

A Bridge between two Cultures. The Literature of Japanese-Korean Authors in Comparison to German -Turkish Authors

The aim of this paper is to examine the novel of a Japanese-Korean, respectively a German-Turkish female author with regards to comparative aspects - if you wish - across continents: *Mizube no yurikago*, written by Yû Miri and *Black tea with three Lumps of Sugar* by Renan Demirkan. The two authors engage both in acting and writing, and therefore correspond in their biography. Just as their works do, both were written in the 1990's, and both show strong autobiographical signs, and both authoresses deal with the development of their main characters. Again both characters are of foreign origins and the tales start at childhood, narrate their adult life and their decision to take on the profession of actresses. Of importance now is the question, in how far these parallels continue to exist further than the superficial structure, and to what respect bi-culturality becomes a topic therein. As already mentioned, these two novels are just two examples, but an important aim of our further studies will be to analyse, whether any general tendencies to deal with the topic of inter-culturality are to be found in the different dealings with it.

If we first look at *Mizube no yurikago* ("The Cradle by the Shore"), we find the chronological recount of a first person narrator, meeting difficult initial socialization circumstances of the main character *Miri* in great detail, of her life in a large Japanese-Korean family. Right from the beginning at school she finds herself in the more and more intensifying position of an outsider, and is being bullied by her fellow pupils. Her inability to communicate and the lack of such communication with her surroundings finally become so unbearable for her, that she tries to commit suicide by drowning herself in the ocean. For the head of the

school this then marks the opportunity to expel the girl from school, since her behaviour had become more and more disturbed/ing. At this point, she is being cushioned by the incidentally arising chance to start training as an actress. This is the first time in her life, that she herself is being appreciated. She also discovers her talent for writing.

On analyzing already existing reviews, one finds that a special emphasis is being put on the theme of family, which means in case of the female author *Yû Miri* that of a broken family, as centre of interest. Here a Japanese-Korean protagonist is being portrayed, undoubtedly a member of the second largest minority group in Japan, and the specific problems of a Japanese-Korean family which are almost completely ignored. This may be due to the sensitivity towards political correctness in Japan, which obviously leads to a bashful treatment of minorities like the Burakumin or Japanese-Koreans. To bridge this chasm with a view from outside and to focus on these aspects is so much more aspiring. In the following, I will focus on the portrayal of the Koreans in *Mizube no yurikago* and the meaning assigned to the Japanese-Korean origins for the development of the protagonist's identity.

I would first like to look at the perception of Koreans as such and the reflection in the protagonist's family. Her parents are definitely not fit for any mould of an ordinary Japanese middle-class family: Her father makes a living as manager of a Pachinko-Hall, but even though he earns a quite reasonable salary, his liking for alcohol and horse-race betting cause financial difficulties for his family. On top of this, on several occasions it is described in the novel, how his eldest daughter Miri becomes a victim of his unexpected outbursts of violence. In every respect Miri's mother resembles the female counterpart to the father. Stemming from a chaotic family background, too, she first attempts to earn additional money by selling Kimuchi, later as hostess in several nightclubs. She does not hesitate to engage in extra matrimonial

relationships nor does she resent physical violence towards Miri. All this pictures a family background hardly fit to let children grow up to be healthy personalities.

Of special importance as example for the whole novel is this the following quotation from the text which sheds light onto the innermost indifference and attitude towards the Japanese-Korean identity of the father: "[...] there was an impressive shelf for books, even taller than my father. But even though he was not able to read nor write Japanese, he had bought all kinds of books and filled the shelf with them, with the only intention to look at them. In a corner of the house, the Korean books -not nice enough for the shelf- collected the dust, strung together with a piece of string." (P.29)

The respectfully put aside Korean books, represent the father's attitude towards his Korean origins, which he is not able to show openly, but rather takes to keeping secret. Nevertheless, his relationship to the Japanese way of living is rather superficial, represented by the Japanese books, these mere prestige objects in the shelf. For the outside world he tries to adopt the ways of the Japanese majority. But just like he is unable to read the contents of the Japanese books, he is unable to completely fit into the Japanese society. His life between Japanese and Korean culture could be defined as a "taken root Neither-Nor- state", which is accompanied by a heavy feeling of inferiority towards his Korean origins.

The pattern becoming obvious in the mimicking of Japanese middle-class habits, together with a lack of self-esteem, is mirrored throughout the whole novel, and is true for most Korean characters. One example is the case of her mother's brother, who conceals his origin through marriage with a Japanese woman, who does not realize that he actually is of Korean background. Thus having gained Japanese citizenship, he achieves a social advancement.

Similar behaviour patterns are also true for Miri's mother. She sends her daughter in pursuit of Japanese habits to piano lessons and later, when Miri had passed the test to enrol in a well-reputed private girl's school, to a Juku. Undoubtedly all her attempts aim at escaping marginalia in vain and have in the end the opposite effect. At times she has rather weird ideas: Due to her liking for young girl's comics, she lets herself being inspired by the heroines from well-off families, when choosing the clothing of her daughter. As a result of this, Miri, distinctly different from her fellow pupils, is being pushed into the role of an outsider. The fact that the mother draws her naive knowledge about rich people from children's literature, and makes intrepid appearances in loud dresses at school, reveals plainly how big the gorge to usual Japanese habits is, and how hard to bridge it. In addition, all her activities concerning the daughter are not prompted by interest for Miri, but the latter simply functions as a scapegoat for all her mother's faults and unfulfilled dreams.

As consequence both characters, mother and father, are denied respect as parents by depicting them in such a chaotic and infantile way. To summarize it , the Japanese-Korean family of the main character resembles concepts like violence, demimonde, indecency, inability to fit in, and filth. Especially the latter aspect is being portrayed again and again with strong emphasis. An example of this is the story of a relation which keeps her bathing water for 10 days, in order to save money, a habit, that in return, causes ugly skin irritations.

When considering that the author herself is a member of the Japanese-Korean minority, it is all the more surprising that she herself seems to follow the stereotype view of Koreans which the Japanese majority seem to have. The reader may be prompted to focus less on the conflicts of identity-development arising therewith. This can also be considered true for the narration being told by a receptive first person

narrator who carries a lesser part in reflecting to narrated actions. The Japanese society itself is not shown in ideal light, so the negative portrayal of the Koreans thus appears less severe. This can be seen in case of the aforementioned uncle. Simply the fact that he fears to be discriminated for his origins, show, how little a tolerance of the Japanese majority there is to be expected. Furthermore, Miri is not merely traumatised due to the lack of security, the violence in her family and her shame about the behaviour of her relations, but also through the sexual harassment she experiences by Japanese men. Twice she is abused by seemingly respectable men, once as a primary-school girl, and again as teenager.

A critical attitude towards the school, which here can be understood as birthplace of society, can be felt. Just like in the protagonist's parents' case lacking educational competence, all that is of interest, is the superficial maintenance of a perfect appearance. Miri, whose behaviour is becoming more and more disturbed, is being made "invisible" when she is simply expelled from school. Neither her family, nor the school can accept her as a human being with individual abilities.

Nevertheless, she does not experience such exclusion in all social fields. Immediately after her attempted suicide, she meets, still being in a bad shape, a classmate by coincidence. She takes her to her home, where her family cares for Miri, who is on the brink of pneumonia. They care for her with devotion, whilst her own parents don't show much interest.

The acting school, too, offers her a second home. Throughout the whole novel, the reader does not meet a single positively described Korean character, giving support to Miri. Due to such narrator strategies it becomes apparent, that in respect to her isolation her being different is a subliminal accusation of her family, and that she sees herself rather as **their** victim and not a victim of society.

The relationship towards the Korean origins in *Mizube no yurikago* is characterized by a strict attitude of demarcation. Since the protagonist does not know the country from own experience, and since her family represents the only link to Korean culture, the gorge is almost impossible to bridge.

With regards to these preliminaries, one is positively surprised to see that Miri does not break but manages a positive development. Here not alone inter-cultural self-determination is meant, but the overcoming of a personal crisis. After her falling ill, a positive period of her life begins, which appears like a rebirth, a second chance to start afresh. In a figurative sense, she passes through a phase of regression to infancy, when she - being bound to the bed during her illness - is being fed and is having her nappies changed by her classmate's mother and older sister. For the first time in her life she experiences the warmth and security of a family. The acting school in particular takes on the part of a substitute family, giving her the support she needs to mentally recuperate. She not only experiences appreciation of her achievements. The director of the group takes the place of a substitute father, giving her assistance to help cure herself. An important part in the acting training is, to confess all bad and until so far suppressed experiences on stage. When the turn is Miri's, she confesses her Korean origins. Crucial to the plot/her is that the director of the acting school turns her so far as bad experienced Korean existence into something positive. Miri thus is able to gain new energy from this relieve of confession, which culminates shortly afterwards in her admittance of her Korean family name. When she is then asked to decide between the Japanese "*Yanagi*" and the Korean "*Yû*" she decides without hesitation for "*Yû*".(228). This should not be mistaken for a positive turning towards the Korean culture, but Miri simply makes an open choice for her Korean origins. She is in the process away from

her difficult family background towards a positive self-confidence. Her father's state of In-Between-ness concerning living between two cultures, which is described as negative does not influence her. This excludes naturally a positive As-Well-As attitude concerning a harmonious bi-cultural existence bridging the gorge. The protagonist's sole roots are in the Japanese Culture.

Towards the end of the novel, her so far made development is being expressed in a very literary style. The picture of the cradle and the metaphor of water, which we already met in the title "The Cradle by the Shore" are being again employed. This stresses again the fact that Miri does not live through a true bi-culturality. 13 years after her attempted suicide, in the meantime being a successful writer, Miri returns to the very same shore, she tried to kill herself. There she comes across a weathered perambulator. "I pressed my body in the pram, being only a frame. [...] All of a sudden the word cradle came to my mind [...] all the time I felt that frame poking into my body, and watched the sea. My cradle is also my grave. The ocean is the place giving life, and to which we have to return when we die. But we live on land. I was very calm and gave my body to the skeleton-like cradle [...] At the horizon of the sea, I saw a vision of a waterway." (269)

The protagonist has reached a point in her personal development, where she is able to handle her past. She is willing to accept her Korean origins, as well as the bad experiences connected to this, represented in the broken perambulator. Like being revealed in the quotation, she has made a decision for life, after a long fight between life and death, ocean and land. The waterway, she has to cross - surely not free from difficulties and contradictory currents - open a new and bigger world for her, a new horizon. It is not said though, whether she will find a bridge there to a positive intercultural encounter with her Korean origins. Beyond the waterway, is the open ocean, as a symbol

for the future.

At this point I would like to turn to the novel "*Black tea with three lumps of sugar*" by the German-Turkish female writer and actress Renan Demirkan, and investigate if such a bridge can be found therein. The initial position seems predestined. The novel is written in a retrospective style by a third person narrator, whose name is not once mentioned throughout the entire novel. The 30-year-old female protagonist is expecting a baby, not from a Turkish man, but an Austrian. Whilst being in the maternity ward awaiting a caesarean section in a Cologne hospital, she lets the different periods of her life parade in front of her. She has associations about the early childhood in Turkey, about her parents and her little sister in Germany when she entered school, etc.; all being often disturbed by the going-ons on the ward.

Let's first examine the protagonist's family and her development from childhood to being a woman. Her father whose earnings as engineer in Turkey wasn't enough, came to Germany as foreign worker and his family followed him shortly afterwards.

The parents wanted a good school education and later on an academic career for their daughters. As to not to let the girls feel too strange in Germany, they follow the wishes of the girls and introduce German habits like the family having coffee on Sundays, cake in the afternoons to the Turkish family. In particular the father takes the part of an intermediary between the two cultures, as can be distinctly seen in the following scene:

To the joy of the children, the family put up a Christmas tree like German families do, despite their Islamic belief. But when the girls, following German habits, donate gifts to their parents on Christmas

Day, the mother feels her Islamic belief betrayed. She rejects the crying, disappointed girls, saying that only Christians would present gifts, and not Muslims like they were. The father tries to mediate and to save the atmosphere of the evening. Christmas didn't have purely Christian origins, but also old Celtic ones, where winter solstice was celebrated. Drying his daughters' tears he ends his explanations saying: " We look forward to your presents,".

The character of a loving Turkish father and this scene of undoubtedly displayed security are diametrically opposed to the violent Korean father of Miri in *Mizube no yurikago* and her cold family background. The German- Turkish parents, too, attempt to adopt to German habits up to a certain degree. But in their case it is not an unreflected mimicking, like in *Mizube no yurikago* where the Korean father put up the Japanese books as mere prestige objects.

Therefore the attention has to be turned to another important aspect in " *Black tea with three Lumps of Sugar* " The circumstances of the Turkish family are distinctly different from the Korean ones. Moreover, their description is obviously different from the cliché of German - Turkish families in popular TV serials, or early literature of the German-Turkish cultural scene. Here the pattern of the oppressed young Turkish woman can often be met, limited in her personal development, and who is only allowed to show herself in public wearing the Islamic veil. Their desire for a good education is often not well looked upon by the male family members. The father is often described a scary patriarchal lacking education what so ever, who does not even shy away from ordering the murder of a female family member to keep up the traditions. The father in " *Black tea with three Lumps of Sugar* " is definitely contrary to this pattern. He is a distinct counterpart to the stereotypes of *Mizube no yurikago* as well.

Examining in this context the development of the female protagonist,

we will find that the experiences of the adolescent of foreign origins are not described in a euphemistic way. She too, has to endure exclusion in school like Miri. She is "not initiated into the secrets of the other girls " (21). Furthermore she has to put up with the fact that not all teachers try to integrate her into the class: In high school the foreign language teacher gives bad marks to her only for her exotic looks (55). The "being different" seems the cause for a feeling of inferiority during puberty. Obviously she feels set aback because she is "not so tall and blondish beautiful" (26) like the others, and does not correspond to the common beauty ideal. Her self-confidence stems alone from the fact that she is "at least the slimmest with the smallest cloths' size".

When she decides to leave the confiding home before finishing school, she ends up in a deep inner conflict. The parents don't hold her back, and don't show extreme reactions like in the afore mentioned popular films. But they are ashamed of their daughter's behaviour in the face of their Turkish friends, especially since it is traditionally expected of the daughters to stay under the parental supervision until they get married. Consequently they stop contacting her. As a result, she suffers from severe feelings of guilt. After she passed her final exams out of her own accord though, they reconcile.

Her inner conflicts influence her personality development more than they do in Miri's case. Naturally, she has a completely different start than Miri, let alone because of the settled family background. These different preliminaries equip her with better requirements and seem to contribute to her inner strength even at an early stage in her life. Miri's leaving home instead, resembles a flight, followed by attempted suicide and the ending of her scholarly education. The motivation of the Turkish-German protagonist on the other hand is not done in the heat of the moment. She purposefully pursues her education, earns her own money for this, and takes responsibility for her own life.

Here we have reached a crucial point. The pattern of being a victim is broken twice in "*Black tea with three Lumps of Sugar*". The German - Turkish woman does not feel as being the family's victim like Miri does. This differentiates her from the above mentioned German-Turkish female characters as well. Here we sometimes meet a variation of the oppression of the Turkish women by men, and them being "rescued" by a German. This is a phenomenon we come across in Miri's case, too. There the director of the acting school has the rescuing part, who helps her deal with her traumatic childhood experiences. Nothing of that sort can be detected in "*Black tea with three Lumps of Sugar*". How little she is in need for assistance can impressively be seen in a rape scene, we come across in this novel, too: On the way home from a trip to Turkey together with her German boyfriend they accept the invitation of a young Turk, to stay there for the night. The latter then tries to rape her, whilst the boyfriend sleeps next to them not noticing what is going on. She manages though to repel the Turk.

Comparing this to Miri's condition, one can say, that she has completely different opportunities to develop her interculturality. The Japanese-Korean Miri can only react to her chaotic, infantile parents who represent the Korean culture for her, with rejection. This is why she can not be wrapped up in an intercultural "in-between-ness" between the Japanese and the Korean culture. In contrast to this, the German - Turkish woman has no purely negative resentments towards Turkey, which she knows from own experience. Apart for the attempted rape, she has positive memories about this country, for example about the grandparents living in Anatolia. She also sees the parents as people who deserve respect. Due to the feelings of obligation resulting from this, she can not easily detach herself from the stricter Turkish morals. Additionally, her exotic appearance draws her into a stronger intercultural conflict, other than Miri whose appearance is not so much

different from the Japanese.

But it is exactly this conflict that forces her to deal with the topics of "being foreign" and "interculturality" in greater detail. This of course bears the chance to go further than the Japanese- Korean protagonist, when trying for true bi-culturality. Up to a certain extent she has succeeded, and she has not to suffer as much from inner torments of being torn. The decision for a new life resembles a positive attitude after all. The teenager, cultivating her skinny body has turned into a round, settled personality, welcoming a new phase in her life in the face of delivering her baby. Her choice for being an actress, seems to show a positive attitude towards her bi-culturality in the context of the novel. Her experiences with different people and cultures enable her to play different roles. In Miri's case, the acting school on the contrary, obviously had a mere psychotherapeutical function, for she does not pursue the profession after her biggest personal problems are being solved.

Which kind of bi-cultural existence do we encounter then in the novel "*Black tea with three Lumps of Sugar*"? As the aforementioned has shown, in "*Black tea with three Lumps of Sugar*" cultural differences are neither negated, nor stressed. Turkey is not depicted as being non-civilized and misogynous, Germany isn't respectively idealized or vice versa. Instead both countries and the German-Turkish alliance seem heterogeneous. This very differentiated handling of interculturality is being realized by Renan Demirkan in using the alter ego third person narrator and in not mentioning the heroine's name, which has a detaching effect on the reader as consequence. The Turkish protagonist becomes thus the character of an example. Contrary to *Mizube no yurikago* this narrating strategy enables an analysis well above a purely individual level.

But what does the title "*Black tea with three Lumps of Sugar*" resemble?

Apart from the title, the tea appears as main theme throughout the whole text. So, one can read about the mother of the protagonist, being exhausted from working in Germany, when she remembers the sunny and dusty landscape of Anatolia, which "made {you} thirsty for the unique black tea, which was being served with three lumps of sugar."(43) The sweet tea triggers off feelings of warmth, security and a feeling of belonging and therefore resembles a piece of home country, you can take with you. The father says another important sentence. "Home can also be the place, you first have to find. "(49) The concept of home as being an attachment to a particular piece of land, a national belonging is not combined to. After three decades of living and working in Germany the Turkish parents return to Ankara, to spend the rest of their lives there. Alas, the father reacts with a circulatory collapse to the meanwhile changed environment, and returns to Germany only after one week. Shortly afterwards, the mother returns to Germany, too. To her as well, the return to Turkey has become a return to a strange country. Just like with the Korean father of Miri we meet in the Turkish parents accordingly a "Neither-Nor-Attitude", but with the difference that they have lost their former cultural identity, whereas Miri's father is right from the start in a state of in-between-ness.

In contrast to this rather resignating attitude, the Turkish protagonist has reached a new state of in-between-ness, as member of the younger generation. Her delivering a baby shortly represents figuratively a new phase of German-Turkish co-existence. Thus she develops a "multicultural utopia" for the unborn. " We will build for you the most beautiful four-poster bed of the entire world, with colourful Kelims from Turkey, [...] and cuddly toys from Germany. [...] [...] we take away the hot sun from the dusty streets of Anatolia and put it over the city of Cologne. Imagine, how she is going to sparkle then. Of course the Rhine has to be cleaned, so that we can grill fish, [...] As

dessert we will have white mulberry. In the evening we will get pancakes with bacon, and sip hot black tea with it", (120, 121)

A bridge is built between the cultures. A new feeling of an identity not attached to a certain country, again supported by the main theme of the black tea is being expressed in an "As-Well-As"-Attitude. A complete annulation of cultural differences is not meant here. In this light, the authoress has said in an interview, the cultures could not be dissolved like Nescafé. She wished for a cultivated society where people respect and supplement each other. (Babylon 08.10.98)

The multicultural visions of the future are developed contrary to the distinctly dichotomic attitudes in *Mizube no yurikago* and *Daichi no ko* or some novels about German -Turkish people: something new, a third is being created. This new third does not consist of an anarchical, nihilistic and inter-personal value negating condition like in *Fuyajô*, but rather in a peaceful juxtaposition. This is a tendency we meet again in the works of Tawada Yôko, who lives in Germany and writes in Japanese as well as in German. This new "As-Well-As"-attitude corresponds to the so-called American salad-dressing model, as it is being juxtapositioned in the interculturality debates about the "melting pot": The ingredients of the salad, meaning the different cultural characteristics are not blended to an indefinite broth consisting of mulberries, pancakes with bacon, and black tea, but co-exist next to, and supplement each other. They are held together by the dressing, resembled by mutual respect and tolerance.