

4-2019

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### Recommended Citation

Tierney, Robin (2019). Review Essay - Women in Translation: Yoko Tawada's The Emissary. *Bridgewater Review*, 38(1), 34-36.

Available at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol38/iss1/10](https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol38/iss1/10)

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# REVIEW ESSAY

## Women in Translation: Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary*

Robin Tierney

When, in 2018, the author Yoko Tawada won the inaugural National Book Award for Translated Literature and the translator Jennifer Croft won the Man Booker Prize for International Literature, I felt as though plucked from a worldwide audience of bingo players as I realized that my numbers, in the form of award-winning translations to which I had some connection, had been called. Yoko Tawada's writing was the main focus of my doctoral dissertation in Japanese literature, a dissertation that I wrote while in graduate school at the University of Iowa with Jennifer Croft. The dim halls of our faltering Department of Comparative Literature – Jennifer and I comprised precisely half of the students in our year – were at quite a far remove from the glamor of *New York Times* spreads and award ceremonies at the Victoria and Albert. How, I wondered, did the cultural *zeitgeist* shift to form this connection to my rather desultory academic studies?

As I set about writing a review of *The Emissary* for which Tawada had won the award, it became clear that the same drive for inclusion that has produced broader programming, all-gender public restrooms, and the most racially diverse and most female group ever elected to the U.S. House of representatives, is also strong in parts of the English-language publishing world. Opposition to reactionary forces is also strong, as is the role of social media in rallying together that opposition. (Jennifer has suggested that the selection of the Polish novel she translated, *Flights*, for the U.K. based Man Booker International prize may have been part

of pushback against the bullying which Polish immigrants experienced in the wake of Brexit.) The publishing world is now creating space, at the side of the biggest literary awards, for literature not originally written in English. In 2016 the most internationally recognized literature award for an individual work in English, the Man Booker Prize, established an award for literature in translation. The U.S.-based National Book Award followed suit in 2018.

The work of women writers is translated more and receiving greater attention. While literature written by women has typically comprised less than 30% of literature in translation,

in 2018 the National Book Award and the Man Booker Prize were both awarded to the translations of women writers. Four of the five finalists for the National Book Award for Translated Literature were works written by female authors. In contrast, the literary prize that was in some ways a predecessor to the Man Booker Prize for International Literature, *The Independent Foreign Fiction Prize*, awarded just two female writers in its twenty-one-year history. Social media movements such as #womenintranslation, and its attendant #WIT month in August, have been key in raising awareness of the gender imbalance in translation.

Adding to this Möbius strip of interlocking causality is the desire expressed by #namethetranslator; the movement to recognize the significant role of the translator. (Think for a moment of the last work of literature in translation that you read – isn't it tempting to recall the words as though they issued directly forth from the author?) The Man Booker Group expressed this recognition with the unconventional move of awarding equal purses to the writers and the translators. And when *Flights* won the award this past year, the author Olga Tokarczuk, and her translator Jennifer Croft, appeared as a duo



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at the many events and book readings that followed the announcement to an unprecedented degree. I am tempted to posit causality between women writers who are increasingly translated, and translators receiving more of the spotlight; wouldn't the recognition of hitherto unrecognized labor and genius be a signature feminist move?

Tawada is exemplary of the changes afoot in the literary world; she is a border-crossing woman writer who publishes in both her adult-acquired German and her native Japanese, she has recently seen an uptake in the number of her novels being translated and she appreciates the role of the translator to such an extent that she prefers the word 'transformation' over 'translation.' Indeed, she has won two of the inaugural awards for literature in translation: in addition to the National Book Award, Tawada also won the first Warwick Prize for Women in Translation (2017) for her German-language *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, translated by Susan Bernofsky.

*The Emissary*, translated from Japanese by Margaret Mitsutani, is a novel about a future Japan that has been irrevocably altered by too much radiation; older people can't die and younger people are enfeebled. It is a clear response to the Fukushima nuclear power plant failure with echoes of the experience of *hibakusha* – victims of radiation sickness from the atomic bombs. Mumei (literally 'no name') is a young boy who is raised by his great-grandfather, Yoshiro. While Yoshiro is wearied by the prospect of his possible immortality, he is saddened by the short life span of his grandson who has little independent mobility and struggles to digest most food. Such a seemingly grim premise, written in Tawada's unsentimental and slightly surrealist style, becomes simultaneously a cautionary apocalyptic tale and a fanciful exploration of unknowable consequences:

School bathrooms had turned into joyful places with colorful walls and lots of flowers and vegetation. The students heard that they used to be places you were supposed to get in and out of quickly. That was probably because of the germs. But the teachers assured them that "there were a lot more things more frightening in their environment now" (115).

Should a reader be looking for hope, the 'Emissary' of the title provides some. An underground organization that has connections to the world outside of the now-isolated Japan searches for exceptional children – emissaries – to smuggle out of the country with the purpose of aiding international medical study and the possibility of extending their life span. Mumei comes under consideration for such a mission.

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When Yoshiro plans his 108<sup>th</sup> birthday party he reflects back on his last birthday dinner with regret: "you could tell the younger generation by their rounded backs, thinning hair, pale faces, and by how slowly their chopsticks moved. Realizing their descendants were in such a bad state because they'd been so feckless made the elderly feel guilty, dampening the festivities" (93). Surprisingly, however, the children have a fundamentally different emotional response to their situation because their generation is "equipped with natural defenses against despair" (128). It is as though Tawada casts the gloomy future by invoking our current understanding of what a contaminated world would look like, but recognizes that twenty-first-century humans aren't so all-knowing as to be able to imagine the psychic developments that will ensue from that contamination. We might be powerful enough to mess things up, she seems to say, but it would be hubris to think we are powerful enough to see the future.

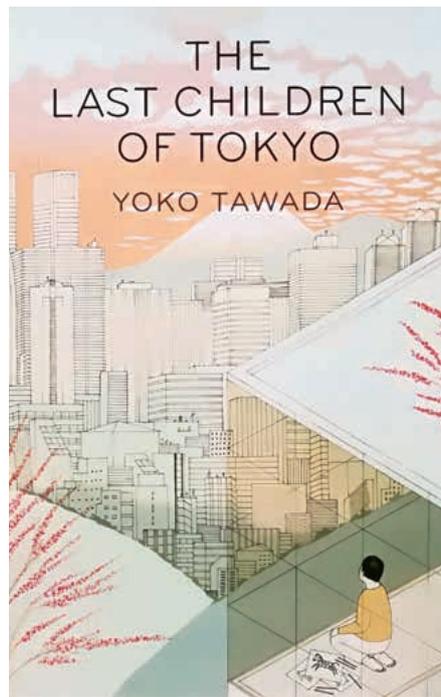
Margaret Mitsutani's translation allows a non-Japanese-reading audience to read a tale of environmental degradation by a writer from a culture with a historically unique experience of mass radiation. Translation, generally speaking, broadens the range of human experience and imagination to which we all have access. But translation also does something else; it can point us towards that which struggles to be translated. Tawada, who writes in multiple languages, has said that she doesn't want to cross the gulf that exists between two languages, but that she "wants to live in the ditch that separates them."

In terms of *The Emissary*, that 'ditch' is the wordplay that many Japanese readers found to be the focal delight of the story. The flexibility of written Japanese is strikingly different from that of a purely phonetic code. Chinese characters – *kanji* in Japanese – derived from China and therefore they typically possess a Chinese-affiliated reading and at least one, though usually more, Japanese readings. There is a linguistic convention that also allows writers to

attribute their own idiosyncratic use of a *kanji* as long as phonetic lettering is provided alongside for the reader. Tawada takes advantage of this convention when composing the Japanese title, pronounced ken-toe-she, and rendered with *kanji* that can also produce those sounds, but do not contain the meaning ‘emissary.’ Instead of the standard 遣唐使, she created 猷灯使 for the title. Why does this matter? Because the former set of *kanji* specifically reference the imperial knowledge-gathering expeditions to T’ang China, while Tawada’s title drops that reference altogether and puts in its place ‘votive candles.’ Votive candles are the sole link that connects members of the underground organization in the story; every morning members get up while it is still dark and light a candle before they head out for their day. It is a quiet and private ritual. Instead of alluding to cultural borrowing from an august empire, the title references a quotidian mode of resistance. Or, rather, it does both at the same time.

Tawada’s homophonic neologisms often insert tension between grand public narratives and more base human realities. The new government declares a slew of national holidays to memorialize the past. One such holiday commemorates the internet, since Japan has lost its connection to the World Wide Web. The *kanji* that Tawada puts together to name that holiday – 御婦裸淫 – mean the ‘the honorable perversion of female nudity.’ The sounds that these *kanji* individually produce in Japanese, however, are o-fu-ra-eeen, approximating the English ‘offline.’ Readers, then, pronounce ‘offline’ at the same time that their attention is drawn to the extent to which the massive distribution of graphic and filmic pornography comprised one of the largest functions of the internet.

Translation itself does not illustrate the marvelous differences that exist between languages, but the existence of translations provides an opportunity



British book cover for *The Last Children of Tokyo* by Yoko Tawada.

to articulate the vast possibilities of language creation and mental processing. Tawada is interested in using a language with as much awareness of the language’s fabrication as possible. She does not try to inhabit a language as though it were ‘natural’ – hence her desire to write in a non-native tongue – and she rejects the confines of a ‘beautiful national Japanese language.’ Her work repeatedly unmoors selfhood from language and national identity. One of her narrators reminds readers that when they see her jean-clad figure traveling alone on a train they would be wrong in assuming that she has a kimono stored away at home somewhere. Another narrator, in the short story *Persona*, is so tired of being harassed as an Asian woman living in Berlin that she puts a Noh mask on and wanders the city, as though to make tangible the ‘Japanese’ mask that people already project onto her. A volume of Tawada’s vignettes is titled “Exophany: the adventures of travelling away from the mother tongue.” In an era of World-English such a drive to relieve oneself of the linguistic comfort of the center is remarkable.

And this brings me back full circle to the coincidence of both the subject of my dissertation and my classmate receiving major awards for translated works within the same year. The narrator of *Flights* ponders the qualities of a global language in a way that was entirely new to me:

There are countries out there where people speak English. But not like us – we have our own languages hidden in our carry-on luggage, in our cosmetic bags, only ever using English when we travel and then only in foreign countries, to foreign people...

How lost they must feel in the world when all instructions, all the lyrics of the stupidest songs, all the menus, all the excruciating pamphlets and brochures – even the buttons in the elevator – are in their private language. They may be understood by anyone at any moment, whenever they open their mouths...Wherever they are people have unlimited access to them – they are accessible to everyone and everything! (176)

Would this perspective on English-as-the-global-language be written by a monolingual English-language writer? Would Tawada’s nuanced, sometimes humorous take on post-radiation come from a writer whose parents hadn’t experienced daily life after nuclear devastation? I don’t think so, and I am very glad that the publishing world is creating greater access to translations of such insightful women writers.



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