

Exploring the Teacher Identity in Sakae Tsuboi's *Twenty-Four Eyes*

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Abstract

Teachers play an essential role in the field of education. Their identities are crucial to the teaching profession. In the wide range of literary works, especially books or novels, teachers often appear as a character. This research was conducted to explore the identity of the teacher depicted in Japan's legendary novel *Twenty-Four Eyes* by Sakae Tsuboi which was translated by Akira Miura. This novel tells the story of a young teacher's journey in a remote area of Japan during World War II. One research question was raised, "how is the teacher identity depicted in the Sakae Tsuboi: *Twenty-Four Eyes*?" Qualitative research, specifically document analysis was used to explore the teacher identity in this novel. The researchers also implemented a close reading method to gain a deeper understanding about the related topic. The data was carefully analyzed using thematic analysis. The use of a Social Role Theory (SRT) helps the researchers to interpret the text. It showed that social relations happening will affect feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Based on the text, the researchers concluded four themes appeared as the identity from the teacher; teacher as an educator, as an inspirer, as a challenger, and as oppressed. It is hoped that through the result of the research, teachers, educators, or even scholars can gain meaningful insight related to identity.

Keywords: *education; teacher identity; Twenty-Four Eyes*

1. Introduction

Teachers are one of the most important figures in the world of education. They play a major role in the successful teaching and learning processes. Lately, teachers' performance in their teaching has received considerable attention among researchers. Teachers' identities will shape how they conduct their performance in the classroom. Rodgers and Scot (as cited in Lankveld, 2017) acknowledge that teacher identity is essential to the teaching profession. This is in line with Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) who stated that teacher identity is at the heart of the teaching profession. In the last two decades, there has been a shift of focus in learning theory from cognitive to social perspectives, allowing identity to come to the fore (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Therefore, the identity of teachers in the education sector is worth investigating.

Identity is complex yet important because it is a concept that distinguishes humans from other creatures (Leary & Tangney, 2012). It can give people a framework to construct their own ideas about "how to be," "how to act," and "how to understand" their work and place in society (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Leary and Tangney (2012) believe that only through social processes can humans become conscious of themselves. However, many teachers find it difficult to find their identity. Furthermore, many researchers are also confused about identity (Barkhuizen, 2017), which makes identity, particularly the teacher identity, a challenging topic.

Literature, however, comes to simplify the complex, as things can be more easily understood through the work of literature. The advantage of works of literature is that the point that the author wants to convey can be



manifested in light language but does not bore the reader (Sasalia & Sari, 2017). This research tried to investigate the identity of the teacher depicted in the literary work, especially from the novel. Literary works are really close to people, sometimes they contain real stories from people's experiences. In a wide range of literary works, the teacher appears as a character (Muchmore, 2012). This is an interesting thing to investigate because, through stories, people can understand better and give meaning to their lives. Muchmore (2012) argued that real and imagined teachers are similarly storied creations when they are represented through text. Both of them can be analyzed and explored. In the current era, novels have become the leading hero in the drama of literary development (Bakhtin, 2014). Building on this, novels have proven to become a tool to portray the lives and identities of teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to further discuss the about the novel which became the object of this research.

Novels, as literary works presented through the written word, have the power to captivate the human imagination through engaging narratives, complex storylines, and well-crafted characters (Tamrin, 2023). This is in line with Sasalia and Sari (2020), who stated that novels portray various aspects of human life, making them relatable and interesting to analyze. Greenham (2018) in his book stated that reading is one of the strangest yet most powerful of all human experiences because humans can learn, see, and feel something that does not even exist. *Twenty-Four Eyes* is a well-known novel from Japan, written by Sakae Tsuboi in 1952, this novel explores the poignant story of a young teacher, Hisako Oishi, who educates twelve children in a rural village in Japan. The story is set in pre-and post-World War II Japan. The theme of education and the role of a teacher is very strongly written in this story. However, the novel is not only about education but also about social & human conditions themes were addressed in this story. Therefore, the researchers tried to analyze the teacher identity depicted by Hisako Oishi through the English version of the book translated by Akira Miura.

The researchers raised one research question which is "How is the teacher identity depicted in the Sakae Tsuboi: *Twenty-Four Eyes*?" Through this research question, the researchers hoped that it could guide and help the researchers to capture how the identity is depicted in that novel. The question was crucial for the research, therefore the researchers chose one research question that might cover the gap especially related to teachers' identity in literary works.

1.1. Literature Review

Similar research was conducted by Muchmore (2012) which the title was "From Laura Ingalls to Wing Biddlebaum: A Survey of Teacher Identities in Works of Literature." In this research, Muchmore read 44 literary works in which teachers have appeared as characters. It contains twenty adult novels, six young adult novels, six children's books, five plays, four autobiographical novels, and 3 short stories. The setting of the story was mostly in English-speaking countries. Muchmore employed document analysis through analytic induction. In this approach, he carefully read all the literary works with special attention paid to the characterization and identities of teachers. In order to gain the data easier, he used note-taking. From the research, Muchmore concluded that there are ten identities emerged, those are: a) teacher as nurturer, b) teacher as subversive, c) teacher as conformist, d) teacher as hero, e) teacher as villain, f) teacher as victim, g) teacher as outsider, h) teacher as immutable force, i) teacher as eccentric, and j) teacher as economic survivor.

In other previous research, identity was also investigated, for example in "Development of Self-Identity in Sandra Cisneros's Novel *The House on Mango Street*" by Veeraganesh and Anuradha (2024). In this research, the researchers tried to investigate the feelings and economic culture of migrating people like Chicano (Mexican American) in facing injustice and sensitive situations. The themes that emerged were identity, discrimination, racism, violence, sexual harassment, and education. The researchers used descriptive study and tried to study Chicano literature, especially *The House on Mango Street* using colonization study. The result stated that through self-exploration and self-evaluation of the inner self, it will form people's personal identity in society. It shows how education helps women in need and is forsaken in order to advance the status of "Chicano." The researchers argue that the main character was not only shaped by her own thoughts but also by the thoughts of other people. It shows that the social environment plays a major role in shaping one's identity.

Seeing the short review of two similar research, it showed that research on the identity in literary works has received considerable attention among researchers. It is proven by the diversities of research about self-identity. It has been carried out a lot. For instance, Madhavan (2017) and Silitonga and Ambarita (2020) who analyzed the self-identity crisis faced by the main character, both have different settings where Madhavan (2017) talked about Indian women in a novel in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* while Silitonga and Ambarita (2020) investigated about self-identity crisis in a novel *Every Woman for Herself*. Similarly, Youssef (2022) investigated the relationship between place attachment and self-identity in Ezzedine Fishere Farah's story, while Wahyuningsih (2020) examined how self-identity and social identity intersect to influence love in the *Legenda Baturaden* story. Houghton (2022) explored the construction of identity in the hybrid novel *Queen of Beauty*. Lastly, Meeran (2024) conducted research on the representation of identity in contemporary English novels. These studies highlight the crucial role that self-identity plays in shaping characters and narratives in literary works,

showing how literature offers a platform for readers to better comprehend and reflect on their identity issues in the complexity of human life.

From some previous research, some gaps can be filled. There are limited articles that discuss teachers' identity in literary works, especially in *Twenty-Four Eyes* by Sakae Tsuboi. The researchers found limited article that discusses this book. This research responds Muchmore's (2012) recommendation for future research to conduct an in-depth exploration of a smaller sample of literary teachers situated within their specific socio-cultural and historical context. Prior (2003) in his book stated his concern that written documentation plays a role in most human societies, but little attention has been paid to it by social researchers. Therefore, the researchers think that this research is worth investigating. The researchers hoped that this research could contribute to the field of literature, especially about identity, and give valuable insight to the reader.

1.2. Theory

The self is tied to fundamental motivations, such as maintaining consistency (coherence), taking action (agency), and fostering relationships (communion) and these motivations shape both personal and social identities (Talaifar & Swann, 2018). Social Role Theory (SRT) was proposed by social psychologist, Alice Eagly, in the early 1980. This theory explains the social relations between individuals and groups, which will affect their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Van Lange et al., 2012). In short, this theory stated that social interaction will shape an identity. This theory is closely related to gender differences (Rafat, 2022). Van Lange et.al., (2012) argued that as individuals construe themselves during personal development, a cognitive structure about their being male or female is formed.

Social-Role Theory highlights the importance of social roles in educational setting, especially in student-teacher interaction (Zavalko et al., 2024; Mo & Li, 2024). This theory provides valuable insights to the formation of identities and behaviour. Seeing some previous research that used Social-Role Theory (SRT) as a theoretical framework, the researchers believed that this theory was suitable to analyze education novel. It is because the novel has so many interaction between teacher and student.

The researchers chose this theory because it is relevant to the novel. It is related to the condition depicted in the novel which is closely linked with gender differences. Through the Social Role Theory (SRT), it helped researchers to determine the identity of the teacher by seeing her participation in the social activities. Sachs as cited in Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) stated that their identity as a teacher is shaped through personal experience in society and their interpretations drawn from those experiences which makes identity dynamic and not something fixed or imposed. Therefore, in this research, Social Role Theory (SRT) will serve as a framework for analyzing how the main character in *Twenty-Four Eyes* negotiates her identity as a teacher.

2. Method

This research was conducted using qualitative research. Poedjiastutie (2021) stated in her book that qualitative research will be very suitable to apply in social research where humans play an important role in the research. Aligns with Creswell (2013), he stated that qualitative research is interpretive and naturalistic which means that the researcher investigates the subject in their natural setting and tries to understand or interpret the phenomena based on their experience. Qualitative research helps the researchers to see the complex of social phenomena that cannot be explained by numbers. Document analysis is one of the methods from qualitative research that is suitable to carry out this research. This method consists of analyzing various types of documents including journal articles, newspaper articles, institutional reports, and even books (Morgan, 2022). For books, it can be fictional books or non-fictional books. Morgan (2022) stated that analyzing documents such as journal articles and books can be beneficial for researchers because of the data stability.

The object of the research was a novel by Sakae Tsuboi, *Twenty-Four Eyes* which was translated by Akira Miura. This novel was chosen through the principles of purposeful sampling. It means that this novel was selected by the researcher because the content of the research provides a rich data for exploring the teacher identity in the social context, which aligns with the objectives of this research. This is in line with Bekele and Ago (2022), who stated in their research that in purposive sampling, the study site and unit of analysis within it were selected because of their relevance to the research. Besides, this book was selected because there are very limited research that discuss and explore this book. Therefore, the researchers decided to chose and analyze this book as a research object.

To have a better comprehension, the researchers used a close-reading method. Close reading is about enjoying the way the words on the page create beauty in complexity (Greenham, 2018). Greenham (2018) divided six content of close reading, which means there is a lot of scope that can be analyzed through close-reading methods, those are: the semantic, the syntactic, the thematic, the iterative, the generic, and the adversarial. This research took "the thematic" as how themes emerge and affect meanings when people read the text. Creswell and Creswell (2018) in their book explained six steps to conduct thematic analysis, it consist of collecting the codes,

reviewing the codes, grouping the codes that represent similar ideas, organizing the codes into groups, organizing the groups, and last step writing narrative for each group themes. For data analysis, the researcher tried to analyze the novel to identify the recurring patterns, ideas, or themes. What themes that can be concluded from the certain actions, conversations, decisions, or notions. The researchers read it three times carefully, coded it manually, and categorized it into some points. Thematic analysis involves organizing data into parts of text and assigning words to those segments to develop a general understanding of them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) Payumi & Hartati (2018) stated that the close-reading method is very effective for learners to comprehend the text. Close-reading method, especially thematic, is a good and suitable complement for the document analysis.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers used triangulation. Triangulation is one of the important points of the research since it can increase the validity and credibility of the research. In this research, the researchers used investigator triangulation. According to Thurmond (2001), Investigator triangulation involves using more than one data analyst or observer in the study which will lead to greater credibility. This involved consulting with a second researcher who reviewed the identified themes and provided feedback. Denzin as cited in Thurmond (2001) stated that the purpose of using multiple investigators in one study is to decrease the potential of bias in analyzing the data as well as increase the honesty and validity of the research.

3. Findings and Discussion

In this part, the focus shifts to the research findings that were extracted from a qualitative investigation, particularly the document analysis of Sakae Tsuboi's book entitled *Twenty-Four Eyes*. The data were obtained from thematic analysis by seeing what themes occur in the book. To answer the research question "How is the teacher identity depicted in the Sakae Tsuboi: *Twenty-Four Eyes*?" Some themes appear as a result of careful investigation by the researchers. The themes will be explained below

3.1. Teacher as an Educator

The first theme that emerged was the teacher as an educator. It is one of the most prominent themes in the whole story. It is precisely because teachers' responsibility is to educate their students. In this novel, Mrs. Oishi worked hard for her students' intellectual growth. Besides, as an educator, she also builds an intimate relationship with her students. Throughout the story, Mrs. Oishi shows genuine concern for her students, learning their nicknames, family backgrounds, and interests. She even promised herself to teach them wholeheartedly and never disappoint them.

Just finished with her first experience of teaching, she thought of the twelve first graders who had tasted group life for the first time that day. She saw their eyes vividly, each pair shining with its own individuality. "Never in the world will I disillusion those eyes," she told herself. (page 36)

Seeing the pieces of examples from the story, her identity as a teacher is shaped after her first day of teaching. It can be concluded that this theme appears because of the teaching and learning process, which might contain teacher-student intimate interaction. This is in line with Social Role Theory (SRT) proposed by Eagly (1980) which states that social relations between individuals and groups will shape an identity. It also affects their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Van Lange, Kruglanski, & Higgins, 2012).

The interesting part is, the teacher-student interaction does not always happen inside the class. Mrs. Oishi and her students learn outside the class. It often intersects with the community where it will increase the interaction. Mrs. Oishi was not always promoting academic lessons but also life lessons. For example when she brought her students to help the society after a big disaster even though she was actually rejected and mocked by the society itself.

Spoke to her in a joking tone, as carpenters usually do, but not without sarcasm, "Oh, is that you, Lady Teacher? Are you here to help us too? Would you mind getting the whole bunch of kids to roll the stones out of the road down to the beach then?" "Leave the job here to a carpenter like me. Or would you like to use a hatchet or something?" (page 48)

The people around him laughed, as if they wanted to make fun of her (page 49)

She was suddenly embarrassed, She had to start back, and suggested in order to cover her humiliation, "How about all of us getting the stones out of the road now?" (page 49)

In this part, Mrs. Oishi's identity as a teacher helps her to act in that kind of situation. It is in line with Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) who stated that identity can give people a framework to construct their own ideas about "how to be," "how to act," and "how to understand" their work and place in society. Identity is not only shaped by society but also guides how to act in society.

3.2. Teacher as an Inspirer

The second theme that appeared was the teacher as an inspirer. Mrs. Oishi's actions and speech sometimes inspired her students. Through interaction, her identity as an inspirer was shaped. This might be unconsciously shaped since Mrs. Oishi does not have an intention to inspire. One of her students named Sanae Yamaishi is one of the greatest examples in this theme. Even though it was not explicitly mentioned, Sanae was really inspired by Mrs. Oishi. In fact, she wants to become a teacher as well. It happened of course because of a reason. Sanae has a very close relationship with Mrs. Oishi. In the end, she became a teacher and this could happen because of Mrs. Oishi.

When Mrs. Oishi told them to write what they would like to be, Sanae had written "educator." (page 160)
"Yes, she's at the top of her class. I think she's going to teachers' school eventually, but she's a little quiet. I wonder if she'll make a good teacher, being the way she is," Mrs. Oishi spoke anxiously about Sanae, the girl who usually didn't express herself aloud. (page 157)
Sanae had graduated from teachers' school with an excellent record and had been awarded the honor of staying on to teach. Her eyes shone even brighter now. Because of Mrs. Oishi, Sanae had become good friends with Kotsuru who had graduated also with honors from midwifery school in Osaka. (page 190)

From the example, the researchers can conclude that intimate relationships and interaction between teacher and student can shape a teacher identity. In this case, Mrs. Oishi was Sanae's inspiration, their closeness, shared values, and Sanae's success in achieving her dream of becoming a teacher indicate that Mrs. Oishi had a strong influence on Sanae. This is in line with Sachs as cited in Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) who believed that identity as a teacher is shaped through personal experience in society and their interpretations drawn from those experiences.

The other example is when Mrs. Oishi gave her student a lunch box, she bought it with a huge amount of money. It is because her student, Masue, feels embarrassed because of her lunch box. This might be a very trivial action done by Mrs. Oishi, but Masue on the other hand, felt that it was really meaningful to her. She even still kept it after a long time ago. That kind of small action by Mrs. Oishi could inspire and motivate her.

With resounding footsteps, she rushed downstairs and came running back immediately. Showing the empty lunch box to everyone, she said, "Look! Mrs. Oishi gave this to me when I became a fifth grader. How do you like that?" (page 240)
The teacher, however, looked on with tearful eyes. (page 241)

This theme shows that the identity of a teacher is not only as an educator who is in charge of transferring knowledge but also includes character building and inspiration for the younger generation. Environment plays an important role in shaping identity. As teachers, it is important to have interaction with their surroundings.

3.3. Teacher as a Challenger

The third theme that emerged was the teacher as a challenger. The setting of this novel was in World War II, when Axis powers (Japan, Italy, Germany) were facing an endless war with allied powers (United States, United Kingdom, Uni Soviet, and France). This particular condition can shape one's identity. This condition led to a different perception of people, some of the Japanese people supported all their governments' rules. However, a few of them were against the rules, including Mrs. Oishi. The situation drives her to become rebellious, particularly about the rules even though she chose to remain silent.

One of the obvious pieces of evidence was her opinion about the pamphlet from her friend. She found it interesting and made sense, even she used it when she was teaching. Initially she did not realize anything until one of her friends, Mr. Inagawa was arrested because of spreading that pamphlet. They believed that those pamphlets were considered "red" which is closely related to their enemy, the Uni Soviet.

"Why, I've seen The Seeds of Grass myself, but how could that be 'red'?" asked Mrs. Oishi, puzzled. (page 141)

The vice-principal smiled. "That only shows sincerity doesn't pay, you see. If the police heard you talk that way, they'd label you 'Red,' too." (page 141)

"I don't understand that. You know, I liked some compositions in that pamphlet so much I once read them to my class. 'Wheat Harvest' and 'The Chimney of a Soy-sauce Factory' were good ones." (page 141)

"Watch out, watch out! Did you get the pamphlet from Mr. Inagawa?" (page 141)

This conversation depicts the situation clearly and how it affects her identity. The thing that attracted Mrs. Oishi turned out to be something that was forbidden by the government, but it did not change her feelings. Instead, it was the beginning of Mrs. Oishi to have a different ideology from the government which later will shape her identity.

The warlike atmosphere has spread even to Mrs. Oishii's place. The government rules at that time obliged all the men from the family to become soldiers. They said that to die defending one's country is the highest honor. Surprisingly, the government's doctrine was successful. All the boys' dreams were to become a patriotic hero, to join the frontline war. However, Mrs. Oishii strongly opposed that viewpoint.

"Why do you want to be a soldier so much?" Mrs. Oishi asked Tadashi. (page 168)

His answer was frank: "Because I'm not the heir. Besides, it's much better to be an NCO than to be a fisherman. (page 168)

Tadashi, apparently having sensed something, asked, "Don't you like soldiers?" (page 168)

"No, I like fishermen and rice dealers better. You're still too young to die, you know." (page 169)

".....Look at me. I've been teaching my pupils from the first grade on, but now more than one half of the boys want to be soldiers. What's the sense of teaching, I wonder?" (page 170)

As Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) have mentioned, this point of view will construct their own ideas about "how to be," "how to act," and "how to understand" their work and place in society. Her views that opposed and contradicted government policies shaped her identity as a dissident and subversive. It led to her future action, for example when Mrs. Oishii defied his husband when he had to go to protect his nation. Her husband and son's death strengthen her identity as a subversive.

3.4. Teacher as an Oppressed

The fourth theme that appeared was the teacher as an oppressed or a victim. Victimized teachers are oppressed or defeated in some way, either by their societies, students, administrators, or by the profession itself (Muchmore, 2012). This notion aligns with Eagly's (1980) Social Role Theory (SRT) stating that people's interaction with their society can shape their identity. Mrs. Oishii in the story was initially rejected by a lot of people. It is because she is an outsider and has a different cultural background from others. It fueled other people's suspicions and biases. She also often got mocked and scolded by either their students or students' parents. Through that bad and negative interaction, it shaped her identity as a victim. One of the examples was when Mrs. Oishii was scolded by society even though she had good intentions.

The proprietress, however, pretended not to hear anything and asked, "Lady Teacher, what were you laughing about just now?" (page 51)

Miss Oishi said nothing. (page 52)

"Is other people's bad luck so funny? My husband fell off the roof, but maybe that's funny too, is it? I'm sorry he didn't get hurt more. If he had, it would have been even funnier, huh?" (page 52)

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" (page 52)

She muttered the last few sentences, as if talking to herself, and went away angrily, leaving the teacher speechless with surprise. (page 52)

This conversation was one of the examples of the interaction that happened between Mrs. Oishii and her society. It is caused by society's prejudice against her. Mrs. Oishii identity as a victim not only comes from their interaction with society, but also comes from her actions. Even though mostly, her actions were caused by social interaction. The other example is when Mrs. Oishii got a leg injury that took a very long time to recover because she fell into her students' trap. That severe injury in her leg forced her to quit teaching for so many years.

She dusted her skirt at the knees, and stepped backwards. Suddenly she screamed; she had fallen into a sand trap. (page 56)

Amid all the clamor, the teacher did not try to get up. She lay on her side, doubled up, with her hair touching the sand. (page 56)

"Will one of you go and get a Gentleman Teacher? Tell him I've got a broken leg and can't walk." (page 56)

It was a fact that must be accepted by teachers that teaching might lead to bad outcomes. It is a part of the risk of their job that teachers must take. It is inevitable, through Mrs. Oishii's story, hoped that it can help teachers to that realization. Teachers may find greater strength in their own experiences, drawing inspiration from how others, like Mrs. Oishi, navigate these challenges. Even though it is just a fictional character, people can still learn from that (Muchmore, 2012)

4. Conclusion

This research was conducted to investigate the teachers' identity depicted in the literary work, particularly the novel entitled *Twenty-Four Eyes* by Sakae Tsuboi. Furthermore, one research question raised,

“How is the teacher identity depicted in the Sakae Tsuboi: Twenty-Four Eyes?” The researchers used document analysis to find the answer to the research question. Social Role Theory (SRT) comes as a foundation or grand theory which helped researchers to analyze the book. After careful reading, the researchers found four big themes that appeared that show the teachers’ identity in this novel. The themes are first: 1) Teacher as an educator, 2) Teacher as an inspirer, 3) Teacher as a challenger, and 4) Teacher as an oppressed.

There are some limitations in this research. The first limitation is the limited source of data. It is because there are almost no researchers that discuss this book, and even other Sakae Tsuboi’s works. Then, the context might be irrelevant in today's era. Yes, it is still possible to learn and get the value of the novel but it will be better if the future researcher can investigate the up to date and relevant novel. It is suggested to use a novel that depicts an Indonesian setting, so the reader might relate it better. The researchers also suggest future research to use different theories and see it from another perspective. Even with lots of imperfection, the researchers hope that this research can be beneficial for people who read it, especially for teachers and educators.

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