



Second Language Creative Writers: Identities and Writing Processes

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Review of

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For Jacques Derrida, language is a habitat that contours one's "ipseity" (1). He addressed the complexity generated in one's sense of the self when one speaks a language that is not one's own, but a legacy of the colonial experience which has erased the language of the colonized. Yan Zhao's monograph entitled *Second Language Creative Writers: Identities and Writing Processes* explores the configuration of writer identities and writer voices of Second Language Creative Writers who have access to both their first and second languages. The linguistic habitat of these second language creative writers is a *mélange* of various linguistic paradigms that have played a pivotal role in the constitution of their subjectivities. As Zhao meticulously traces the connection between the identities and the cognitive writing processes of 15 advanced level L2 Creative Writers in the United Kingdom through discourse analysis, this important work does not only cover how social processes and human cognition are interconnected, it also operates as a work that could function as a base for devising new ways of analyzing the subjective coordinates of L2 writers vis-à-vis the target language and also the socio-political contexts within which the target language is spoken.

In her work under review here, Yan Zhao interweaves Community of Practice (CoP) theories with Post-structuralist thought in order to analyze the imbrication of the socio-cultural paradigms, histories and interactions within the creative writing processes of L2 writers and their identity construction. Zhao sees their modes of writing as "*idiosyncratic* performances" (Zhao 7; italics in original) stemming from their agentive choice of engagement with specific discourses, ideological angles, writing mechanisms, etc. In doing so, they "perform" (Zhao 3) specific configurations of identity which remain functional in multiple spheres of existence. One of the important areas that this work opens up for further exploration is the engagement of prior social and linguistic experiences in the performative enactment

of one's identity as a creative writer.

The monograph is divided into eight chapters. The first two chapters not only establish the connection between identity and creativity within multiple socio-political contexts but also recapitulate various pre-existing arguments pertaining to the linkages between society, emotional and cognitive faculties and the identities of creative writers. In addition, these chapters highlight the existing research in L2 creative writing practices in terms of the performance of various ethnic, ideological and cultural roles—and in terms of the various identity positionalities of the writers. However, while encompassing the major research in the domain, Zhao does not set down any operational definition of the terms 'creativity' and 'creative writing,' though her research participants engage in creative writing tasks of composing personal narrative and the ending of a short story.

The middle chapters engage in a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the various forms of I-ness that emanate from the data collected from think-aloud story-writing sessions and interviews. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the various elements that went into the creation of the creative writer identities of the participants of this research. The concluding chapter highlights the findings of her research as well as the implications and scope of her investigations.

Primarily focused on L2 creative writers and their perceptions of their selves in an academic context, Zhao's research opens up different avenues of thought particularly in investigating the construction of identities of L2 creative writers in an L1 context. However, while Zhao simply focuses on a 15-member group of students who are highly proficient in the L2, the book does not discuss the relevance of her work in different socio-political contexts. Her techniques of investigation do elucidate the relationship between creative writer identities and their socio-cultural milieus, but it can be argued that this cannot encapsulate the complexities of identity formation in all their rich varieties. For instance, while her work focuses on the I-statements of the participants as they addressed her questions in her interviews, the modifications that those identities undergo when the writers become participants as well as the creators of their own narratives could provide additional variables for analyzing the relationship between identities, cognitive practices and the social environments of the creative writers.

In addition, her research does not take into account the context of L2 creative writers who are living in an L1 environment. Case studies of the identity formations and the cognitive choices of creative writers in developing countries like India and Pakistan can provide an interesting space for further research, specifically as one traces their cognitive processes involved in their engagement with the rhetorical and discursive strategies available to them in both their first and target languages.

Another untouched aspect in Zhao's work is the engagement of L1 literary genres and stylistic practices within an L2 context by the second language creative writers. The works of many South Asian writers like Alamgir Hashmi, Arundhati Roy, Taufiq Rafat, Ilona Yusuf, Michael Ondaatje, etc., attest to the influence of their L1 linguistic and stylistic strategies, narratives and social conventions on their

L2 creative writings. This absence of representation is particularly noticeable in the section where Zhao conducts a careful discourse analysis of the transcripts of the creative writers' interviews and think-aloud activities. In these sections, one can easily see the influence of the multiple spheres of existence that have led to the assembly of the subjectivities of the participants. These include class differences, the struggles of the diasporic as well as the struggle to adapt to the target culture's socio-political norms. The identities of these creative writers are thus processual and emergent. This processual emergence of the identities of the L2 creative writers leads to the question pertaining to the reciprocal engagements of both their first and second languages. One may inquire as to the extent to which the second language and its associated ideological baggage intrudes into the performance of their identities and their cognitive practices in an L2 environment, particularly as their comments reflect a desire to adapt to the host country's environment. The tensions inherent in their identities, stemming from their diasporic experience and their reflection in their creative expression, do not manifest themselves in the analysis.

Further, the analysis does not take into account the fact that during creative writing, these bi- and multilingual writers interact with multiple voices ranging across the local and the global spectrum. This negotiation is not just spatial but also temporal, as the writers' personal, national and international histories blend to constitute their identities as well as the cognitive choices that they make while composing their work. It is this historical negotiation of identities that is amiss in the work, since the focus is only on the writers' personal histories. Zhao's argument would be further strengthened if she took into account the impact of their native histories on their modes of thinking and creating. For instance, one of the participants, Teri, talked about her immigration experience from Afghanistan to the UK, while another, Teng, highlighted his struggles as he worked in different capacities in the food and hospitality industry. In cases where the participants had the same nationalities, class differences defined their prior experiences both in their homeland and their host country. In addition, all of them displayed different levels of prior interactions with the English language, which nevertheless influenced the way they engaged in creative writing practices. Teri was educated in Great Britain and was more concerned about acquiring a socio-political legitimacy within the target culture as she strove to undo any differences in language proficiency between herself and the native speakers of English. In contrast, Teng's practices of writing in English were based upon his firsthand cultural interaction with customers and co-workers; hence, it emanated from more direct and diverse contact with day-to-day realities as a worker in a foreign country. What one sees is that in the formation of identities and the cognitive choices that these writers make, Zhao is correctly pinpointing the respective socio-cultural stimuli, personal histories and goals that are involved in governing the cognitive choices one makes in engaging in creative writing. Whether one is a Proactive writer (i.e., expressing themselves through assertive I-statements) or a Retroactive writer (i.e., expressing themselves through more self-critical I-statements), one is aware of the socio-cultural norms within which these self-representations are done. This element of Zhao's findings could lead to unique observations if L2 creative writers located in an L1 socio-political context were involved in similar modes of analyses.

Another direction that supplementary research to this work could take would be an analysis of the I-statements made by L2 creative writers located in an L1 context, but also of the alignments of the selected creative writers with specific story-writing values and conventions. My own experience as an L2 creative writing teacher in an L1 context has led me to observe that such students actively engage genres and stylistic paradigms found in their local cultures and literary traditions within their L2 creative writing activities. In doing so, their explorations of their “ontological security” (Zhao 168), particularly with reference to their local socio-political apparatus and also its resonance in a wider global perspective, yield slightly different ways in which these L2 creative writers construct their identities. While exploring the cognitive choices that these participants make in an L1 environment, one can further theorize how the “voice” (Zhao 34) in different creative writing contexts negotiates among different epistemological stances as the socially configured human mind remains in a state of flux and development. Not only that, the connection of L2 creative writers with the voices of their pre-colonial and colonial past as well as their postcolonial present could tap into the ways the L2 creative writers engage with multiple socio-political backdrops across multiple temporal frameworks.

To conclude, while Zhao’s work does provide a solid foundation for analyzing how different L2 creative writers construct and play out their identities, the work could have gained an added theoretical strength if it had taken on a postcolonial theoretical framework in analyzing the political and ideological leanings of the L2 creative writer identities in connection with both their host and home countries. The work also does not critically analyze the reasons governing the Anglophile leanings of a number of the individuals who participated in this study in all their socio-political complexities. However, it is precisely these unaddressed issues within this work that provide the impetus for further investigations in the discipline so that the role of individual and collective identities may be further explored in terms of identity performances in different contexts.

WORKS CITED

Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other; or The Prosthesis of Origin*. 1996. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford University Press, 1998.