



The (Un)known Epoch: Exploring Dystopian Japan in Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary*

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Abstract

Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary* is set in Japan after a massive and irreparable disaster. The entire country isolates itself from the rest of the world during the post-disaster period. Tawada's novella probes into the issue of sustainability through the ageing population and natural catastrophes in dystopian Japan. Borrowing the concept of the "Anthropocene", the present study examines the "human-induced environmental change" that predominantly affected the entire Japanese population. The *Emissary* provides a glimpse into the notion of social tension in this surreal landscape. Due to environmental degeneration, the dystopian Japanese society is ostensibly suffering from contaminations, extinctions and overpopulation of elderly, while the children, ironically, are born frail, sick and delicate. Tawada's novella follows the lifestyle of the two main protagonists, Yoshiro and Mumei in the inhabitable, post-apocalyptic Japanese society. As the Japanese government imposes a strict isolation policy, it captures how both Yoshiro and Mumei cope and react with the perils that the disaster imposes. The novella further satirizes the futuristic Japanese society by envisioning a distressing dysfunctional society that predominantly deals with the aftermath of the catastrophe. The Kafkaesque depiction of the regressive post-apocalyptic Japanese dystopian society in the novella further reimagines humans' environmental adaptation for survival.

Keywords: Dystopian, Post-Apocalyptic, Environmental Degeneration, Environmental Adaptation, Japanese Literature.

Introduction: A Dystopian Japan in Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary*

The dystopian Japan sets in seclusion as the entire nation is closed to the outside world and the routes to other countries have been cut off as well. According to Gregory Claeys (2017), the adjective dystopian "evokes disturbing images" (Claeys, 2017, p. 3) and "implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail" (p. 5). Due to the unknown and massive disaster, the earth is contaminated, where even "wild animals had not been seen in Japan for many years" (Tawada, 2018, p. 24). Similarly, the entire human population in Japan is affected by this unknown disaster as well. Many inhabitants are fleeing Tokyo to live in rural areas (from Okutama to Nagano Prefecture) as this metropolitan is deemed uninhabitable. Tokyo is designated as an area exposed:

... to multiple health hazards from prolonged habitation area ... This designation was supposed to mean that although when measured separately, neither drinking water, air, light nor food was over the danger line, there was a high probability of multiple pernicious influences from lengthy exposure to the environment as a whole (Tawada, 2018, p. 40).

Due to the ecological change, the elder generation grows stronger, and unfortunately, the younger generation is born weak and frail. Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary* (2018) focuses on the two main protagonists, namely, Yoshiro, a 108-year old elderly who is taking care of his fragile great-grandson, Mumei. According to Yoshiro, even "children without parents had long since ceased to be called 'orphan'; they were now referred to as *doku ritsu jido*, [also known as] 'independent children'" (Tawada, 2018, p. 80). Apparent changes to the socio-cultural and political climates at this post-apocalyptic dystopian Japan seem to raise the concerns of its inhabitants. The novella further probes into the notion of ecological and political instability of the futuristic Japanese society. Hence, this speculative fiction about the post-apocalyptic nation provides a glimpse into the far-future dystopia about the possibility of becoming a reality if such humankind's current trajectory continues. According to Murphy (2020):

In times of social upheaval, paired with a grave climate crisis that appears to be soon irreversible, dystopias have become increasingly prevalent in literary projections of possible futures. Indeed, the entire sub-genre of climate fiction (cli-fi) is based on apocalyptic settings produced by climate change or more sudden environmental disasters (Murphy, 2020, p. 2).

The title of the present study emphasizes the concept of the (un)known epoch, a new geological epoch of humans, where human activities have had a significant impact on the ecosystem and climate. This new epoch, termed "the Anthropocene", was a concept introduced by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in the year 2000. E. Ann Kaplan (2016) describes the Anthropocene as "the new era humans have entered in which they represent a dangerous "geologic force" (Kaplan, 2016, p. 1). Louise Westling and John Parham (2017) defines the Anthropocene as "a period marked by interrelated, potentially cataclysmic human environmental impacts: mass extinction, invasive species, climate change, increased atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide, rising sea levels, and the dumping of nuclear or chemical waste" (p. 1).

Carolyn Merchant (2020) argues that "the idea of the Anthropocene can help us reconceptualize the humanities in new ways that make them compelling for the twenty-first century" (p. xi) as the "future catastrophic events could also be traumatic" (Kaplan, 2016, p. 1). Merchant further highlights that "human activities impact nature in devastating new ways, suggesting that the earth—as we know it today—may cease to exist in the future" (Kaplan, 2016, p. x). Hence, the present study borrows the concept of "the Anthropocene" to examine the "human-induced environmental change" that has predominantly affected the entire Japanese population.

The Emissary provides a glimpse into the notion of social tension in this surreal landscape. Hence, the (un)known is used in the title of this study to further satirize the futuristic Japanese society by envisioning a distressing dysfunctional society that predominantly deals with the aftermath of the catastrophe. Similarly, Mumei, in Japanese, means "no name", which further encapsulates the sense of uncertainty and mystification of the (un)known epoch. As indicated in the novella, Yoshiro claims that "In this age when paper money, stocks, and interest had lost their luster, people who could barter had top priority" (Tawada, 2018, p. 49). Consequently, the Kafkaesque depiction of the regressive post-apocalyptic Japanese dystopian society in the novella further reimagines humans' environmental adaptation for survival.

Exploring the (Un)Known Epoch in *The Emissary*

In Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary*, the Japanese government imposes a strict isolation policy after the unknown disaster. The Japanese government believes that "Every country has serious problems, so to keep those problems from spreading all around the world, they decided that each country should solve their own problems by itself" (Tawada, 2018, p. 42). The entire country is living in seclusion as it is closed to the outside world and the routes to other countries have been cut off as well. The novella is set in a post-apocalyptic setting that illustrates the

aftermath of the unknown disaster. Tawada's novella follows the lifestyle of the two main protagonists, namely Yoshiro and Mumei, who constantly highlight the inhabitable, and post-apocalyptic Japanese society.

According to Kaplan (2016), such representations in literature allow us to anticipate "future ecological devastation". Similar to Kaplan's concerns, I believe that "these fantasies [i.e., films or literature about environmental change] function as warnings, a kind of "memory for the future," and ... what future there is for memory as these fictional humans come to an end" (Kaplan, 2016, p. 4). Likewise, Seeger and Davison-Vecchionein also claim that "imaginative literature makes a valuable contribution to understanding and thinking critically about society" (Kaplan, 2016, p. 2).

The novella further prompts for actions to address the fundamental ecological issues that might occur in the future and provide a platform for humankind to reconceptualise the notion of "environmental humanities". The concept of "environmental humanities", as defined by Sverker Sörlin (2014):

... is a broad multidisciplinary approach that signals a new willingness in the humanities to forego the primary focus on disciplines (as in, e.g., environmental philosophy, environmental history) for a common effort in which the relevance of human action is on par with the environmental aspect (Sorlin, 2014, p.12).

As mentioned earlier, environmental and climate changes occur in certain parts of Japan. Due to the environmental change in the country, the earth is severely contaminated and even "wild animals had not been seen in Japan for many years" (Tawada, 2018, p. 24). As Japan is severely affected by climate change, its effects have taken a toll in the agricultural sector. The climate is depicted as "Heat and cold mingled together into a dry humidity, taunting the skin" (Tawada, 2018, p. 105). The novella further reveals that "filthy runoff from factories into rivers" (Tawada, 2018, p. 43) makes the earth contaminated. As a result, "contamination permeating the soil had seeped into the asphalt that covered the street" (Tawada, 2018, p. 125). In addition, due to the existing contamination, humans are also affected when "breast milk was [not] guaranteed to be safe...Breast milk contained, along with its life-giving nutrients, a high concentration of poison" (Tawada, 2018, p. 73). Therefore, due to the environmental changes after the massive and irreparable disaster, the younger generation is born as aged and weak creatures.

The novella captures how both of them cope and adapt to the perils that the disaster imposes on their daily life. Yoshiro indicates that "Actually, the word mutation was rarely used anymore, having been replaced by the more popular environmental adaptation. With plants growing larger and larger...It had simply grown larger in order to survive in this new environment" (Tawada, 2018, p. 9). For example, in Yoshiro's descriptions of Mumei, he indicates that "Perhaps it was his head, much too large for his slender long neck, that made him look like a baby bird" (Tawada, 2018, p. 3) and his "birdlike legs turned inward from the knee down" (Tawada, 2018, p. 107). In addition, the new epoch also sees the changes in the human biological system, where human beings will change their sex at least once in their life. This is shown in the excerpt below:

The whole human race is becoming feminized...In areas where culture dictated that female fetuses should be aborted. Nature, enraged at humans disrupting her balance this way, had started playing various tricks. One trick was making sure that no one stayed the same sex all their lives. Everyone's sex changed either one or twice, and people couldn't tell ahead of time how many times their sex would change (Tawada, 2018, pp. 91-92).

Tawada's novella probes into the issue of sustainability through the ageing population and natural catastrophes in dystopian Japan. Tawada also highlights the vengeance of nature over culture in this novella. The lopsided misogynist mentality in the past culture disrupts the sex ratio in the society, resulting in the ecological imbalance.

In addition, the role reversal situation in this dystopian society has placed the older generation in constant dilemma. As mentioned in the novella, “ninety percent of children these days fever was a constant companion” (Tawada, 2018, p. 34). As such, “the aged could not die; along with the gift of everlasting life, they were burdened with [a] terrible task of watching their great-grandchildren die” (Tawada, 2018, p. 36). Mumei, on the other hand, also highlights the fact that the “grown-ups can live if children die...but if grown-ups die, children can't live” (Tawada, 2018, p. 36). On top of that, the elderly also starts to realise that “their descendants were in such a sad state because they'd been so feckless” (Tawada, 2018, p. 93) and that sense of realisation makes them feel guilty. According to Yoshiro, “In the near future, young people would probably all work in offices and physical labor would be left to the elderly” (Tawada, 2018, p. 20). Therefore, the sense of uncertainty is prevalent among the older generation. He states that:

While it wasn't clear whether or not Yoshiro's generation would really have to live forever, for the time being they had definitely been robbed of death. Perhaps their bodies had reached the end, even their fingers and toes worn down to nothing, their minds would hang on, refusing to shut down, writhing still inside immobile flesh (Tawada, 2018, p. 93).

As opposed to the elderly, the younger generation's physical health (like Mumei) is deteriorating tremendously. For example, “Mumei's teeth were so soft he couldn't eat bread unless it was softened by steeping” (Tawada, 2018, p. 15). In addition, “Like most children of his generation, Mumei was unable to absorb the calcium he needed. Human beings may turn into a toothless species someday” (Tawada, 2018, p. 17). Despite being born in such a devastated condition and being physically enfeebled by deteriorating health, some of them, like Mumei, are gifted with exceptional wisdom. For example, “from birth Mumei had seemed to possess a mysterious kind of wisdom, a depth that Yoshiro had never seen in a child before” (Tawada, 2018, p. 36). Additionally, “Mumei had an uncanny ability to read people's thoughts...he didn't just sense a person's general mood, but actually seemed to read their minds” (Tawada, 2018, p. 18).

The notion of the (un)known explores the possibilities of human-induced environmental degradation in affecting the livelihood of humankind in Japan and the other countries around the world. Tawada's novella obliquely articulates the ecological crisis caused by humans' interactions with technologies and their environments. According to Louisa MacKay Demerjian (2016), “The world is more “connected”—financially and technologically—than ever before and while that could mean that we all keep each other afloat, it could mean we all go down together” (p. 2). As such, Tawada's *The Emissary* documents Japan's unforeseen transition into this (un)known epoch, the Anthropocene, and highlights humankind's adaptations in dealing with tremendous and abrupt environmental, political, sociocultural changes.

The Suppression of Memories in a Dystopian Japanese Society

“The dystopian landscape is one where the virtues of the individual and the family are trampled upon and destroyed in the name of development and control” (Barton, 2016, p. 5).

Carter Hanson (2020) defines memory as “an innate human capacity and remembering and forgetting universal human activities” (p. 1). Our memory is not only limited to storing new information, it is also used to interpreting and integrating new information in order to function effectively in our daily lives. Jonathan Forster (2009) argues that “Memories are personal and internal” and yet without memory, human beings would not be able to participate in external acts (i.e. carrying out a conversation, taking the initiatives on new ideas etc.). The novella suggests, although not elaborately explained, that the notion of memories function as a form of

hindrance to the dystopian society and they are constantly suppressed by the hegemonic power.

Hanson further argues that “Dystopian regimes maintain power through discursive control of information and history, and dystopian dissidents attempt to resist by reclaiming language” (p. 9). Hence, memories related to the past Japan (i.e. culture, language etc.) are deemed as impractical in the present dystopian Japan society. Therefore, “foreign words were rarely used” (Tawada, 2018, p. 4) in this dystopian Japanese society. Yoshiro states that “the shelf life of words was getting shorter all the time — it wasn’t only the foreign ones that were falling out of use. And some words that had disappeared after being labeled “old-fashioned” had no heirs to take their place (Tawada, 2018, p. 4). Mumei points out that:

Great-grandpa knows lots of words; he never uses lots of the words he knows; he teaches me words he never uses; then he tells me never to use certain words he tells me about...could clothes still be there, just as they were, even after the words for them disappeared? Or did they change, or disappear, along with their names? (Tawada, 2018, p. 98).

The suppression of the memory through language eradicates the recollection of the past before the new order where the dystopian subjects are generally being silenced under the influence of a hegemonic power. As indicated by Erika Gottlieb (2001), “each dystopian society contains within it seeds of a utopian dream. These are articulated by the ruling elite’s original promise when its new system was implemented” (p. 8). The implementation of a new system in post-apocalyptic Japan begins through the act of abolishing some irrelevant words/phrases. For example, even the names of the older holidays are rephrased as well. For example, “Respect for the Aged Day” becomes “Encouragement for the Aged Day”, “Children’s Day” becomes “Apologize to the Children’s Day”, “Sports Day” becomes “Body Day”, while “Labor Day” becomes “Being Alive is Enough Day”.

The aftermath of the post-apocalyptic affects and changes the entire topography in Japan, resulting in the emergence of a hegemonic power that constantly seeks to suppress memories of the past. The hegemonic power, also known as the Diet oppresses them as shown in the excerpt below:

The Diet’s main job was to fiddle around with the laws. Judging from how often the laws changed, someone was definitely fiddling with them. Yet the public was never told who made the changes, or for what purpose. Afraid of getting burned by laws they hadn’t heard of, everyone kept their intuition honed sharp as a knife, practicing restraint and self-censorship on a daily basis (Tawada, 2018, p. 89).

Hence, Yoshiro also envisions the possibility of an oppressive virtual house arrest. He laments his premonitions living under the regime of the hegemonic power in Japan. For example, “In a few years’ time, perhaps, they would no longer be able to leave the house” (Tawada, 2018, p. 10). Actions such as “Singing songs in foreign languages in public spaces for over forty seconds was strictly prohibited. Nor could novels translated from foreign languages be published” (Tawada, 2018, p. 48). The dystopian subjects are silenced in the futuristic regressive Japanese society. Most of them suffer under the regime and it is shown through a passive resistance from the dystopian subjects. For example, a poster outside an elementary school carries a message that says, “NO ONE SPEAKS OF THE WEATHER ANYMORE OR REVOLUTION EITHER” (Tawada, 2018, p. 105).

Yoko Tawada’s *The Emissary* highlights the notion of memory as a form of coping strategy. The younger generation in this Japanese dystopian society lacks historical consciousness. There is a gap in their memories in a sense that there is no connection between the past, present and the future. The gap can only be bridged through the older generation’s memories. Therefore, Yoshiro intends to preserve his memory of the past through the objects from the past and through a manuscript of a children’s novel he is working on. Yoshiro believes that “Mumei may not have needed them as furniture, yet the table and chairs inspired him,

calling forth images of a long-forgotten time, or of faraway lands that he would probably never visit" (Tawada, 2018, pp. 10-11). Due to Mumei's feeble physicality, furniture in the house cause great inconveniences to him. However, as memories tend to be malleable and they are susceptible to distortion, preservation of these furniture would serve as mnemonic objects to provide a form of sensory experience and to help to recall memories of the past, specifically the lifestyle before the unknown disaster. Yoshiro believes that this fictional novel could function as:

A raw, honest treatment of the problems they faced every day would only end in frustration at the absence of solutions, making it impossible to arrive at places one could only reach in books. Creating an ideal fictional world for his great-grandson was another possibility, although reading about an ideal world wouldn't help the boy change the world around him any time soon. (Tawada, 2018, p. 16).

The notion of memories, which demarcation between the past and present is totally severed and Yoshiro believes that by preserving the elements of the past, it would allow Mumei to feel slightly better as the fictional world about the past provides hope to Mumei. Therefore, Yoshiro, who is in the midst of writing a children's book, describes his manuscript in the following excerpt:

Ken-to-shi, Emissary to China, he'd called it, his first and only historical novel: he was already well into it when he realized he'd included the names of far too many foreign countries... he had to get rid of the manuscript for his own protection, and since burning it was too painful, he had buried it (Tawada, 2018, p. 35).

However, since Yoshiro's novel contains too much information about the past (i.e., foreign countries, foreign words etc.), and unfortunately, he has to get rid of his works. Hence, Yoshiro decides to bury his novel at the Thingamabob Cemetery, "a public graveyard where anyone could pay their last respects to something they wanted to part" (Tawada, 2018, p. 35). Mumei reveals that his Great-Grandpa's intention to preserve his past memories through words or objects from the old Japan and it is shown in the following excerpt:

All those words- dead ones and the ones that weren't quite dead but that nobody ever used anymore- were stored in Great-grandpa's head. He was always wanting to throw out old crockery or toys they didn't use anymore, yet he kept all the old useless words in the drawers of his brain, never letting them go (Tawada, 2018, pp. 114-115).

For Mumei's sake, Yoshiro constantly encodes and stores his memories of the past through the preservation of the sensory information (i.e., objects such as furniture, books etc.) at his house in order to ease the retrieval process. Every now and then, Mumei reads those picture books [that are preserved by Yoshiro] to know more about the unknown past that was robbed from them after the massive disaster. On the other hand, Yoshiro relives the past while taking pleasure in daily routines such as walking a "Rent-a-Dog" along the riverside, where the term "walk" seems to be an "outdated expression". The act of memory retrieval, which sounds like an easy task turns out to be difficult when words are gradually being labelled as "outdated" or "obsolete". However, the novella provides a hopeful tone for the unknown future of dystopian Japan and as Demerjian (2016) claims that "if dystopia provides a warning, there must be potential for change and therefore hope for the future" (p. 3).

Conclusion

"The parallels between our real world and that of dystopian worlds become apparent; worlds might fall apart but, if we heed the warnings, there is hope for the future" (Demerjian, 2016, p. 3).

Yoko Tawada's *The Emissary* alarmingly displays a delusive representation of humankind's

fraught relationships with the natural world and technology. Through this dystopian novella, Tawada satirizes the current tendencies of Japanese society towards destruction that feels strikingly significant at present. The (un)known epoch is ironically illustrating the known consequences of environmental crises, technological and human-induced disasters and thus, emphasizing the importance of sustainability. Tawada's cli-fi fiction serves as a wake-up call to humanity in projecting the "imagined future selves", a term borrowed from Kaplan. As for Yoshiro, preservation of the past through his memories function as coping strategies in highlighting his struggles and his hope for a better world. The futuristic speculative content in Tawada's *The Emissary* further provokes humankind's responses towards ecological crises, specifically highlighting humankind's responsibilities and ecological sustainability for the future of humanity.

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