

## YOKO TAWADA IS A WRITER «WITHOUT BORDERS»

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### Abstract

This article focuses on Yoko Tawada, one of the most famous modern representatives of Japanese and German literature of the late XX – early XXI century. The uniqueness of the writer lies in the fact that, having left the space of her native language and adopted a new one, she strives to visualize the possibilities of both in her texts, which, in turn, was a prerequisite for literary bilingualism and the disclosure of another culture. It is for this reason that she is considered to be a hybrid writer who can produce texts that go beyond the national culture. For her, there is no border between East and West, because both the left and right sides of the horizon are equally native. According to her value coordinates, Yoko Tawada is a citizen of the world, so she can safely be called a writer «without borders».

**Keywords:** Yoko Tawada, Japan, Germany, emigrant literature, hybrid identity, the phenomenon of androgyny, bilingualism, writer «without borders», «The Emissary», «Encrusted in the Earth», «Written in the Stars»

### Introduction

Yoko Tawada is one of the most famous living representatives of Japanese emigrant literature, writing in two languages – Japanese and German.

Knowledge of several languages was a prerequisite for literary bilingualism, thus the writer is considered to be a hybrid person who can create transnational texts.

After emigration to Germany, Tawada found herself, from a cultural point of view, in a favorable environment where there is a great interest in foreigners writing in German. This, in turn, had a positive impact on her career.

### Objective

The aim of this article is to analyze the life and career of a modern representative of Japanese emigrant literature, Yoko Tawada.

### Results and Discussion

Yoko Tawada was born in Nakano, Tokyo. In 1979, at the age of 19, she took the Trans-Siberian Railway to visit Germany. She received her undergraduate education at Waseda University in 1982 with a major in Russian literature, and upon graduation moved to Hamburg, Germany, where she began to study modern German literature. In 2000 Tawada received her doctorate in German literature from the University of Zurich, where Sigrid Weigel, her thesis advisor, had been appointed to the faculty. In 2006 she moved to Berlin, where she currently resides.

Yoko Tawada began publishing in 1987. She made her debut with a bilingual collection of poems and prose «Nothing Only Where You Are» («あなたのいるところだけ何もない» – «Nur da wo du bist da ist nichts»). Her literary talent was

manifested in various literary genres (lyrical, dramatic, epic), subgenres (short story, novel, novel, play) and in «borderline» (sub)genres at the intersection of literature and radio (radio plays), literature and music (libretto), science and literature (essays). In addition to original literary works, she wrote an excellent dissertation «Toys and Linguistic Magic in European Literature» («Spielzeug und Sprachmagie in der europäischen Literatur», 2010) following example of the works of the German romantic writer, composer, artist E. T. Hoffmann<sup>1</sup>.

The knowledge of several languages allowed the writer to get into other language spaces, which, in turn, was a prerequisite for literary bilingualism and the disclosure of another culture. It is for this reason that she is considered to be a hybrid writer who can produce texts that go beyond the national culture.

As noted by A.V. Belobratov, «Yoko Tawada left the space of her native language, adopted a new language and strives to clearly present the possibilities of both languages in her texts. Europe and Japan are also entering into a dialogue on a meaningful level, since in her texts she constantly refers to ancient Japanese myths and fairy-tale images. A mixed form, a mix – that is, German texts with Japanese hieroglyphs and writing elements, is more art than literature, according to Tawada herself»<sup>2</sup>.

The writer's career among Russian-speaking readers is known to a narrow circle of connoisseurs of Japanese literature. Only two books have been translated into Russian - the novella «The Bridegroom Was a Dog» («犬婿入り») and the novel «Suspect on the Night Train» («容疑者の夜行列車»). For the first work, she was awarded the Akutagawa Prize<sup>3</sup>, for the second – the Tanizaki Prize<sup>4</sup>, two of the highest literary awards in Japan. She also has the highest literary awards in Germany: the Kleist Prize<sup>5</sup> and the Goethe Medal<sup>6</sup>.

Yoko Tawada can be safely called both a Japanese and a German writer, because she writes in both languages. And her name has been flashing for several years in the lists of the most likely candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The writer began to get interested in the Russian language and literature at the beginning of her career. In high school, she fell in love with Dostoevsky's works. And at the university she began to study Russian. At that time, Japan had an American education system, so the first two years of the bachelor's degree students simply studied general subjects and acquaintance with Russian literature was short to really study it. Despite this, Tawada was fond of this subject. She even wrote a paper about the work of Bella Akhmadulina in her last year of university. But after getting a job in Germany, in Hamburg, she moved there and after that she had no opportunity to continue studying Russian, because she had to go into German. Tawada herself is very sorry about this.

Many years later, in Japan, she wrote her own version of the play «The Cherry Orchard» by Chekhov. And after that, she created her own version of the social and household play «Mystery-Bouffe» by Mayakovsky. So, her interest in Russian literature has never waned.

Among the representatives of Russian literature, Tawada singles out her favorite poets Bella Akhmadulina<sup>7</sup>, Marina Tsvetaeva<sup>8</sup>, Anna Akhmatova<sup>9</sup>, playwright Anton Chekhov<sup>10</sup> and writers Fyodor Dostoevsky<sup>11</sup> and Mikhail Bulgakov<sup>12</sup>.

The writer compares Dostoevsky with drugs: «Dostoevsky is like drugs, you get hooked on him. At the same time, you don't want to write like him, and you can't answer the question why you love him. But this writer becomes a part of you, and you will never be able to extract it from yourself»<sup>13</sup>. She is also connected with Bulgakov by very warm memories: «In October<sup>14</sup>, I visited Ukraine, was in Kiev and Mariupol in connection with the presentation of my book. I visited his museum. You can't imagine how much I love his novel "The Master and Margarita"! »<sup>15</sup>.

Certainly, such interest in Russian literature had an impact on the writer's works.

Russian names of cities, streets, organizations, etc. are often found in her works. For example, in the novel «Suspect on the Night Train» («容疑者の夜行列車») she mentions a city like Sakhalin: «... she wants to stay in New York and finish a book about Sakhalin, sitting in the KGB bar on Second Street in New York<sup>16</sup>». And in the novel «Memories of a Polar Bear» («Etüden im Schnee»), the great-grandmother of the main character is a living in Russia.

In addition, Tawada often uses elements of magical realism inherent in Mikhail Bulgakov's works, such as the anthropomorphism. For example, in her novel «Memories of a Polar Bear» («Etüden im Schnee»), the main characters are talking polar bears.

To top it all off, the style of Yoko Tawada, as well as the style of Fyodor Dostoevsky, tends to be occasional. She constantly searches for unusual, expressively colored words and expressions, noting them in notebooks in order to include in the speech of her characters or «equip» with her own author's speech. In addition to this constant collection of unusual words and expressions, Tawada herself acts as a «language-maker», she persistently demonstrates the possibilities of word-formation models of the Japanese and German languages as a guarantee of the inexhaustible richness of speech. In her collection of essays entitled «Überseetzungen<sup>17</sup>», she reflects on this topic in more detail.

Russian may have been forgotten by Yoko Tawada, but her interest in Russian literature has never faded and, certainly, this has affected the career of the writer herself. After all, her works contain elements inherent in her favorite Russian writers, which can interest connoisseurs of such literature.

Besides Russian literature, Tawada was also fond of German, which also impacted on her career. Among her favorite writers, she singles out Paul Celan<sup>18</sup>, Heinrich von Kleist<sup>19</sup>, Walter Benjamin<sup>20</sup> and Franz Kafka<sup>21</sup>.

The influence of Kafka can be traced in many Yoko Tawada's works, but this is especially evident in the novel «Suspect on the Night Train» («容疑者の夜行列車»).

The everyday protocol style of narration and the absurd reality inherent in this work reminds the style of the well-known Franz Kafka: «The station looked somehow strange. There were frighteningly few passengers on the platform. The railway workers' eyes were running around, they were clearly hiding something. Should I approach someone and ask what happened? Stupidly. It remains to observe what is happening in silence. Some kind of mystery has enveloped the station, but you are not able to pull it off»<sup>22</sup>. However, the heroine of the novel is not as indifferent as Kafka's Josef K. – and she is never alone, sometimes separating, sometimes merging with her author as needed. She is the owner of the second person, a participant in a strange, incomplete dialogue. A kind of relative glimmer of consciousness, a flickering observer of an incredible happening that is about to disappear into this happening. The identity of the author and the heroine is incomplete, the dialogue of the heroine with reality is also incomplete: whether it is a strange young man chasing a ballerina at exhibitions; or a woman with huge nails – everything is marked by the seal of phantasmagoria and some kind of obsessive game in which the heroine is involved. The reader sees only the flat, faded shadows of cities, and in a sense, he will begin to worry that these are the shadows of entire cities, that in some way the whole world may be immersed in such a dream, may be shrouded in a veil of alienness and illogic.

As can be seen, adopting certain things from one of her favorite writers, Tawada does not forget about her own style, which makes her work even more interesting for analysis.

Being a bright representative of the androgynous (Grigory Chkhartishvili's term) literature of the late XX and early XXI centuries, in whose consciousness the West / East are relative «values», the writer often plays with geographical names that are relative denoters of the value world. A striking example is the essay «On the Spree» («An der Spree», 2011): «I'm in Europe, I don't know where I am. One thing is certain: the Middle East is not far from here. The place where the Middle East is very close is called Europe. When I lived in the Far East, the Middle East was far away. But that was a mistake. The Middle East was quite close to the Far East, as it was thought of in the Far East. < ... > Europe is located where the Silk Road ends. < ... > Europe is where the planes land»<sup>23</sup>.

Another example is the essay «U.S. + S. R. Eine Sauna in Fernosteuropa», in which Tawada continues to demonstrate the game with geographical concepts. It is dedicated to her journey from Wakkanai to Sakhalin. It's important to pay attention to the title of the essay, because it is ambiguous. «U.S. + S. R.» can be read both as USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), and as U.S. (USA) + S. R. as Sozialistische Republiken (socialist republics, the current CIS space), that is, as a sign of Sovietism, and as Sowjetisches Russland (Soviet Russia), if read in German.

It is evident from the examples cited earlier that thanks to technology, means of transportation and communication, the world has turned into a «global village». The West and the East began to come into closer contact in all spheres, including the literary one. Grigory Chkhartishvili accurately noted: «...at the end of the XX century, a certain qualitative barrier was overcome and it became possible to talk about

literature for which there is no East and West, or rather, there is no border between East and West, because both the left and right sides of the horizon are equally native for writers of this direction»<sup>24</sup>. Yoko Tawada herself puts it this way, «Being a foreigner is an art» («Fremd sein ist eine Kunst», 2009): «< ... > when the Japanese see photos of my chaotic room, they think: «Oh, there are a lot of European things there». I think then, which European, which Japanese? Is the sister's piano «Yamaha» Japanese or European? I've never shared it»<sup>25</sup>.

Or in the essay «Living in Japan» («Wohnen in Japan») Tawada notes that in Japanese interiors it is much more common to see different types of carpets than tatami<sup>26</sup>. In Japanese homes, European-style tables are adjacent to small Japanese winter kotatsu<sup>27</sup> tables. Next to the «home altar» – a TV – you can see a Bavarian cuckoo clock. Thanks to modern technologies, the Internet, global trading companies (such as Amazon, Aeon, AliExpress, Carrefour, Ebay, Tesco PLC, The Home Depot, Inc., Walmart, etc.) any goods of the world become accessible, giving variety to our interiors, as indicated by the Tawada herself in Japanese clothing units.

It is worth emphasizing that in the 1980s and 1990s and especially in the 2000s, Germany received a lot of emigrants. Both in Germany and in many other Western countries (USA, Canada, England, France, etc.), state and ethnic borders no longer coincide. In the new socio-cultural environment, the issue of national identity has become much more complicated. Before that, it was much easier for people to identify themselves as Russians, Germans, Japanese, Iranians, Chileans, etc. It is this time that is mentioned in Tawada's novel «Suspect on the Night Train» («容疑者の夜行列車»). To the question of the Hindu, «What country are you from?» the heroine of the novel could calmly answer: «From Japan», in «those years you did not doubt your identity at all: you're a woman, you're from Japan»<sup>28</sup>. Echoes of the «pure», non-hybrid identity can be seen in the commentary of the main character in the fourth journey («To Belgrade»). «The Slavs and Hong Kong somehow poorly combined in my head». She said these words in a movie theater when the Serbs were watching a Hong Kong action movie.

After emigration to Germany in the 1980s, Tawada found herself in a culturally favorable environment, where there is a great interest in foreigners writing in German. It should be noted that in Germany, since 1985, a special Adalbert von Chamisso prize<sup>29</sup> was founded, which is awarded to particularly gifted foreign writers for their unusual use of the language and enrichment of German literature. Tawada was awarded it in 2006. Sufficient to say that she received the highest literary prizes in Germany and Japan, as well as scholarships from the USA: the Hamburg City Prize (1990), Gunzo-Shinjin-Bungaku-Sho (Japan, 1991), the Akutagawa Literary Prize (Japan, 1993), the Lessing Prize of Hamburg (1994), the Chamisso Prize (1996), the Villa Aurora Scholarship in Los Angeles (1997), the Tübingen Associate Professor-poet (1998), Max Kad high-ranking guest MIT (1999), Robert Bosch Scholarship, German Literary Foundation Scholarship, Uzumi Keki Literary Prize (2000), Sei-Ito Literary Prize (2003), Junichiro Tanizaki Literary Prize (2003), Goethe Medal (2005), Visiting Writer at Washington University in St. Louis (March-April, 2008), Visiting

Writer at Stanford University (February, 2009), Guest Professor of Intercultural Poetics (Hamburg, 2011), etc. These numerous international awards and scholarships, being signs of world recognition, strengthen and enrich her hybrid identity.

After receiving the Heinrich Kleist Prize in 2016 and the American Book Award<sup>30</sup> in 2018, Tawada came to world fame. In 2020, her name was even mentioned in the list of candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Heinrich Kleist Prize is one of the most prestigious literary awards in Germany, the owners of which are famous writers, including screenwriter Heiner Müller. The prize is awarded only to books written in German, and Tawada was the first winner from Japan. In the comments to the award, it was mentioned that Tawada's book opens up new possibilities of language expressions in the German language.

With the growing popularity of Yoko Tawada, it became common to call her a «Japanese writer» living in Berlin. But since her novels are written alternately in Japanese and German, this difference really only matters in an isolated, monolingual, nationalistic society like the one she represents in her novel «The Emissary».

«The Emissary» is a novel by Yoko Tawada, which was first published in the Japanese literary magazine «Gunzo»<sup>31</sup> in August 2014. Its English translation by Margaret Mizutani was published in the UK under the title «The Last Children of Tokyo» and in the United States, where it received the National Book Award for Translated Literature in 2018, as «The Emissary». Tawada's book was the first to win since the Translated Literature category was revived, and the first Japanese winner since the 1982 prize was split between a book of translations from the Manyōshū (VIII) poetry anthology and a collection of stories by nineteenth-century writer Higuchi Ichiyō (1872-1896).

But it all started with a short story «Fushi no shima» or, translated by Margaret Mizutani, «The Island of Eternal Life», included in the collection called «Sore de mo sangatsu wa, mata», in which the narrator in the first person, a Japanese woman living outside Japan, tells about the transformations that occurred in Japan after the events of March 11, 2011, as a result of the fact that the country did not take the necessary security measures to prevent a repeat of something similar to the disaster on Fukushima. After the fictional Great Pacific Earthquake, which is supposed to have occurred in 2017, Japan closes its doors to the outside world, entering a state of isolation similar to the isolationist foreign policy of the «Sakoku»<sup>32</sup> (1633 – 1853) of the Tokugawa Shogunate during the Edo period (1603 – 1868). The 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. There is no electricity here, and people amuse themselves by reading newspapers printed on wooden blocks and listening to storytellers to the accompaniment of guitars or biwa lutes, like people of the Edo era.

Subsequently, the writer developed this story by creating a small novel called «Kentoshi» or «The Emissary», written by the most modern method using elements of symbolism, magical realism and postmodern writing technique, which is

manifested in her ironic attitude to the problems that exist in the present time not only in Japan, but also around the world.

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.

«The Emissary» is a distorted image of Japan, which reveals its modern problems. What Tawada writes about looks eerily prescient, taking into account that the novel was published in 2014. The author's vision of global environmental, political, economic, social and other problems makes the book a vivid example of the literature of the future. But this is not an image without hope. After all, the writer preserves the virtues of humanity and embodies them in the two main characters of the story, Yoshiro and Mumei. She urges to keep this thought in mind in order to imagine a better future for the next generation.

Each Tawada's work opens up new horizons. Recently, the writer has embarked on another period of transition. She is working on the creation of a trilogy and has already published the first 2 books – «Encrusted in the Earth» («地球にちりばめられて») in 2018 and «Written in the Stars» («星に灰めかされて») in 2020<sup>33</sup>.

«The Emissary» is set in Japan, cut off from the world after a tragedy resembling the accident at the Fukushima-1 nuclear power plant, but in the new trilogy, the island state is destined to disappear. The reasons for the disappearance are unclear, but the story contains references to the devastating damage caused by anthropogenic impact, including environmental pollution that causes Minamata disease, as well as to the movement against the construction of nuclear power plants.

The main character of the trilogy is an immigrant from the disappeared archipelago named Hiruko. Her name always written in alphabetic script, so it catches the eye and emphasizes her foreign status. The name comes from the «leech child» who occurs in the Japanese creation myths, the misconceived firstborn of the creator gods, who abandon the child to the waves. The heroine of the novel also leaves her native land and travels to the Scandinavian countries. The novel raises the problem of immigrants, which is gaining a global scale in the modern world, as well as a wide range of problems, including natural disasters, languages, ethnicity, gender issues and identity. Some readers will surely draw a parallel between the impossibility of returning to the native land of the main character and the modern world, which closed its borders due to the pandemic. Tawada raises serious problems, but uses sparkling expressions and wordplay to describe them, and this allows the reader to take a fresh look at the situation. Hiruko speaks a unique jargon – a mixture of Scandinavian languages, and watching this language turn into Japanese expressions is another bonus for the reader.

Together with other people who are separated from their places of origin, Hiruko tries to find those who speak her native language. In the first novel, Hiruko meets a Greenlander living in Germany who works in a sushi bar. This and several subsequent episodes undermine her concept of «native language». It begins to seem

to her that in the era of globalization, when people and cultures easily overcome borders, it makes no sense to fight for the purity and uniqueness of a certain language and food culture, because there is a completely different world. In the second novel, the Earth is considered as one of the planets and this changes the scale of the narrative.

What will happen to Hiruko and her companions in the third novel? What new horizons will the writer open to the reader? One thing is certain – Tawada will remain one of the influential voices of world literature for a long time to come.

**Conclusion.** Yoko Tawada is a phenomenon of the late XX – early XXI century, who made a great contribution to the development of literature in Japan and Germany. Because of her unique personality, combining both East and West, she was able to become popular all over the world. It is not surprising that her works arouse great interest among readers, because her literary heroes, as well as Tawada herself, are located in several cultural zones.

According to her value coordinates, Yoko Tawada is a citizen of the world, so she can safely be called a writer "without borders".

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- <sup>3</sup> The Akutagawa Prize (芥川龍之介賞) is a Japanese literary award presented biannually (twice a year).
- <sup>4</sup> The Tanizaki Prize (谷崎潤一郎賞), named in honor of the Japanese novelist Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, is one of Japan's most sought-after literary awards.
- <sup>5</sup> The Kleist Prize (Kleist-Preis) is an annual German literature prize.
- <sup>6</sup> The Goethe Medal (Goethe-Medaille) is a yearly prize given by the Goethe-Institut honoring non-Germans «who have performed outstanding service for the German language and for international cultural relations».
- <sup>7</sup> Izabella Akhatovna Akhmadulina (1937 – 2010) was a Soviet and Russian poet, short story writer, and translator, known for her apolitical writing stance.
- <sup>8</sup> Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva (1892 – 1941) was a Russian poet.
- <sup>9</sup> Anna Andreyevna Gorenko (1889 – 1966), better known by the pen name Anna Akhmatova, was one of the most significant Russian poets of the 20th century.
- <sup>10</sup> Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860 – 1904) was a Russian playwright and short-story writer who is considered to be among the greatest writers of short fiction in history.
- <sup>11</sup> Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821 – 1881), sometimes transliterated as Dostoyevsky, was a Russian novelist, short story writer, essayist, and journalist.
- <sup>12</sup> Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov (1891 – 1940) was a Russian writer, medical doctor and playwright active in the first half of the 20th century.
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- <sup>17</sup> Übersetzungen – occasionalism, created by Yoko Tawada from the German word «übersetzungen» («translations»)
- <sup>18</sup> Paul Celan (1920 – 1970) was a Romanian-born German-language poet and translator.
- <sup>19</sup> Bernd Heinrich Wilhelm von Kleist (1777 – 1811) was a German poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer and journalist.
- <sup>20</sup> Walter Bendix Schönflies Benjamin (1892 – 1940) was a German Jewish philosopher, cultural critic and essayist.
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- <sup>26</sup> A tatami (畳) is a type of mat used as a flooring material in traditional Japanese-style rooms.
- <sup>27</sup> A kotatsu (Japanese: 炬燵 or こたつ) is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, upon which a table top sits.
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- <sup>29</sup> The Adelbert von Chamisso Prize (Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis) was a German literary award established in 1985, given to a work whose author's mother tongue is not German, as was the case for Adelbert von Chamisso.
- <sup>30</sup> The American Book Award is an American literary award that annually recognizes a set of books and people for «outstanding literary achievement».
- <sup>31</sup> Gunzō (群像) is a Japanese monthly literary magazine published in Japan.
- <sup>32</sup> Sakoku (鎖国, "locked country") was the isolationist foreign policy of the Japanese Tokugawa shogunate under which, for a period of 214 years during the Edo period (from 1603 to 1868), relations and trade between Japan and other

countries were severely limited, and nearly all foreign nationals were barred from entering Japan, while common Japanese people were kept from leaving the country.

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