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Domesticity and Immigrant Womens Labor in Julie Otsukas "The Buddha in the Attic"

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Brygida Gasztold

**Domesticity
and Immigrant
Women's Labor
in Julie Otsuka's
*The Buddha
in the Attic***

And when
 She arrived to look
 Into the face of a stranger
 Who was her husband, thirteen years older than she,
 Did she politely untie
 The silk bow of her jacket
 Her tent-shaped dress
 Filling with the dried wind
 That blew from the surrounding fields
 Where the men were burning the cane? (Song, 3–4).

Julie Otsuka's 2011 novel *The Buddha in the Attic* is an important contribution to American literature, whose contemporary representatives tend to embrace a wider selection of national experiences. It is no longer an authoritarian white, Anglo, male voice that had dominated American literary history, but the literary reclamation of America, which is told by the Other. The author focuses on a Japanese-American gendered experience, evoking the early twentieth century phenomenon of picture brides and their lives in America. Giving the voice to female representatives of an Asian immigrant group allows the author to complement an official American history with the episodes that had long been deemed marginal. The focal point of the novel are assimilative hardships of Japanese picture brides who embarked on an arduous journey to make America home. And yet, when they finally seem to have got there, the irony of history (or rather the fears of American WW II government) plays a trick on them, locking them up in internment camps and destroying their entire world. What finally felt like home became alien, and what seemed familiar turned out to be hostile. Otsuka's novel portrays immigrant women's lives as a constant chain of adjustments and compromises, which they have to make in order to survive, both on personal and communal level. Thus, the concept of home and homeliness is not presented as a fixed and stable position located within the immigrants' reach if only s/he tries hard enough. Rather, it reveals its shifting and contingent nature that is conditioned by the alterations of economic and political power structure of the American government. What the novel shows is that for Japanese immigrant women the concept of home is a work in progress, which requires constant negotiations and renegotiations between what is familiar and unknown and what is desired and unwelcome.

Julie Otsuka builds her story on a historical fact, which is the early twentieth century practice of selecting brides from the immigrants' native countries, such as Japan and Korea, due to miscegenation laws in America. The practice of long-distance marriage arrangements was not unknown to America. In 1620, the first ship with colonial mail-order brides known as "Jamestown brides" aka "tobacco wives" arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, where the prospective husband allegedly had to pay 120 lbs. of tobacco for the passage of the bride-to-be. Between 1663 and 1673 King Louis XIV subsidized the travel of about eight hundred young women, later named as "daughters of the king," to the colony in Canada. Between 1719 and 1720, about a hundred marriageable women arrived in the French colony of Louisiana. They came to be known as the "casket girls" (Zug, 85). "Between 1885 and 1924, 200,000 Japanese [mostly young men] went to Hawaii, and 180,000 to the U.S. mainland" (Takaki, 45). Gentlemen's Agreement in 1907 arrested Japanese immigration to Hawaii and America, but it still allowed families to be joined. Because of this loophole,

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picture brides were still able to officially immigrate to America. There was a considerable demand for Asian women since interracial marriages were highly discouraged by American government, as is seen by the Expatriation Act of 1907, which stated that “any American woman who married a foreigner was automatically denaturalized” (Volpp, 829).

The picture-bride system was popular in Japan where most marriages were not a result of a personal choice but were arranged by relatives, or professional match-makers. A potential bride would be chosen on the basis of a photograph and family recommendations. “Usually the marriage would be performed in Japan without the groom present – a “proxy” standing in for him – so that the woman who arrived in the United States would already be his wife, by Japanese reckoning” (Cott, 151). However, the idea of a proxy marriage appeared suspicious to American authorities who ordered the brides to “remarry” on arrival, this time according to an American ceremony, which is based on mutual consent. Ronald Takaki quotes the number of picture brides at “66,926 between 1908 and 1924. Between 1911 and 1920, women represented 39 percent of all Japanese immigrants. In fact, so many Japanese women emigrated that females represented 46 percent of the Japanese in Hawaii and 34.5 percent on the mainland in 1920, a year before the “Ladies’ Agreement.” But, by then some 20,000 picture brides [...] had already arrived” (47). Japanese government stopped issuing passports to picture brides bound for the mainland in 1920 because the practice generated much controversy in the United States. Takaki adds that “Japanese women went to America in much larger numbers than Chinese women” (46). It is interesting to note that “Korean picture brides entered the United States with Japanese passports issued to them as colonial subjects of Japan under the terms of the Gentlemen’s Agreement” (Takaki, 56).

Since interracial marriages were forbidden by California state law, Japanese government supported immigration of women, which was hoped to bring greater stability to immigrant bachelor communities and stem drinking, gambling, and prostitution. The institution of marriage was believed to promote a positive image of the Japanese immigrant community, thus helping battle single men’s negative reputation that contributed to anti-Japanese sentiments in America. As Tanaka claims: “[p]icture marriage, although practiced by only 10 percent of all Japanese immigrants, strongly influenced both Japanese and American concepts of the Japanese racial and gender image” (48). Family, thus, was seen as an efficient mechanism of labor control. Japanese picture-brides agreed to marry strangers in the hope of becoming part of the American Dream, however, because of their physical differences from white Americans, they were for a long time not accepted as part of the American society in the same way in which European immigrants were. The process of adaptation was a difficult one since Japanese, Chinese, and Korean groups were excluded through federal laws; they were denied citizenship and property rights. Asian immigrants were in demand as long as they provided cheap migratory labor, but as members of the racially subordinated group, they were not seen as the potentially desirable citizens of the United States.

Making America Home

A long sea voyage is the time of both anxiety and hope, during which the women experience the feelings of “longing and dread” (Otsuka, 9)¹, accompanying their journey to the unknown. They try to envision their American future, dreaming of “new wooden sandals and endless bolts of indigo silk and of living, one day, in a house with a chimney” (Otsuka, 5). Their dreams reflect the lives of white people: a white house with a garden, a bathtub with hot water, a servant, a chambermaid, a laundress, and a Chinese butler. Even though their expectations are not high, as they agree that it is enough to know that the man from the letter is healthy, does not drink and does not gamble, they hope for a better life than the one they have just left behind. Reality, however, brings only bitter disillusionment, as not only the poignant letters which they received “had been written [...] by people other than [their] husbands, professional people with beautiful handwriting whose job it was to tell lies and win hearts” (Otsuka, 18), but what they see in the San Francisco port is “the crowd of men in knit caps and shabby black coats” (Otsuka, 18). The would-be husbands rarely match the enhanced photographs included in the letters, which exhibit strong, healthy, and handsome young men wearing western clothes and standing in front of nice houses with mowed lawns and white fences, with an occasional T-model Ford in a driveway. Emulating the Western attributes of affluence, such as a symbolic suburban house, the men signal not only that they know what is desirable in America but also their will to assimilate. Enticing the brides with American symbols of success, the letters read: “I have bought a beautiful house.... I own a farm. I operate a hotel. I am the president of a large bank” (Otsuka, 10), they set their assimilative goals, hoping that the future wives will assist them in these endeavors. In his chapter entitled “Making Racial and Gender Self-Image in the Japanese Community: The Japanese Immigrant Perspective,” Tanaka explains how “modern technology – i.e., photography – became a powerful instrument for defining the collective Japanese-American identity in gender and racial terms”, assisting both the brides in Japan and the grooms in America in establishing idealized gender roles (121). And how later those idealized images were objectified, evaluated, and traded.

On coming to America, picture brides are full of misconceptions about this mysterious country and its inhabitants. They imagine a land of enormous trees and vast plains and believe its language and customs to be “unfathomably strange” (Otsuka, 7). Americans are said to have a strong animal-like odor, they “eat nothing but meat and their bodies [are] covered with hair” (Otsuka, 7). Japanese women find it hard to tell white people apart since to them they all look alike. American women tend to be tall and loud, they do not have to kneel down before their husbands or cover their mouths when they laugh, nor do they have to work on the fields. Unlike Japanese men, Americans show their respect by holding open the doors and tipping their hats. Both men and women shout a lot, eat cooked beef at funerals, and drink milk of cows. Americans live in big houses with a piano in the front parlor, they wear shoes inside the house, hang dishes on the wall instead of pictures and have locks on their doors. Instead of dispelling worries, husbands fuel the newlywed wives’ fears, warning them to stay away from white people – not to stare

1 Julie Otsuka. *The Buddha in the Attic*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. All references are to this edition and are cited by page within the text.

at them, not to believe them but to watch them carefully: “Expect the worst, but do not be surprised by moments of kindness” (Otsuka, 25).

Japanese picture brides come to this strange land to make it their new home, but the definition of home becomes illusory as its meaning changes together with circumstances: home is a bunkhouse on the ranch, a tent, a wooden shanty in a camp, a bed of straw in a barn, a corner of the washhouse, a bunk in a rust boxcar, an old chicken coop, a flea-ridden mattress in a shed, a spot on the floor of an abandoned schoolhouse, or a patch of earth. “Home was wherever the crops were ripe and ready for picking. Home was wherever our husbands were. Home was by the side of a man who had been shoveling up weeds for the boss for years” (Otsuka, 25). Otsuka portrays women who are homemakers, making the best of what they have got; they decorate dirt-floored shacks with “cut out pictures of cakes from magazines” (Otsuka, 34), sew “curtains out of bleached rice sacks” (Otsuka, 34), and make “Buddhist altars out of overturned tomato crates” (Otsuka, 34).

For contrast, they can see affluent, white people’s homes and images of near-perfect domestic life, but only from the servant’s perspective. The distance between the two is not only measured in miles but in terms of unbridgeable gap that signals social standing. Japanese picture brides never feel an accepted part of American society, thus their attempts at making America home may succeed on the level of family, providing its members with basic needs and care. Home becomes a location of resistance, to borrow bell hooks’ term,² in the way it nurtures and supports family members. Economic success of small businesses run by husbands would probably not have been possible if, after a long day, they had not been met at home with a hot meal, clean clothes, and a place to rest. Japanese children would not have done well at school if their mothers had not provided them with care and encouragement that fosters individual desires. Despite hardships, home was sometimes the only place of affirmation, where their dignity could have been restored, or, through acts of domestic violence, compromised.

A sense of permanence is indispensable in the creation of home, which in its foundation should be a safe haven for its inhabitants. However, migratory labor, social othering, and a discriminatory policy towards ethnic groups make this goal hard to accomplish. Answering the demands of a swiftly changing job market prevents the migrant workers from establishing and maintaining a permanent place of residence – a physical space to call home. Migrant and itinerant workers, who come and go as needed, suit employers who shake off any responsibility for their well-being: “These folks just drift, we don’t have to look after them at all” (Otsuka, 29). In time, one might expect that the feelings of otherness and alienation might wither in the wake of assimilative gains, but Otsuka’s novel presents the typical successful immigrant story that is undercut by a historical event, which derails the protagonist’s notion of self. The little economic stability and social position they seemed to have achieved proves inadequate when the boundaries of home fail to provide protection. American distrust and anxiety, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, robs them of everything they had been working for. Once again what they had been led to think of as home crumbles, forcing them to redefine their entire lives. A sense of unhomeliness is thus articulated in imagery of threat, vulnerability, and impermanence. To be at home in America means to live under constant fear of exclusion and dominance. Otsuka’s novel demonstrates

² It is from her essay “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” (1990).

how social, political, and economic constructions, such as racial prejudice, low wages, itinerant work, housing discrimination, denial of ownership and citizenship rights have worked to obstruct the construction of homeplace for Japanese immigrants.

Patriarchy Adopted and Enacted

Japanese picture brides share the patriarchal upbringing, which replicates and reinforces social order that is based on the division of male and female roles. In Japan, “[t]here was, in principle, a strict sexual division of labor: [...] Japanese men provided for their families economically and made the major household decisions; women were the main suppliers of reproductive and domestic labor” (Dona, Ferguson, 82). Due to the fact that initial immigration to the U.S. was overwhelmingly male, the labor patterns were disrupted and Issei men had to learn some domestic skills for themselves and for employment, for example, laundry business. “There are few data as to whether the Issei women who later joined these men were likely to have expanded outside of their traditional spheres of domesticity and family work” (Dona, Ferguson, 84). The system of social governance, in which Japanese men hold authority over women and children, enjoy social privilege and moral authority, leaves women a very restricted sphere of influence. Poverty and patriarchy work against women, reducing their roles in family and society to the realm of domesticity. A woman is not expected to have a voice but be an obedient and docile daughter and wife. The Meiji Civil Code (1896) and the gender roles it dictated promoted an ideal of a modern Japanese woman: “modest, courageous, frugal, literate, hardworking, and productive” (Nolte and Hastings, 171). Moreover, a Japanese system of land inheritance makes it easier for families to part with daughters, so parents marry them off “for the betrothal money” (Otsuka, 8). A popular peasant saying illustrates the difference between children: “One to sell, one to follow, and one in reserve” (Takaki, 49), with the girl being the first one. According to the rule of primogeniture, the son to follow, usually the oldest one, is to inherit the whole property, whereas the younger ones could seek fortune overseas and later become in want of brides. This system makes women victims of family interests and pawns in personal intrigues.

When they come to America, picture brides again conform to a male-controlled social order, which makes them quiet, obedient, and respectful of authority – a perfect material for a wife or a maid, according to a patriarchal discourse. The way Japanese women are depicted in in-group relationships reflects a broader and stereotyped vision of Asian women in American society; they are perceived as passive, submissive, and naïve – qualities generally associated with powerlessness, yet excelling in sexual prowess and eager to please their male masters. Just like in Japan, in early twentieth century America, marriage defines the woman’s status, providing a commonly approved way of being recognized as a valuable member of the society. Using male privilege, the husband exercises control on the family’s decision-making process, leaving his wife little autonomy. In this respect, he is assisted by American immigration laws that, in fact, force the bride to stay married, as divorce would mean her deportation back to Japan. Japanese women may change

the continents and cultures but their subjugation to the patriarchal rule persists: “Our husbands worked us like slaves” (Otsuka, 35). Even if they wanted to, they could not go back home since their fathers had informed them: “If you come home, you will disgrace the entire family. If you come home, your younger sisters will never marry. If you come home, no man will ever have you again” (Otsuka, 50). Obedient to traditional Japanese values of duty and filial obligation, they rarely challenge the allotted roles, and that is why most of those marriages persevered.

In their new families, Japanese picture brides recreate the only system they know – patriarchy. Women must work in the fields and then come home and do household chores: “In the evening, no matter how tired we were when we came in from the fields, they sat down and read the paper while we cooked dinner for the children and stayed up late washing and mending piles of clothes until late” (Otsuka, 63). Even though Japanese women suffered themselves from gender inequality, they still favor boys over girls, just like their own mothers did: “they’re the better gain on the farm” (Otsuka, 63). They “fed them more [...] sided with them in arguments [...] dressed them in nicer clothes [...] scraped up [their] last pennies to take them to the doctor whenever they came down with fever, while [their] daughters [they] cared for at home. I applied a mustard plaster to her chest and said a prayer to the god of wine and bad colds” (Otsuka, 63). This discrimination has economic roots: the daughters will one day marry and leave them, like in a Japanese culture, while the sons might stay and take care of their aging mothers. In Japan, “a woman left her natal home at marriage and joined her husband’s household, where she was assigned particularly low status until she proved to be industrious, submissive, and able to bear children” (Dona, Ferguson, 82).

Husbands do not participate in domestic chores or children rearing: “They rarely spoke to their children, or even seemed to remember their names” (Otsuka, 64). It is not customary for children to address fathers directly but they do it through a mother: “Tell Papa there’s something wrong with one of the horses” (Otsuka, 64). It is the mothers who teach them manners, praise, and scold them. They “taught them never to accept a handout [...] never to brag” (Otsuka, 69) and inform them about the world around: “Stay away from the Chinese. They don’t like us. Watch out for the Koreans. They hate us. Be careful around the Filipinos. They’re worse than the Koreans.” (Otsuka, 69). As these comparisons draw upon stereotypes, the author presents Japanese Americans as both the victims and perpetrators of racial prejudice. The relationship between Japanese and other ethnic groups is tense due to discrimination and prejudice present in American society, heightened by the fact that these groups compete with each other in the job market. Thus, the narrative shows how the economic situation impacts inter-racial relations in American society.

A Life of Otherness

The concepts of similarity and difference are central to the way in which we construct our sense of identity and social belonging. Otherness illuminates one group that embodies the norm and the other that is defined through difference to the first one – asymmetry in power relationships being crucial to the creation of otherness. Out-groups cannot prescribe their own norms but are subjected to the practices of the dominant group. Thus, the creation of otherness presupposes the emergence of two hierarchical groups, in this

case Japanese immigrants and white Americans. Otsuka's narrative represents the interactions between Japanese-Americans and white Americans in terms of Otherness, which follow the conventional insider – outsider pattern. An ethnic woman writer acts as a native informant, whose account stresses what is different and unfamiliar, while explaining a subordinate group to a dominant one. The narrator builds her fictional world on the antinomy between “us” and “them,” where the latter refers to white Americans. There are not many instances where their paths crisscross other than economic dependency – immigrant labor is the key factor of the Japanese-American lives, one that establishes their social status and enables a route to social acceptance and advancement.

Japanese women become objects of racial prejudice and othering. They represent a visible minority: short, with “long black hair and flat wide feet” (Otsuka, 3), they stand out in comparison to tall and white Caucasians. Being constantly reminded of their physical difference, they are made to believe that they want to look like their white employers: tall, fair, with bright teeth, graceful limbs, and pale skin. Most importantly, however, they lack self-confidence that characterizes white Americans: “they seemed so at home in the world. So at ease. They had a confidence that we lacked” (Otsuka, 39). Especially when a sense of self-worth is undermined by members of their own group. “By 1920 women comprised 37 percent of the Japanese population of California, as opposed to only 15 percent in 1910” (Tsu, 207), establishing an overwhelming male majority within the Japanese community. The scarcity of women, on the one hand, added to their value in the eyes of husbands, but on the other hand made them victims of sexual attacks, especially that many of them lived isolated on remote farms or in neighborhoods surrounded by men. “Although violent incidents that resulted in official investigations occurred only sporadically, Japanese women experienced recurrent harassment from their countrymen” (Tsu, 191). Despite those fears and worries, Japanese immigrant women still believed that America could offer them a more attractive vision of the future than the familiar hardships in the native homeland. That is why they reassured themselves “that it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village” (Otsuka, 7).

In Otsuka's novel the characters forge narrative accounts of the past that signal Japanese immigrants' underprivileged position in American society. They stay in the background, try not to draw attention to themselves: “We learned to live at a distance from them, and avoided them whenever we could” (Otsuka, 52), they speak seldom and cause no trouble or complain: “In America we knew we had no choice but to scrub sinks and wash floors” (Otsuka, 44). Most white people “took little notice of us at all. We were there when they needed us and when they did not, poof, we were gone” (Otsuka, 44). Japanese immigrants have problems with finding a place to stay because Americans do not want them as neighbors: “Do not let the sundown find you in this county” (Otsuka, 23). If they settle, they do it “on the edges of their towns, when they would let [them]” (Otsuka, 23). As domestics, they live in the servants' quarters of big houses of affluent white families, tending their gardens, doing their housework, and looking after their children. Acts of violence are not uncommon: white neighbors spray their windows with buckshot, set chicken coops on fire, dynamite their packing sheds, burn down the fields, and the local sheriff never comes to their rescue. In towns, children throw stones at them and knock off their hats, they are seated in the worst seats in the theatre, waiters serve them last, and barbers refuse to cut

their hair – “Too coarse for our scissors” (Otsuka, 52). White doctors refuse to see Japanese women when they are ready to give birth, and the children sit at school with Mexicans, in the back of the classroom. As racial mixing is undesirable, Japanese-Americans are advised to stay in J-towns, where they can feel safe among their own. From this perspective, America appears to be “a violent and unwelcoming land. Is there any tribe more savage than the Americans?” (Otsuka, 36).

Otsuka’s narrative provides numerous examples of overt and institutionalized racial discrimination, which infiltrates all aspects of lives, determining where they live and what kind of work they do. Economic competition between Japanese (often equated with Asian) and white workers for wage level jobs and the mutual distrust of different cultural ways fuels prejudiced sentiments. This is why Japanese immigrants sought employment that would bring them into little direct competition with white employees, such as small service businesses (laundries and restaurants), tenant farmers, farm managers, and plantation laborers. Discriminatory policies would be harder to implement and racial prejudice might loosen its grip if immigrant groups were intermixed not isolated. Lack of understanding between Americans and their ethnically-diverse neighbors, however, provides a perfect breeding ground for ethnic prejudice, which marks both personal, cultural, and organized spheres of lives.

There are two main routes of assimilation accessible to Japanese immigrant women: labor and their Americanized children. When they are employed as domestic servants, they learn American ways on the job: how to make a bed, answer the door, shake a hand, operate a faucet, dial a phone, and set a table. The new knowledge alters the traditional gender balance when white women teach them how to talk to a husband, how to argue with him, and how to deceive him: “Don’t ask him where he’s been or what time he’ll be coming home and make sure he is happy in bed” (Otsuka, 39). However, the most difficult lessons of American mores come with their growing up children – the second generation Nissei who are taller, heavier, and louder than their mothers, who move quickly with long steps, refuse to use chopsticks, and prefer “bacon and egg every morning for breakfast instead of bean-paste soup” (Otsuka, 75), pouring ketchup and drinking gallons of milk. Immigrant children give themselves American names and do not want to celebrate Japanese holidays. They never invite friends, explaining: “We live like beggars” (Otsuka, 75), and are ashamed of their mothers: of straw hats, threadbare clothes, callused palms, and wrinkled faces: “They wanted different and better mothers who did not look so worn out” (Otsuka, 75). Due to a cultural and generation gap, mothers lose touch with their Americanized children, who ignore them because they cannot speak English properly and are not acquainted with “do’s and don’ts” of American culture. This process is accompanied both by the hope and fear that their children will become “true” Americans. Immigrant children, in turn, quickly learn how to navigate their ways in an American multiethnic maze: when there are colored days at the YMCA swimming pool, and that it is better first to ask the restaurant if they serve Japanese. They learn that “they respect you when you are strong” (Otsuka, 77), and that they will never have what they wish for: “higher noses, fairer complexion, longer legs” (Otsuka, 77). The crucial piece of knowledge, however, comes with the realization that “no matter what they did they would never really fit in” (Otsuka, 77) since for white Americans they will always be “just a bunch of Buddhaheads” (Otsuka, 77).

Immigrant Women's Labor

Like many immigrants before and after them, Japanese women come to America as migrant labor. "While women in China were restricted to the farm and the home, women in Japan in the nineteenth century were becoming wage-earning workers away from home in services such as inns and grogshops as well as in industries like tea processing and papermaking" (Takaki, 47), textile industry, construction, and mining. Those skills had prepared them better to suit the fluctuating American labor market, so husbands immediately put the newlywed wives to work as domestics and farm hands. It no longer matters that the women know how to write "short, melancholy poems about the passing of autumn that were exactly seventeen syllables long" (Otsuka, 6), or "serve tea and arrange flowers and sit quietly on [their] flat wide feet for hours, saying absolutely nothing of substance at all" (Otsuka, 7). What comes useful, though, are the household skills, which they can advertise while applying for service jobs: they know how to cook and sew. Even if they did not know, they quickly learn how to "pull weeds and chop kindling and haul water" (Otsuka, 6). Just like they had been instructed by their mothers: "A girl must blend into a room: she must be present without appearing to exist" (Otsuka, 6), they pick plums, top beets, sack onions, crate berries, and nobody even notices them. In the town, they work in their husband's noodle shops and cheap boarding houses. In Japan, "the lowliest job a woman could have was that of a maid" (Otsuka, 45), so that is why they never write home the truth about what they do in America. If they are slow, husbands warn them that "they would send [them] home on the very next boat" (Otsuka, 28), so they weep, curse, and ache while they work: "hands blistered and bled, or knees burnt, our backs would never recover" (Otsuka, 28). For comfort, they chant Buddhist sutras and sing harvest songs. Drained by mind-numbing work, picture brides lose their youth and health toiling in the fields and slaving in white people's homes at the time when they also give birth to their own children.

For many Japanese immigrant women the experience of motherhood, however traumatic it might have been, turns their mundane existence into a meaningful life. When they get pregnant, they may lose the job: "Mrs. Lippincott, did not want a pregnant maid greeting guests at her door. It just wouldn't look right" (Otsuka, 57). If the baby is unwelcome, they pour cold water on the stomach, jump off the porch, or drink a special mixture from the midwife. Like their mothers in Japan, they give birth quickly, after hours, so as not to disturb the work routine: "We gave birth under oak trees [...] beside wood-stoves [...] in dusty vineyard camps [...] on remote farms [...] in a barn [...] in the back of our husband's Dodge truck [...] and the next day we tied the baby onto our back and went out to pick berries in the fields" (Otsuka, 55–57). Maternity must give priority to labor and even when the babies cried, mothers "kept on working because if we didn't we knew we would never pay off the debt on our lease" (Otsuka, 61). As a consequence of poor or non-existent medical care, they suffer from a slipped uterus, they die at childbirth or the baby does not make it. Having children has an important economic significance: "We gave birth to babies that were American citizens and in whose names we could finally lease land" (Otsuka, 58)³. Once the children grow up, they are promptly put to work, picking berries, hauling water,

3 Anti-Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited ownership of land by those ineligible to citizenship and limited the leasing privilege to three years.

shoveling weeds, and chopping wood. "Not once did we ever have the money to buy them a single toy" (Otsuka, 65). Most importantly, they bring sense and joy to mothers' lives, "for the first time since coming to America we did not mind having someone else beside us in bed" (Otsuka, 62). Even though young mothers lacked the support they would have had in their village and within the bosom of their families, they are happy seeing their children grow up.

White employers admire Japanese workers for their strong backs, nimble hands, stamina and discipline, claiming that the "short statue make[s] [them] ideally suited for work that required stooping low to the ground" (Otsuka, 29). They are complimented on a docile disposition and "[u]nusual ability to tolerate the heat" (Otsuka, 29). Contrary to Chinese workers, Japanese "didn't gamble or smoke opium, [they] didn't brawl, [they] never spat, [...] they were faster than the Filipinos and less arrogant than the Hindus [...] more disciplined than the Koreans [...] soberer than the Mexicans [...] cheaper to feed than the Okies and Arkies, both the light and the dark" (Otsuka, 29). In American eyes, the ethnic hierarchy between rival minority groups is established on the basis of their value and usefulness to American economy. Immigrants increase economic efficiency by reducing labor shortages in low-skilled markets. Japanese women are well aware of their disadvantaged position on the labor market and they assure themselves that if their husbands had told them the truth in letters, they "would never have come to America to do the work that no self-respecting American would do" (Otsuka, 29). Japanese immigrant women are predominantly producers, not consumers, but this position at least grants them access to American society.

In answer to acts of racial aggression, Japanese immigrants resort to one thing that empowers them in this hostile world – they plunge into work. Instead of dreaming, wanting and writing letters home, they work in the fields and do household chores, slowly disappearing as autonomous beings. As much as a mechanical repetition of arduous daily tasks helps them to survive another day, everything has its prize, and one of them fears that amidst hard labor "[her] soul has died" (Otsuka, 37). In America, the physical and practical have taken over the spiritual, depriving them of an important realm of their traditional lives. Japanese laborers realize that they are an asset to American economy, but, at the same time, they are deeply unappreciated: "We were an unbeatable, unstoppable economic machine and if our progress was not checked the entire western United States would soon become the next Asiatic outpost and colony" (Otsuka, 35). As long as immigrant labor is desired from the economic point of view, the sheer numbers of Japanese workers threaten to tip the balance of power. The fears of the dominant group are reflected in stereotypes, such as the "Japanese breeding like rabbits," or Japanese males "arranging for picture brides to be sent over so they can overpopulate the country with their offspring" (Hosokawa, 22). As retaliatory measures, immigration quotas are introduced to monitor the size of the group, or various forms of real estate discrimination, as shown in Otsuka's novel, to ensure that the Japanese stay in the preferred neighborhoods (J-towns). The out-group's economic success and visibility entails the threat of minority dominance and feeds discriminatory sentiments.

A Life of Loss

The overarching thread guiding American lives of Japanese picture brides is the feeling of loss, beginning with an arranged marriage to a stranger and a loss of virginity. The choice of words to describe this important moment signals women's subjugation to their husbands: quickly, without saying a word, "flat on our backs on the bare floor" (Otsuka, 19), coldly but knowledgeably. Women are objectified, abused, and presented as passive recipients of male desires and sexual actions. Phrases such as greedily, hungrily, "with their fists whenever we tried to resist" (Otsuka, 19–20), by surprise, drunkenly, recklessly, roughly, and "with no mind for our pain" (Otsuka, 20) confirm the woman's portrayal as weak and unimportant, which justifies the use of violence: "They tied us up and took us facedown on threadbare carpets that smelled of mouse droppings and mold" (Otsuka, 20). Devoid of affection and sensitivity, the sexual act is a disturbing spectacle of a de-humanized and animal-like satisfaction of male carnal desires: they took them with grunts, groans, "shouts and long-drawn-out moans" (Otsuka, 21). The male authoritarian position is reinforced by means of repetition, which draws attention to men as sexual agents and ignores the presence of women: "They took us even though we were still nauseous from the boat and the ground had not yet stopped rocking beneath our feet [...] They took us before we were ready and the bleeding did not stop for three days [...] They took us with the assistance of the innkeeper and his wife, who held us down on the floor to keep us from running away" (Otsuka, 19–21). In accord with the patriarchal rule, the newly-wed husbands "took them for granted and assumed [women] would do for them whatever it was [they] were told" (Otsuka, 19). In answer to desperate cries for help, they offered ominous assurance: "You will come to like it" (Otsuka, 21).

The brutality and callousness which the brides are subjected to during the wedding night, forecasts their future position in a marriage: the women "stared up blankly at the ceiling and waited for it to be over, not realizing that it would not be over for years" (Otsuka, 20). If the husbands could not find blood on the sheets, they cursed them and threatened to send them back home. Traumatic as their sexual initiation might have been, it recalls home and the way their own fathers "had taken our mothers every night in the one-room hut back home in the village: suddenly and without warning" (Otsuka, 21). The sexual act serves to reaffirm male dominance and ensures a woman's subservient position. Sexuality is thus presented as a tool of the patriarchal order used to maintain control over its female members.

In America, picture brides lose their voice since the one they have is of no use there. Their native tongue becomes useless in relationship to the outside world and the inability to speak English proves a serious hindrance, which does not only spoil communication but also determines their inferior position in a society. To a much greater extent than English, Japanese language reflects the complexities of social hierarchy, paying special attention to the status of the speaker with regard to the listener. "Women's entire bearing, physical movements, style of speaking, and language forms and expressions were supposed to reflect their status as well as their special feminine qualities as shy, retiring, and graceful (Hassell, 562). Moreover, they were not encouraged to assimilate but to act as "culture bearers and to live up to the requirements of the normative roles to which they had been socialized" (Hassell, 560). As labor is their only avenue of social acknowledgement, the first English words they learn

are work-related: “water,” which saves their lives during the scorching sun in the fields, reassuring “All right” and threatening “Go home.” Then, they learn “first words of horse English” (Otsuka, 26) when they plough the land and “[a]fter fifty years in America these would be the only words of English some of [them] could still remember by heart” (Otsuka, 26). When they start work as domestics, for the sake of their employers’ comfort, they are given new, American names – no one would bother remembering those Japanese ones. Next, they are taught job-related essentials: “This is a bucket. This is a mop. This is a broom” (Otsuka, 42), rarely being allowed to attend evening classes. The first letter they come to recognize is often “x,” “so [they] could sign [their] name[s] at the bank” (Otsuka, 73). Any attempts at mastering the English language are met with resentment, both on the part of white Americans – they “shrugged their shoulders and walked away” (Otsuka, 27) and their husbands – “But for now [...] leave the talking to me” (Otsuka, 27). Lack of knowledge of English seriously bars the Japanese immigrants’ access to America and leaves the wives totally dependent on their husbands – they cannot negotiate the terms of work or explore their new world. It will also negatively affect the relationship with their American-born children, who will be ashamed of their mothers’ ungrammatical and accented speech. An inability to speak English makes them cut off from any sources of information other than the members of their own group, maintaining the division into “us” and “them”: “We could not read their magazines or newspapers. We stared at their signs in despair” (Otsuka, 26). A language barrier further isolates Japanese immigrant women from the mainstream society and prevents them from taking roots since they have no communicative tools that would enable them to make sense of their new home.

When Japanese picture brides hope to enjoy a dose of stability in their lives, they suffer another loss that came from the very heart of their adopted homeland – the American government. In 1942, President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066 according to which more than a hundred thousand people of Japanese descent were moved into Internment Camps. This outbreak of American xenophobia had its roots in the war in the Pacific. The incident which instigated the forced relocation and incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry (two-thirds of them were American-born citizens) was the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japanese Imperial forces. When America joined the Allied forces, the mass media war propaganda launched a campaign against spies, collaborators, and traitors who might obstruct war efforts. The Pacific coast, heavily populated with the descendants of Asian immigrants, was seen as an especially sensitive zone where the threat of espionage was perceived as real. Needless to say, little evidence of Japanese disloyalty has been found, pointing at race prejudice, West Coast economic interests, and war hysteria as the main reasons behind the government actions. This shameful episode was one of the most serious violations of civil liberties in American history.⁴

Industriously constructed Japanese-American world collapses when the political becomes private. At first, there are rumors about lists, people taken away or disappearing, raids on boardinghouses, businesses seized, and newspapers shut down. Yet, nobody feels threatened: “We were simple women who lived quietly and kept to ourselves” (Otsuka, 81). Then, more rumors come about

4 In 1988 President Ronald Reagan signed the Reparations Act acknowledging the U.S. government’s responsibility for the injustice to Japanese Americans and promising payments (20,000 \$) to all internment camp detainees or their heirs.

houses searched, telephone wires cut, and documents confiscated. As protective measures, they draw shades, remove their names from mailboxes, and do not leave the shoes on the porch: "At night we bolted our doors and spoke among ourselves in whispers" (Otsuka, 81). Uncertainty feeds their imagination so they burn souvenirs related to their native country: photographs, letters, diaries, documents, and paper lanterns. For fear of discrimination and in want of acceptance, Japanese American families further distance themselves from their cultural roots. They examine their lives to look for a mistake they have made, "surely [we] must be guilty of *something*" (Otsuka, 91), and blame themselves for the society's distrust because they clung to old ways for so long: "We've made them hate us" (Otsuka, 87). The shift in attitude makes them realize that the threat is palpable: anonymous letters arrive in the mail, customers disappear, insurance companies cancel insurance, banks freeze accounts, the milkman stops delivering, and the neighbors' children no longer wave hallo. "Suddenly, to find ourselves the enemy" (Otsuka, 85), they wonder, feeling utterly helpless. But worse comes later, when the neighbors raid the barn at night, and they hear about a Chinese laundryman who was beaten because "[t]hey mistook him for one of us" (Otsuka, 89). When the same old rattan suitcase, which was bought for the journey to America, needs to be cleaned again, they know their American Dream is gone. Neighbors peer from behind the curtains, and no sooner had the Japanese residents left than the looting started: gardens are stripped of flowers and local pawn shops begin to exhibit an assortment of exotic pieces. To fill the labor void new domestics are hired: "sturdy young women from the Philippines, thin bearded Hindus, short squat Mexicans" (Otsuka, 125). Only when Okies, Arkies and Negroes move into abandoned houses, do their white neighbors wish for peace, quiet, and the previous occupants. The forced internment demonstrates how fragile the Japanese immigrants' position in American society really was, despite their efficient labor and economic achievements.

Through a Collective Voice

The portrayal of Japanese immigrant women stresses their sameness as members of an ethnic group, sharing a common experience of immigration, however, Otsuka's narrative also highlights differences between individual members. Although to white Americans Japanese picture brides look the same, they differ in terms of appearance, origin, social standing, religion, education, and ambitions. No doubt the economic pull factors prevail, yet the readers are presented with diverse reasons why they leave Japan: to escape poverty and the rice paddles, to avoid the fate of their older and prettier sisters, "who had been sold to the geisha houses by [their] fathers so that the rest of [them] might eat" (Otsuka, 5), to boost their chances of marriage, which back home were thwarted by an unexpected and out-of-wedlock motherhood, because there they wanted to marry but "all the eligible men had left the year before to find work in Manchuria" (Otsuka, 8), or to track down a father who left the family and was never heard of. They come to America from different parts of Japan: from Hiroshima, Hokkaido, Kyoto, Tokyo, Nara, and from small mountain hamlets. Some of them are farmers' daughters, others come from urban areas. They are as young as twelve and as old as thirty-seven. Japanese picture brides are described as passive victims of the forces that are beyond their control, but their fate is not unique in world history. The motley crowd

on the ship heading for San Francisco signals global political and economic upheavals that uproot people forcing them to look for a new home. There are Sikhs from the Punjab fleeing to Panama, White Russians escaping the revolution, Chinese workers from Honk Kong on their way to the cotton fields of Peru, and a group of gypsies from Mexico. International labor migrations were the result of European and American colonialism. Takaki explains that “‘core’ nations like the United States, England, France, Spain, and Portugal penetrated politically and economically the less-developed, ‘semi-peripheral’ areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in their search for new markets, raw materials and sources of labor” (Otsuka, 31). The play of economic forces behind push and pull factors enforces international labor migrations. As long as the reasons and circumstances of their journeys differ, all of them will have to find a new home.

The tension between similarity and difference in the group portrayal of Japanese-American women is reflected in the use of a collective narrative voice, in which phrases such as “we,” “our,” “one of us,” “most of us,” “some of us,” “a few of us” signal a group. Whereas phrases such as “one,” “there was a...” as well as italicized passages suggest a temporary emergence of an individual voice, which personalizes the experience while making it unique – the picture brides are presented as individuals *en masse*. Delphine Munos observes that this technique “simultaneously allows for a sense of group cohesion, for the emergence of sub-groups, and even at times, for selective individualization” (71). Otsuka’s narrative pattern might be recognized as “unnatural narrative”⁵ – an attempt to deconstruct the idea of an anthropomorphic and distinctive narrative voice that emulates the experience of a real-world human character. Using the choral “we” voice allows the author to present the women’s experiences in all their diversity, without privileging anyone in particular, as all are considered equally important. Even though individual cases of life stories are mentioned, whose uniqueness is highlighted by the use of particular names, geographical places and details in appearance, outfit or character, the narrator uses the plural “we” to stress the shared experience. Munos evokes Brian Richardson’s remarks on collective narratives: “the *we* form gestures towards the creation of a collective consciousness that strives to unshackle itself from the tyrannies of colonialism and/or resist the tenets of white supremacy. It is also that this technique might express new communal solidarities while simultaneously endorsing and breaking the (culture-specific) conventions of the mimetic world, with the result that such a perspective challenges, in turn, the, what Richardson calls, ‘hegemonic paradigm of the isolated Western consciousness’ (5)” (68). This strategy also implies a sense of closeness and intimacy on the part of women who empathize with fellow immigrants, struggling to carve out a better life in America. As we read only about isolated details of their lives, they never emerge as distinct entities. Since life in America fails to endow them with the feeling of wholeness, the narrative style is reflective of the fragmentary nature of their experiences. A carefully chosen absence of an individual point of view implies de-individualization of Japanese Americans – initially seen as a collective group of laborers and later as a mass-threat to American safety. Only the last chapter presents the narrative shift, with the “we” referring then to the white community, who silently and passively witnessed their neighbors’ disappearance. However, in this case,

5 See Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, Brian Richardson, „Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models. *Narrative* 18.2 (2010): 113–136.

their facelessness and anonymity afforded by the plural narrative voice serve as a disguise and a protective device against the realization that, willingly or not, they are also part of the story. As Fludernik puts it, "one of the most compelling contrapuntal functions of we narratives is to shift responsibility to others in order to hide behind a collective" (116).

Final Remarks

Otsuka's novel creates the Japanese immigrant women's visibility, furnishing them with the voices they had been denied throughout their lives. The Other has made a claim to speak back, disrupting the dominance of power. Because of their gender and ethnicity, Asian American women were overlooked and women's issues, such as sexuality, maternity, family, and domestic labor, were seen as secondary. Due to traditional norms of social conduct, "*Issei* women generally did not talk about their fears, loneliness, doubts, sadness, or anger experienced in the years since leaving Japan, nor did they discuss their confusion and sense of shame as a result of the experience of being interned" (Hassell, 563). Therefore, *The Buddha in the Attic* is a delayed answer to the protagonist's plea: "Does anyone even know I am here?" (Otsuka, 30). The use of a choral narrative voice is an empowering act on behalf of female victims of circumstance and passive recipients of a future scripted by others. Japanese picture brides "belong to the invisible world" (Otsuka, 26), which is comprised of everything other than white, dominant, and male – they represent ethnic, underprivileged, and female. We can see how they have been marginalized and ignored: first, their parents decide about their fate, then husbands speak for them. One might argue, though, that going away gives them at least a possibility of control over their destinies, more than they could have had back home. Their invisibility is replayed on the level of family and society, it affects the conditions of their employment and relations with their Americanized children. The culture they are forced to renounce due to the pressures of assimilation is represented by the image of Buddha, hidden away in an attic where nobody can find it. In a similar way, the experiences of Japanese picture brides have been hidden away from mainstream American history and their substantial contribution to American economy has been ignored. Silence and invisibility that defined the women's lives transcend ethnicity and come to characterize the attitudes of white Americans who are, in majority, presented as passive witnesses to the Japanese internment: "Sometimes it's better not to know" (Otsuka, 122), they claim. Hence, the protagonists' voices, which articulate important fragments of their private female lives are also representative of an ethnic group and communicate its position in American society. Through different aspects of individual lives of Japanese picture brides, Otsuka shows how Japanese American women have been silenced and mistreated by official history.

Otsuka's novel raises questions that are located at the intersection of multicultural feminism and anti-essentialism. The author defies the validity of American Dream for those whose upward social mobility does not depend on hard work, but on ethnicity and gender. Due to racial prejudice, the ideal of American Dream is unattainable to Japanese picture brides, yet without their hard labor American economy would not have developed the way it did. Economic mobility among Japanese immigrants was largely possible because of presence and labor of women, who helped establish and maintain family

farms or small businesses. Women's labor was also critical to the economic survival of the immigrant family. Because the idea of marriage is seen as private, the wives' labor was easily overlooked as not belonging to the productive sphere. This position made them especially vulnerable to financial and physical exploitation. The history of picture brides demonstrates how social agency supported by institutions under hegemonic patriarchy controls reproductive work and its attached value. The importance of marriage is thus presented as much beyond the scope of private and personal experience but as adding to the sustainability of the patriarchal structure.

Due to modern technologies, industrialization, urbanization, and international mobility, the mail-order bride business continues to bring profit to agencies worldwide. "The Western fetish for Asian women is fueled by age-old myths of their subservience and sexual prowess, while ongoing practices of exploitation and dominance by the West perpetuate these archaic stereotypes" (Perez, 217). Present-day picture brides come from different countries and represent various cultures and religions, but the rationale behind the match making industry is still the same. "Whereas women in industrialized countries may have been able to challenge the system at an individual level, and to delay or resist marriage or to impose more stringent conditions upon it...their resistance leaves a gap in the domain of reproduction as motherhood and homemaking, a gap then filled by women from other countries" (Kojima, 200). Even if underprivileged and desperate women, whose poverty has often been the result of capitalist expansion in Asia, still decide to enter the picture bride contracts in the hope of bettering their lives, it is clear that this cross-cultural phenomenon helps to maintain the sexual division of labor and reinforces a reductive and stereotyped conception of femininity.

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