Germany, literature, novel «The Emissary», «Kentoshi», «The Last Children of Tokyo».

# Introduction

Yoko Tawada, a renowned writer, has often been referred to as a "Japanese writer" residing in Berlin due to her alternating use of Japanese and German languages in her novels. However, this distinction holds significance primarily within an insular, monolingual, and nationalist society, precisely like the one portrayed in her novel "The Emissary."

#### **Objective**

This article aims to thoroughly analyze the narrative structure and composition organization

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of Yoko Tawada's novel, "The Emissary," crafted by a contemporary Japanese-German author.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"The Emissary," initially published in the Japanese literary magazine Gunzō in August 2014, is a novel authored by Yoko Tawada. Its English translation by Margaret Mitsutani, titled "The Last Children of Tokyo," gained recognition in the United Kingdom, while in the United States, it received the esteemed National Book Award for Translated Literature in 2018, under the title "The Emissary." Additionally, a German translation by Peter Pertner, entitled "Send bo-ote," was published in the same year.

The genesis of this novel can be traced back to a short story titled "Fushi no shima" or "The Island of Eternal Life," featured in the collection named Sore de mo sangatsu wa, mata. The protagonist, a Japanese woman residing abroad, narrates the transformations that unfolded in Japan after the events of March 11, 2011. These events were the consequence of the country's failure to implement necessary safety measures to prevent a recurrence of a catastrophe akin to the Subsequently, Fukushima disaster. undergoes self-imposed isolation, akin to the isolationist foreign policy of the Tokugawa Shogunate's "sakoku" era (1633-1853) during the Edo period. Radioactive material in the air has deprived the elderly of the ability to die, and they are caring for frail young children who are "too weak to walk or even stand, with eyes that can barely see and mouths that can barely swallow or

speak" . The absence of electricity relegates people to engage in activities like reading newspapers printed on wooden blocks and listening to storytellers accompanied by guitars or biwa lutes, reminiscent of the Edo era.

Expanding upon this foundation, the author further develops the story into a novel titled "Kentoshi" or "The Emissary." Employing a contemporary approach, Tawada skillfully integrates elements of symbolism, magical realism, and postmodern writing techniques.

The novel unfolds in a post-catastrophe era, surpassing the magnitude of the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, which displaced the entire archipelago, necessitating Japan to sever all connections with the outside world.

#### 「『どうして?』

『どの国も大変な問題を抱えているんで 一つの問題が世界中に広がらないように、そ れぞれの国がそれぞれの問題を自分の内部で解 決することに決まったんだ。前に昭和平成資料 館に連れて行ってやったことがあっただろう。 部屋が一つずつ鉄の扉で仕切られていて、たと えある部屋が燃えても、隣の部屋は燃えないよ **うになっていただろう。**』」

#### « -"Why is it closed?"

-"Every country has serious problems, so to keep those problems from spreading all around the world, they decided that each country should solve its own problems by itself. Remember when I took you to the Showa -Heisei Museum? All the

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rooms were separated by steel doors, so if a fire starts in one room it can't spread to the next one."»

electricity, household appliances, Internet. television and cars are no longer in use; fruits, vegetables and other plants are too polluted for human consumption; all animals except rented dogs and carrier pigeons have disappeared.

In addition, the elderly have stopped dying, children get sick, cannot walk and eat normally, and the gender of each person changes once or twice during their lifetime.

「自分の死んだ後の時間なんて存在しない。死 ねない身体を授かった自分たち老人は、曾孫た ちの死を見送るという恐ろしい課題を負わされ ている。」

«For an old man like Yoshiro? Time after death no longer existed. The aged could not die; along with the gift of everlasting life, they were burdened with terrible task of watching their greatgrandchildren die.»

Tokyo is a ghost town, real estate prices have plummeted, and people are fleeing to Okinawa, where they work in "fruit factories" because unpolluted fruits and vegetables are now the most sought-after commodity.

「農作物が海外から輸入されることがなくなっ てからは、オレンジもパイナップルもバナナも 沖縄からしか送られて来ない。」

«Ever since Japan had stopped importing food from abroad, all the oranges, pineapples and bananas came from Okinawa»

The novel, titled 献灯使 ("Kentoshi") in hieroglyphics, carries the profound meaning of "the messenger who presents the votive lantern to the deities in sanctuaries or temples." Notably, its homophone, 遣唐使 ("Kentoshi"), was historically employed to designate Japanese envoys dispatched to Tang China between 630 and 894. These envoys were tasked with acquiring and assimilating various aspects of Chinese civilization, including knowledge of Chinese medicine, governance, poetry, Buddhist practices, as well as culinary recipes, diverse musical instruments, and games like sugoroku and go . Even festivals such as Tanabata were brought back to Japan through these emissaries. It is worth mentioning that the protagonist, Yoshiro, references Tanabata as the title of an unfinished novel, which he hesitates to complete and conceals due to concerns about including too many foreign place names. This fear stems from the strict isolation policy enforced in Japan during that era.

The narrative of Yoshiro's story intricately intertwines with the presence of the outside world to such an extent that the elimination of all geographical references would result in the obliteration of the entire tale.

「地名は作品内に血管のように細かく枝を張り 、地名だけ、消すのは不可能だった。身の安全 のためには捨てるしかなく、燃やすのがつらい ので埋めたのだった。」

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«Place names spread throughout the novel like blood vessels, dividing into ever smaller branches, then setting down roots, making it impossible to eliminate them from the text.»

The main character of the novel, Yoshiro, takes care of his great-grandson Mumei, a child of exceptional intelligence and insight, although enclosed in a body too fragile to stand up for himself. Every day he becomes weaker and weaker, and Yoshiro is unable to help him, since no one knows how to cure Mumei and his peers.

In his work, Tawada makes it clear that the children are very sick, but it is not clear what exactly. The first is the real component of the novel, and the second is unreal. This technique is characteristic of magical realism.

「無名は青い絹の寝間着を着たまま、畳の上に べったり尻をつけてすわっていた。どこかひな 鳥を思わせるのは、首が細長い割に頭が大きい せいかもしれない。絹糸のように細い髪の毛が 汗で湿ってぴったり地肌に貼りついている。」

«Still in his blue silk pajamas, Mumei sat with his bottom flat on the tatami. Perhaps it was his head, much too large for his slender long neck, that made him look like a baby bird. Hairs fine as silk threads stuck to his scalp, damp with sweat.»

The various recurring images of birds throughout the novel are a kind of symbol that represents the possibility of freedom beyond the social structure. Most often, the author describes the Mumei as a bird, its appearance and movements imitate winged creatures.

「無名は膝のところから内側に曲がってしまう 鳥のような脚を一歩ごとに外側にひらくように して前進する。」

«Because Mumei's birdlike legs turned inward from the knee down, he turned them outward as he walked, step by step.»

Yoshiro is constantly busy, running around with a rented dog in the morning, helping Mumei with most of his daily chores outside of school and lamenting his great-grandson's physical disabilities and the difficult task of parenting in a polluted world. He torments himself with regrets and guilt that his generation could not preserve a world fit for future generations.

The plot of the novel is quite complex, non-linear, real events are intertwined with unreal ones, which is also inherent in magical realism. The story is a retrospective view of the composition, presented in the form of the main character's memories of his past.

Yoshiro often thinks about his family: his wife Marika, who always seemed to avoid him until work became a convenient excuse to move, his daughter Amana, who also suffers from the same itchy feet as her mother, who eventually moves to Okinawa with her husband, his rebel nephew Tomo, who did not even attend the funeral, left his wife and his son Mumei in the care of Yoshiro.

「義郎は、家族と離れて暮らしたがる遺伝子と いうものがあるのではないかと疑ったこともあ った。妻の鞠華、娘の天南、そして孫の飛藻、 みんなどこかへ吹き飛んでいってしまった。」

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«Yoshiro sometimes wondered if it wasn't genetic, this desire to find a life outside the family. His wife Marika, his daughter Amana, and his grandson Tomo had all taken off»

In addition to complicated family affairs, Yoshiro's paths intersect with the paths of episodic characters, such as a baker who calls his bread with German city names and hides them under Japanese hieroglyphs, or a carver who sells knives along with his autobiography.

Yoshiro is a member of the underground Emissaries Association, whose goal is to help selected young people take refuge on foreign ships so that international scientists can investigate the health of Japanese children. In addition to Yoshiro, the members of the club are the elementary school teacher Mummy, Anthony, and the teacher Suiren, Namoto, who lives next door.

「献灯使の会には、会報のようなものはないし 全員が一度に大勢集まるような会合はなく、 三人かせいぜい四人が個人<mark>の家に集まっ</mark>て話を するだけなので、会の存在が世間の目に触れる ことはなかった。会費もないし会員証もない。 本部は四国にあるが、挟い四国の中で八十八カ 所に散らばっているので、場所を確定しにくい ا ،

«The Emissary Association was unknown to the general public: there was no newsletter, nor did its members gather for large conferences. At most, three or four would meet at someone's house. There were no dues or membership cards. Headquarters was on the small island of Shikoku, spread out over eighty-eight different sites, making it extremely difficult to determine the exact location.»

This symbol of hope, similar to the flame of a candle that members of the Emissary Society light every morning before dawn, seems to go out in the last scene of the novel when Mumei loses consciousness, but the finale still remains open, which is also inherent in magical realism.

「『僕は平気だよ、とてもいい夢を見たんだ』 と言<mark>おうとしたが、舌が</mark>動かなかった。せめて 微笑んで二人を安心させてあげたい。そう思っ ているうちに後頭部から手袋をはめて伸びてき た闇に脳味噌をごっそりつかまれ、無名は真っ 暗な海峡の深みに落ちていった。」

«He wanted to say, "I'm all right. I just had a really nice dream," but his tongue wouldn't move. If only he could smile at least, to reassure them. That's what he was thinking when darkness, wearing a glove, reached for the back of his head to take hold of his brains, and Mumei fell into the pitch-black depths of the strait.»

According to Brian Haman's observations, "Yoko Tawada skillfully employs incongruous juxtapositions in her storytelling, resulting in a sense of incommensurability. Through the interweaving of plot threads, shattered flashbacks, and nonlinear perspectives, the narrative takes flight, momentarily pausing before veering off in unexpected directions, reminiscent of the elusive dragonflies of Yoshiro's youth" . Tawada adeptly combines these disparate plot elements into a narrative tapestry

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that imparts meaning to a dystopian world where the very concept of meaning itself appears to be gradually diminishing.

Furthermore, Tawada's postmodern writing technique merits acknowledgment, as it reveals her ironic stance towards present-day issues not only in Japan but across the globe.

In "The Emissary," she constructs a fictional realm where privatized police parades through the streets in the form of a brass band, performing circus melodies, as crime has become virtually nonexistent. Bankrupt financial institutions employ "Sorry-men" to apologize to disgruntled customers, allowing them an outlet for their anger. Professional educational establishments profit from parents' belief that admission to these costly schools signifies recognition of their child's talent, even if graduates struggle to secure employment or become subjected to exploitative wages.

Moreover, the national holidays within this world are depicted as "completely democratic," and people partake in elections to determine the name and date of each new holiday, as well as to potentially revoke or rename outdated holidays that no longer align with the prevailing state of affairs.

「『敬老の日』と『こどもの日』は名前が変わ って、『老人がんばれの日』と『子供に謝る日 』になり、『体育の日』はからだが思うように 育たない子供が悲しまないように『からだの日 』になり、『勤労感謝の日』は『生きているだ けでいいよの日』になった。」

«"Respect for the Aged Day" became "Encouragement for the Aged Day," while "Children's Day" was now "Apologize to the Children Day"; "Labor day" became "Being Alive is Enough Day".»

A notable and contemporary aspect of the novel "The Emissary" lies in its exploration of language dynamics and the portrayal of how language can distorted amidst he extreme social circumstances. In the the narrative. implementation of a new isolationist policy leads to the prohibition and subsequent neglect of foreign language studies. Katakana, one of the Japanese syllabic scripts traditionally utilized to represent foreign words, becomes reduced to a relic of the past. Yoko Tawada underscores the significance of language as a cultural currency and envisions its stagnation within a Japan isolated from the international community. The narrative paints a picture of Japan reaching a figurative dead end, devoid of a language that could be disseminated and shared.

「天拘社は岩手県に本社があり、靴の中に『岩 手まで』と毛筆で書いてある。この『まで』は 英語を習わなくなった世代が『made in Japan 』の『made』を自分なりに解釈した結果でき た表現だった。」

«The Tengu Company was based in Iwate Prefecture, and inside each shoe Iwate was written in India ink with a brush, followed by the kana for ma and de. The younger generation, who no longer studied English, interpreted the "made" and old "Made in Japan" labels in their own way.»

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But the world of the novel "Emissary" is not only a gloomy picture of the future. A kind of light in this story is one of the main characters, Mumei, in whom warmth and wisdom are felt, something simple, pure and undeniably good. After all, despite his deteriorating condition, the boy is carefree, cheerful and happy.

「曾おじいちゃんだって歯がないのにご飯たく さん食べるし、元気だし。」

«You manage to eat plenty without teeth, Greatgrandpa, and look how healthy you are.»

# Conclusion

In conclusion, Yoko Tawada's novel, "The Emissary," presents a distorted reflection of Japan that not only sheds light on its present-day challenges but also offers glimpses of a potential future. However, this depiction is not devoid of hope. Tawada skillfully preserves the inherent virtues of humanity and imbues them within the central protagonists of the narrative, Yoshiro and Mumei. By emphasizing the importance of cherishing these virtues, she urges readers to envision a brighter future for generations to come. Through her work, Tawada encourages contemplation and the cultivation of optimism, ultimately inspiring the reader to embrace the potential for positive transformation.

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