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Sebastian Wogenstein (University of Connecticut)

Human Rights as Paradigm in Contemporary German Jewish Literature

Research on literature and human rights typically has focused on postcolonial texts from the Global South, yet human rights themes also figure centrally in another arena: contemporary German Jewish literature, especially since the 1960s. In this body of work, we increasingly see a shift in focus from the Shoah and its aftermath to questions of intergenerational trauma. Especially in German Jewish literature since the turn of the millennium, engagement with memory is also clearly multidirectional (Rothberg), and it often is expressed in solidarity with marginalized groups.

While the memory of the Shoah remains a constant reference point, I argue that a broader human rights perspective has emerged as the dominant paradigm. Migration is a particularly prominent focal point, alongside other topics related to economic, social, and cultural as well as intergenerational rights.

Two claims are central to my project: First, although human rights questions appear with relative frequency in contemporary German literature in general, German Jewish writing in particular shows a strong inclination not only to engage human rights issues, but also to frame them as such.

My second, more speculative and broader, claim is that these literary texts, and the public discourse in which they are embedded, contribute to a jurisgenerative effect (Benhabib) in shaping social norms that are, in a globally connected world, also linked with international human rights norms and their interpretations.