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The Relevance of Work for the Perception of Identity in Yoko Tawada's Prose Writing

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Draft paper

Abstract

Yoko Tawada describes in her narratives precarious, demanding, wearing or uncertain job situations, which have consequences for the awareness of identity and the self-consciousness of her protagonists. The arrival and stay in a foreign country – a characteristic setting of Tawada's prose writing – challenge this awareness. Her female narrators perform identity from a different standpoint – they are foreigners in Europe. In fact, reflections on Europe found in her work are famous and well discussed in the scientific community.

The relevance of work becomes apparent in her prose writing as well, from the newest novel *EtüdenimSchnee* to other, earlier ones like *Das nackteAuge* or shorter stories. The portrayed jobs range from writing and performing on stage to being unemployed. Those work experiences share the fact that work is relevant for creating identity: professions hold a different value based on society and are influenced by political circumstances, as seen exemplarily in her writing through stories of exile and forced escape. The observations of the protagonists on their work, cultural differences and on their own, ever-changing identity are highly self-reflective and therefore thought-provoking. Yet they are still caricaturing and humorous at times, always circling around the central topic of searching for and constructing identity as an outsider in a foreign place and culture.

Language plays the major role in perceiving and adapting to a different culture in Tawada's narratives, whereas the category of work seems to receive little consideration until now. This category, however, appears to be fruitful especially regarding the concepts of identity, which is why it will be focused in this paper.

Keywords: Yoko Tawada, Identity, German Literature, Migrant Literature, Europe

Introduction

Hybrid identities are omnipresent in modern Europe: The multicultural perspective can thereby provide different and fascinating views on Europe, but it can also reveal precarious situations and problems. One of those is the problem of finding and establishing one's own identity, especially while living at a foreign place, being confronted with a different culture and dealing with an unknown language. Identity is an ever-changing construct of experience and values. This construct is also the result of social interactions and therefore communication (Parry 2010) in general. Of course, while communicating and being influenced by society, the individual is affected by political conditions of the country he/she is living in as well, regardless of nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Postcolonial studies have therefore investigated different aspects of identity over the years, to the point where this term seems to be rather overused.

One current aspect is the importance of work for the self-awareness of an individual. Spending most of the day performing at a workplace leaves its mark on the individual, sometimes resulting in an identification with one's job. But the reputation of work is once again determined by society, for which work can be seen as a "mirror" (Boysen 2000: 94) regarding the actual status of social opinions. The confrontation of the individual with this public stance and tendencies is necessary, which is why work is so relevant for constructing identity. The constant change of workplace and job requirements result in the need for skills like adaptation and flexibility, which is one reason why identity is a fluid construct. The recent tendencies in the world of work show a growing dissolution of boundaries. Jobs gain in importance not only because of financial survival, but also through becoming more and more a part of the private life.

Observing and portraying views on identity is an important task not only for social, cultural or political sciences, but also for the literature studies (Wertheimer 1998: 135). Literature stores and reflects different constructions of identity. Novels can present a single person's life as an example for historical circumstances and entertain or provoke at the same time. It is possible that those texts can initiate a new public discourse or help remembering important aspects of the past (Jurt 1998: 96). Literature is indeed involved in establishing identity as well, even though it is mostly the collective identity that is influenced by it through creating publicity and showing the zeitgeist of a country or time (Parry 2010). Migration Narratives can hereby raise awareness for the addressed challenges of the postmodern era.

This certainly applies for the narratives of Yoko Tawada, who has become an important author of the literary scene in Germany. As she is writing and publishing in both German and Japanese, Tawada focuses the aspect of language in most of her narratives, essays, plays and poems. Many of her German-language narrations present the plot through the eyes of an outsider living in a foreign country. In order to represent observations of the foreign cultural and

social life around those outsiders, surrealistic descriptions are employed which appeal alienating to readers. Her writings “continuously question and deconstruct our readerly expectations” (Brandt 2005: 1).

Noticeable is the connection of self-perception and work in her prose writing, especially since most of her narrators are working or searching for a profession while living in an unfamiliar environment. The effects of work on the protagonists will be analyzed here by focusing on Tawada’s novels/narratives. Not only is the narrator’s own status important, but their view on other people and the importance of work for those and for society around them. Thereby it becomes evident that Tawada portrays different work-related problems that can emerge for the individual where identity is concerned. One the problem is uncertainty.

Uncertainty: Lying about or Denying the Profession

Throughout the early novel *Das Bad* [The Bath] the professions of the female first-person narrator are mentioned several times. Indeed, the protagonist can be situated in a condition of “in-between”, for she not only moves between Germany and Japan and the corresponding cultural characteristics, but also between human and animal and photographing and writing, as Hallensleben (2014:170) points out. Likewise uncertainty is evident regarding the plot. Hence, it is no surprise that the described work situations of the protagonist change during the text, parallel to the multiple identities shown (Hallensleben: 176).

The first mentioned activity as an interpreter is already seen ambivalent by the narrator. Although this job is necessary for earning a living, it does not seem to suit her well, as she does not like to speak in front of other people, especially not in her native language (Tawada 2010:47). She is therefore not able to perform her work as a Japanese-German interpreter during a business lunch. This job ends with her stuttering and finally fainting. Upon awakening, she meets a woman which is heavily burned and apparently committed suicide. She removes the protagonist’s tongue, whereby the events circling around that woman remain open for interpretation throughout the novel. Because part of the protagonist’s skin has turned into fish scales, she expresses the desire to go to the circus, this event later being found out to be a dream. Surprisingly, all the women working at the circus are busy with an internal fight among themselves, where the looser has to wear a bridal gown and quit the job. This dream might represent the narrator’s desire to avoid marriage or a life without a proper job, maybe even to avoid the dependence on a husband or any male. Moreover, the dream draws attention towards the balancing act for women between marriage/family life and the job.

Only while visiting her mother she admits her unemployment (Tawada 2010: 139), contrary to her stories of different work experiences. After that episode the reader is informed that she is working as a typist, not as an interpreter, and that she is typing down the words of the burned woman whose voice she is able to hear. Her identity problems, for which the varying jobs can stand for, become also apparent by the daily act of applying make-up in front of a mirror. This event is mentioned in the very first pages and shows the attempt of the narrator to match her appearance in order for her to resemble a certain photograph. In a way this is an act of establishing identity each morning anew (Weinberg 2012: 224). But the identity she is trying to build is not a true one. The photograph derives from one job as a photo model, where she was pictured as the stereotypical Asian woman. The conflicting self-awareness (Weber 2009: 83) of the narrator and therefore her perception of identity are, among others, defined through that picture, which is the product of a job.ⁱ

In the same way as the protagonist the person Xander is mentioned with different professions. At the beginning he is the photographer who is taking the pictures of the narrator for commercial purposes. For that reason he changes in a brute manner the appearance of the narrator so that she looks like a geisha. Afterwards he works as her German language teacher and lastly he is a carpenter that is constructing wooden things for her. Thus a transition from an artistic to a teaching and a technical profession took place, while the narrator denies any job-ascription in the end (Tawada 2010: 183), speaking of herself as a transparent coffin.

While the protagonist of *Das Bad* ultimately denies any profession and seems to not tell the truth about her jobs during the novel, the latter does apply above else to the first-person narrator in “Fersenlos” [Missing Heels]. The narrative starts with her reaching a city in a foreign European country as a “mail-order bride” that still has to see her husband for the first time. Over her descriptions of the new daily routine it becomes apparent that the husband is absent and avoiding her during the day. The narrator, who again needs to find herself in a new culture (Łacka 2010: 433), is surrounded by working, independent and often divorced women. Those women face problems in the world of work, which are endangering or even sicken them, yet they are proud of their independence at the same time.ⁱⁱ One of them—the protagonist’s integration course teacher—confronts her with stereotypes regarding foreign brides, which the narrator does not accept for herself.

By dealing with people around her the narrator recognizes that they are above all interested in the work of her husband: “Alles schienensienurandemBerufmeines Mannes interessiert zusein, ich war ihn gleichgültig” (Tawada 1994: 62) [“Everyone seemed to be only interested in the profession of my husband, they did not care about me”]ⁱⁱⁱ. The interest in the husband’s job does not solve the mystery regarding the situation of the narrator and whether her husband even exists.

Apart from this, the narrator is lying regarding the profession of her husband and states a different job each time she is asked about it. From work at the stock market to being a novelist or a director of a company, the

variety of mentioned jobs is connected to the narrator's dialogue partners and the situations where she is asked about it. Due to the answers of the others, she realizes the value of work and independence, notably for women in the modern era of this culture: "[...] begriff ich aber, daß es nicht ausreicht, sich nur scheiden zu lassen, um von der Gesellschaft anerkannt zu werden, braucht man einen Beruf" (Tawada 1994: 58f.) ["I realized that a divorce is not enough, to get acknowledgement from society you need a profession"].

Both texts illustrate how different professions and the pressure of society surrounding them can create uncertainty that is reflected in the self-perception. Another work-related problem appears if the preconditions of even being allowed to work are not fulfilled.

Illegality: Unemployment

Das nackte Auge [The Naked Eye] depicts the tale of a stranded woman that has to face a world where she does not know the language, which ultimately leads to both unemployment and illegality. While visiting East Germany in 1988 for a speech, the young Vietnamese is abducted and taken to West Germany, her abductor believing to do her a favor. There she takes the train one day and reaches Paris, although her intended destination was Moscow.^{IV} She lives with different persons in Paris—for example with another Vietnamese woman she met in the train—but is left helpless considering she cannot speak French and does not possess a visa. The sense of illegality is connected to the missing visa, but to not having a proper work as well, because this fact adds to the feeling of not fitting in and attracting attention as an illegal element: "Jeder hätte sofort bemerken können, dass ich kein Recht hatte, in dieser Stadt zu sein" (Tawada 2010: 50) ["Everyone could have immediately noticed that I did not have any right to be in this city"]. The first-person narrator even reflects about unemployment resulting in looking suspicious in the eyes of other people, which is for her one of the main reasons why they go to work (Tawada 2010: 82).

This precarious situation does have effects on her self-confidence and awareness of identity. As a student in Vietnam she was seen as intelligent and held in high regard by the people around her, whereas her acquaintances in Paris only look upon and know her as someone without an education or the ability to speak the language. One acquaintance therefore suggests that she works in a factory, a desire the narrator herself expresses. The missing visa is again the reason why she begins an unofficial, secret work where she is being experimented upon in a private clinic. Contrary to the exploitative nature of her new secret job, the protagonist's self-awareness is raised through working: "Ich hatte keinen Grund mehr, ein schlechtes Gewissen zu haben. Ich arbeitete, ich war eine Arbeiterin und nicht mehr niemand" (Tawada 2010: 82) ["There was no reason for feeling guilty anymore: I was working, I was a worker and not nobody"]. The work, however shady it seems, strengthens her identity. After a short while she is dismissed, because of talking back to one of the doctors. She is back again within the circle of not being able to learn the language or to work because of being an illegal immigrant and likewise not being able to leave this illegal status, due to a lack of language skills and a proper job.

The educational aspect of her initial travel to West Germany fails (Gentz 2012: 186) like her subsequent efforts in Paris to live a normal life. After being there for a while she becomes disillusioned, not believing that her dream of studying in France could become true anymore. What remains is observing the world, in her case through visiting the cinema in Paris and conducting a fictive dialogue with a French actress.

Furthermore, her observations on other people provide a confrontation of different working classes. From student to doctor or prostitute, she meets both well- and badly-situated people. Independent from their milieus, professions and situations they are positively and negatively portrayed: the prostitute Marie is described as a "protector" who is sharing her home, whereas the student from West Germany is pictured as a "kidnapper". The doctors in the private clinic where she has been employed in are only concerned about profit, while the Vietnamese doctor with whom she was living for a while is portrayed as a hard-working and reasonable man. Therefore identity is marked as influenced by work, but personal traits are not connected to specific professional groups.

Das nackte Auge points to the inseparable connection of work and education and to consequences that can arise if the latter is missing while an access to gaining education and therefore a proper work is barred. Those consequences show themselves especially regarding one's own perception of identity. This perception can also be challenged if the profession itself is influenced by historical or political circumstances.

Risks: Dangerous Professions

In Tawada's newest novel *Etüden im Schnee* [Etudes in Snow] the life stories of three polar bears are presented through first-person perspective. The animalistic point of view provides a new way of looking at daily things and humanity, but at the same time the narrators do inherit typical human traits. This combination ensures both humorous and thoughtful insights. The life stories show the impacts of historical and political backgrounds of the GDR or Soviet Union, but the novel can be read in a more lightly manner, perhaps as a satire, too. Therefore, different topics are addressed, but the view on work by the polar bears in relation to their lives is one of the major ones.

In the first etude the relation between the profession of a writer and an artist as well as the consequences for life and identity are approached. The female polar bear becomes a writer^y and reconstructs her memories retrospectively. By remembering the conditions of her past work at the circus and by thinking about the present she realizes the compulsion to work. Her career choice was decided by others and she performed to get food and ultimately to survive:

“Tag für Tag wurden wir alle in eine Sackgasse getrieben und taten das Minimale, um zu überleben, was gleichzeitig die maximale Herausforderung bedeutete. [...] Wir haben keine Wahl im Leben, weil das, was wir können, im Hinblick auf das Leben nicht so viel ist, wie wir uns einbilden. Aber wenn wir dieses Wenigenichthundertprozentighinkriegen, können wir nicht überleben“(Tawada 2014: 43) [“Day after day all of us were driven into a corner and did the minimum in order to survive, which is the maximum challenge at the same time. [...] We do not have a choice in life, because of what we are able to do with regard to it is not as much as we imagine. But we will not be able to survive if we do not do that little bit 100% right”].

By realizing that career choices are restricted to individual talents, one perceives identity as limited regarding the possibilities. The career at the circus is short-lived due to an injury. While working at an office—she admits she was lucky to get another job at all, because normally she would have been shot dead—the urge to remember her past leads to start writing her own autobiography. In literature the problems of identity and memory are often discussed through this genre, and the polar bear reflects, for example, on the difficulties of accurate memory as well.

During her reflections she compares the artistic, technical work at the circus with being an author. The hard physical training at the circus was difficult, but in the end a sense of achievement was reached, as well as security regarding own abilities and work. Especially this security is missing in the profession of writing. She instead compares writing with hunting, because both activities include effort, uncertainty and existential anxiety to fail. (Tawada 2014: 41).

After she started to write her own autobiography, she begins to look at society and work from a different angle. As the recognition of her written work grows in the society, she becomes aware that she finally performs the transition to being an author. At the same time she has to deal with greedy and dishonest publishers and with her own, unfinished work being used in the context of a political debate regarding socialistic animal-abuse. This was not intended and the consequences are dire. She cannot publish her text in the Soviet Union anymore and is being pushed to the edge of society. An arranged escape into exile by an activist organization from West-Germany seems to be the rescue. Being an exile author now, she is strongly encouraged by her rescuers to continue writing, but new problems arise. The whole situation of living in exile in a foreign country and under the roof and care of exploitative human rights activists let her inspiration to write come to a standstill (Tawada 2014: 75). She is increasingly insecure about her own identity, not least because of the new language surrounding her, which makes her ponder if it would be more fitting to write in German. This would also prevent a translator from changing the meaning of the text so that it can be more easily inserted into the ongoing political debate. After a radical right-wing attack on her she is sent to Canada.

The polar bear, a grandmother for the other bears in the novel, approaches both her confusion about her own identity and writer’s block through an attempt to regain control over her life. For this purpose she decides not to write down memories anymore, but the future which, according to her, will happen in the same way as it was written down. Contrary to this new-found security concerning her life, uncertainty remains. As a metaphor for this remaining uncertainty she uses the image of constantly shrinking ice floes. Once you have finally found a fitting ice floe—here interpreted as an image of life and work coexisting well—the time you are able to spend on it is indeterminate, as it steadily melts and possesses the danger of vanishing completely (Tawada 2014: 93).

The circus takes center stage in the second etude, which focuses on both the daughter of the first polar bear and her human partner Barbara, a circus actress. Both are treated as outsiders at a young age and recognize themselves therefore as unfitting for the “normal” society. The circus is seen as the right work- and living place for such individuals (Tawada 2014: 77). The stage holds the opportunity of exceeding borders and experiencing transformation. It is a place of wonder, but of illusion as well, because the circus, despite its special position in society as an “isolated island” (Tawada 2014: 189), is not detachable from political power and intervention. The whole history of the circus in Europe until the nineties is depicted in *EtüdenimSchnee*. That also includes dealing with censorship, sponsors and more.

Already at an early stage in life an ordinary job is no option for Barbara. The entrance into the circus is difficult, because its members often derive from circus-families. Barbara is able to start working there through small jobs like cleaning and child-caring. Her climb onto stage and fame is shown as a result of luck and coincidences. The work on stage effects everyone working in the circus. The addiction to perform on stage leads to abandonment of other, important things—in Barbara’s case, her daughter—or even of one’s self, as seen through Barbara’s husband Markus. He, like any of Barbara’s love interests, is also a circus employee. He wants to leave this business, but is unable to do so and later killed by a bear on stage. The decay of the circus and finally its dissolution leaves Barbara disappointed in humanity and living the rest of her life in solitude (Tawada 2014: 204), while the polar bear Toska joins the zoo. This zoo is the focus of the last etude, which centers on the famous polar bear Knut in Berlin. Unlike his ancestors, he had no education whatsoever, but discovers that he can reach the people’s hearts through his natural playful behavior, which becomes difficult to preserve as he grows older while being no longer of media interest.

Although the humorous and caricaturing tendencies are evident in *EtiidenimSchnee*, not least because the text is conveying the perspective of animals, a slightly serious approach shows that the novel links the portrayed work situations of its protagonists closely to the corresponding political backgrounds and that this can be dangerous for the self-perception of identity whenever politics and work collide.

One different example of how dangerous the influence of work can be is suicide wherever it can be linked to work. Suicide itself is a reoccurring aspect in the prose work of Tawada. This aspect stands out in both *Das Bad* and in the novel *Schwager in Bordeaux* [Brother-in-law in Bordeaux], where Protagonist Yuna recalls past experiences, one of them being a job at an office. There she follows the transformation of her co-worker Walter. After the company moves to a different building, he seldomly shows up at work. Unlike the other employees he is critical about the move and the technical advantages it provides in monitoring the staff, for example. He is not able to adapt and long before his actual suicide Yuna imagines him jumping out of the office window (Tawada 2008: 65). Suicide because of problems deriving from, with or at work is one of the most extreme examples of the influence of work on identity.

Conclusion

The problems deriving from work for the modern individual seem to be plenty and further challenged through a multicultural perspective on Europe. Tawada's prose writing addresses some of those problems while taking the viewpoint of both outsiders and women. For example, *Das Bad* can be read in many ways, one reading could see the plot as one form of extreme alienation through work to the point where work is detached from identity completely. One alternative to that would be to succumb to the pressure of society, by either adapting to society's opinion in order to gain respect or by lying, as seen in "Fersenlos". The connection of work and education together with the lesser self-respect unemployment can cause are shown in *Das nackte Auge*. *EtiidenimSchnee*, however, emphasizes the aspect of having no choice but to work in order to survive while sometimes being pushed around by dangerous circumstances. It is shown that one can be addicted to work or extremely influenced by it to the point that suicide remains the only option. The approach of the protagonists – neglecting, lying, accepting, giving up or trying to gain control – and their varying jobs show the changeability of identity as well. There is no single identity, as Tawada promotes herself^{vi}, but a variety based on society and the constant change there. Narratives like those from Tawada should therefore be involved in discussions about European identity, because they provide a multicultural, surreal and even humorous perspective on this topic.

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ⁱAccording to Weber, mirror and photography are generally identity-determining in *Das Bad* (cf. Weber 2009: 90).

ⁱⁱThe professions of the women include being a teacher, nurse or accountant. The mentioned jobs of the men around the narrator are fascinating for her especially when they are technical jobs.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since I was using the German versions – some of the texts does not have an English version yet – all English translations are provided by me.

^{iv}As Slaymaker points out, a lot of Tawada's protagonists seem to travel passively because of chance encounters or suggestions by others (Slaymaker 2010: 327).

^v "Tawada often employs in her works female narrators who are often literally ,women of letters [...]" (Łącka 2010: 430).

^{vi}Tawada stated regarding identity: "When I was introduced to European culture and its modern concepts of identity, I noticed that there is an unrelenting search for one single identity. I however, could not work with that idea. I started searching, unconsciously, for realms in which different types of identity are represented. I looked in all kinds of different areas: in classical mythology, in fairy tales, in old Asian pre-literary myths, in African legends, in all kinds of places where elements were reshuffled again and again" (Brandt 2005: 11).

Short CV

Yvonne Dudzik is Ph.D. candidate at the Ruhr-University Bochum in Germany in the field of New German Literature Studies. She holds a Master's degree in German Studies and Philosophy. In her present research she investigates the numerous intertextual references and intertextuality in general in Uwe Johnson's *Jahrestage* [Anniversaries], one of the most memorable post-world war II German novels. Apart from Johnson, her academic interest includes other, often experimental novels since 1950 and Intercultural German Studies. She has presented papers in conferences with regard to Intercultural German Studies, for example by discussing the Transit Spaces in Tawada's writings.