

Ventriloquizing Subalternity: Towards Narrating a Revisionist Counter-Memory in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011)

إصاححة التبعية: نحو سرد ذاكرة مضادة تعديلية في رواية بوذا في العالم السفلي (2011) لجولي أوتسوكا

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Received: 16/04/2023

Accepted: 31/05/2023

Published:13/07/2023

Abstract

This paper scrutinizes the female consciousness in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* by positioning the novel amidst the mechanisms of 'Postcolonial subaltern historiography'. It is argued that Otsuka redresses the representational imbalance of the Japanese-American 'picture brides' by advancing a scathing assessment and rewriting of American history through a counter-discourse of literary genesis. Defying the oversimplification of macro-histories and the omission of the female voice, Otsuka unearths the psychic subtexts that lie within and beneath the historical facts of these Japanese-American females and presents forth 'a revisionist history of affect'. The latter discloses their gender-specific suffering, animating their feelings and how they experienced their private history, both psychologically and corporeally. This article equally probes Otsuka's devices for such reclamation, especially her choice of the palimpsestic 'we' voice, which enabled her to render the private historical memory a communal account.

Keywords: Subaltern Historiography, Counter-Discourse, 'a revisionist history of affect', the palimpsestic 'we' voice.

المخلص : تفحص هذه الورقة وعي المرأة في رواية بوذا في العالم السفلي لجولي أوتسوكا من خلال وضعها وسط آليات تأريخ التبعية لما بعد الاستعمار. يُقال أن أوتسوكا صححت التمثيل المختل التوازن لعرائس الصور اليابانية الأمريكية و ذلك من خلال تقديم تقييم لاذع وإعادة كتابة التاريخ الأمريكي عن طريق الخطاب المضاد أدبي الأصل. تحدياً للتبسيط المفرط للتاريخ الكلي ولإغفال الصوت الأنثوي، تكشف أوتسوكا عن السياقات النفسية المتضمنة وراء الحقائق التاريخية للعرائس اليابانية الأمريكية وذلك بتقديم "تاريخاً تنقيحياً للشعور" الذي يكشف عن المعاناة الخاصة بنوع جنس هؤلاء الإناث ، من خلال تفعيل مشاعرهم وكشف معاشتهم لتاريخهم الخاص ، نفسياً وجسدياً. تفحص هذه المقالة على حد سواء وسائل أوتسوكا لمثل هذا الاسترجاع ، خاصة اعتمادها صوت السرد الجماعي الذي مكنتها من تقديم الذاكرة التاريخية الخاصة لهؤلاء العرائس الآسيويات جاعلة منها قصة مجتمعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تاريخ تأريخ التبعية ، الخطاب المضاد ، "تاريخ تنقيحياً للشعور" ، صوت السرد الجماعي.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) is a follow-up and a prequel to her PEN Faulkner award-winning novel *When the Emperor was Divine* (2002). In *the Buddha*, Otsuka reconstructs the private historical experience of the first generation of Japanese immigrants, or the Issei picture brides, and voices their deep sense of alienation, disillusionment, and exile from the moment they set foot in America till their evacuation and internment during and after WWII. What happened to these females was deemed incidental to the unfolding of American historiography. To this end, the Japanese American minority and Diaspora, notably the experience of the female minority consciousness, as showcased by Otsuka in her novel, prove to be subversive to American history's monolithic narratives or '*les Grands Récits*'.

By filling in the interstices in these female immigrants' representation, or the lack thereof, the novel is deemed an aperture through which the writer intervenes in history's 'master accounts' and '*lieux de memoire*', invents, and conjectures a densely-affectual alternate history. Through the choice of her collective narrative device, Otsuka craftily transmutes this private experience into a gendered-ethnic one through gleaning various accounts together to retrieve their experience and recover their voices. Interrogating and refuting previous narratives established as normative, she sets about to probe the well-knit and stratified marionette of the dominant discourse that occludes these females' voices and stories, reconceptualising them afresh.

In the pages that follow, I shall trace Otsuka's endeavour to re-narrate and reclaim the place of these oppressed voices. Functioning as an alternative to the positivist-empiricist approach to historiography, the Buddha's attic, I contend, echoes metonymically through American history by divulging new and resistant realities of these female Japanese immigrants. More pointedly, Otsuka demonstrates the extent to which their experience of exile and of adaptation that escorted their constant dispersals engendered not simply psychological torments, but equally influenced them physiologically, as their dream of America and of belonging to it is repeatedly denied. The ensuing frustration and denial were transcribed in the premature and untimely decay of their bodies as emblematic of

their muted efforts of being heard vocally and of instead articulating the unspoken through their bodily sufferings.

2. De-Centering Historiography: A Counter-Strategy to Memory and an Insurgent Consciousness

Otsuka's endeavour in *The Buddha in the Attic* partakes in a form of 'subaltern historiography'. The author historically excavates the muted picture-brides of the first generation of Japanese immigrants during the 1920's through her dexterous use of the palimpsestic narrative and her reliance on the polyphonic pluralistic first person voice. She wrenches open the experiences of these mail-ordered brides, focalizing them at the centre as the predominant point of view and creating, hence, a gendered kaleidoscopic account.

Julie Otsuka adopts the genre of the historical novel shedding light on her lineage from her vantage point as a third-generation Japanese American and animating, with such historical precision, the tumultuous experiences of the Japanese Americans before and shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War. Her parents were incarcerated post-Pearl Harbour attacks in concentration camps in Utah in the middle of a desolate area for three years, and a half and her grandfather was arrested by the FBI as a suspect for espionage. The starting point of fictionalizing her account, Otsuka declares in an interview with N. Aparicio, would be "telling [her] own family's personal story; [that she] came to writing because of the silence in [her] own family about this episode in history" (Author Julie Otsuka discusses Displacement and Belonging, 2023). Furthermore, Otsuka stresses, in the same interview, that it was this "horrible kind of negation" from the Americans that motivated her to tend to this task of reconceptualising the past. She poignantly conjures her mother's testimony of not being saluted, after getting back to her neighbourhood past her three years and a half internment in a concentration camp, as one of those bitter instances of avoidance. This, along with the silences hovering in her family and amongst the Japanese Americans, prompted her to exhume this period, to pick up its pieces, and to fill up its interstices with hitherto underdeveloped events in a communal collective story. The latter, then, emerges as a historiographical strategy targeted at the half-silent narratives of the dominant historical accounts of the period.

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On another front, Otsuka further criticizes the absence or rather omission of this episode from history classes of the United States, arguing that it was overdue and timely that one spoke of things forgotten, and maintaining that the “story of the Japanese American is a story of failure without redemption” (Julie Otsuka: *Secrecy and anger*, 2013), buried in the psychological limbo of its sufferers and overlooked and dismissed from American history. This discursive and institutional disavowal fuelled her adversary reaction that is translated into a form of cultural subversiveness against the mainstream and overarching positivist, empiricist historiography that epitomizes allegedly gleamed and epochal truths through acts of avoidance and eschewal, indeed by means of ideological erasures and nullification. Her historical novel *the Buddha in the Attic*, when contextualized as such, amounts thus to a de-centring and foregrounding of a collective consciousness, countering the rigidities and limitations of historiography vis-à-vis the gendered Japanese American question prior to and during the Second World War. Such limitations, Otsuka reminds her readers, infiltrated a political-intellectual culture that is-to put it in Edward Said’s words- “acted dynamically along with brute political, economic and militarily rationales” (1978 , p. 12) that seek to silence, suppress, and speak on behalf of the other.

More specifically, Otsuka’s account details the gender-specific risks of the Japanese American diaspora as the title’s reverberation of the famous feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic* clearly indicates. The dislocation occasioned by their deterritorialization and migration to America shoved these females into the lowest paid and most menial occupations. The Japanese settlement processes in the US, cogently exposes Evelyn Nakano Glenn, are asymmetrically modelled after the male experience of migration, arguing that “most of the existing literature on labour migration ignores women by treating migrants as undifferentiated with respect to gender or by looking only at men's experiences” (1986, p. 14). Thus, in migration accounts, women are treated as a “marginal category: as dependents of male migrants or as part of the debris left behind in the home country” (p. 14) . The Japanese women of this generation

called “Issei” were therefore subjected not simply to racial-ethnic stratification but also to double gender stratification.

The women in Otsuka’s novel belong to the margins that the Indian scholar, literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes in her essay “Can the Subaltern speak?” as “men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (1988, p. 2) . *The Buddha’s* females are not simply at the margins in America, as Otsuka puts it, “settling on the edges of their towns where they would let [them]” (p. 24), but are also described as belonging to the lowest echelons of society a priori, even before their voyage. Otsuka divulges this status of the girls in the following way: “some of us had eaten nothing but rice gruel as young girls”, the chorus of voices narrates, “and had slightly bowed legs... many of us came from the country and on the boat we wore the same old Kimonos we’d been wearing for years- faded hand-me-downs from our sisters that had been patched and redyed many times” (p. 9). In the same line of thought, Glenn stresses that the lineage of these first generation Issei women was of the traditional Japanese society that was, by the time of their departure to America, still colossally stratified in the manner of the Feudal caste system and modelled after patriarchal hegemony (1986, p. 177) .

Julie Otsuka reframes the question of an insurgent otherness which has for long been stifled in historiographical accounts, and negotiates the ways of retrieval through a corrective representation that is so powerfully knit, stylistically sophisticated, and innovative. It needs to be stressed that such an arduous task of recovery necessitates an episteme-changing text and a deconstructionist experimental strategy, the manifestations of which are ample in her prose. Subversive texts of this sort are usually rife with textual, stylistic and ultimately thematic novelties. Her retrieval called forth a characteristically poststructuralist, counter-historical spirit adhering to the Nietzschean contempt of history’s generalized epistemological narratives. Her literary endeavour, then, and her commitment to the pluralistic “we” voice of these females mesh in perfect accord with what Callagher and Greenblatt call a counterfactual and revisionist history from below (2000, p. 53), in as much as it is a project of rescuing these figures from the pile of the long-abandoned debris of history, and of divulging realities long buried under the rubble. Approached from this lens,

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the novel debunks the inequities in the American collective memory and the national archive. Through her aesthetic process of recovery, Otsuka introduces into our reception of social reality, to summon Bhabha, “not [simply] another reified form of mediation-the art object- but another temporality in which to signify the “event” of history... not as fact or fiction but as an ‘*enunciation*’, a discourse of unspeakable thoughts unspoken” (1992, pp. 144-146), reconstructing the narrative of these picture brides from the discontinuities, the unnamed, and the unspoken bits in their lives.

To render this particular Japanese female consciousness through a form of insurgency called forth a complex level of manipulation both of language and form, which are showcased in many unusual stratagems that are the hallmark of this oeuvre. Michel Foucault cogently stresses that “to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value” (1980, pp. 49-50). Indeed, Julie Otsuka’s account amounts to addressing itself to the “unseen”, to what had hitherto been deemed marginal and of tangential salience in both American history and Asian immigrants’ accounts. While American literary history is certainly rife with texts problematising and tackling the conundrums and traumatising experiences of multi-generational waves of Japanese migrants, very few writers concerned themselves with recuperating deeply-factional and alteriorised subjectivities the way Julie Otsuka had done in *The Buddha in the Attic*. If, in the context of colonial production, stresses Gayatri Spivak, the Subaltern has no history and cannot speak, “the Subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (1988, p. 41), emphasizing the ideological construction of gender. Following this line of thought, I argue further that the subaltern as a mail-ordered bride of the first “Issei” generation of Japanese immigrants, whose linguistic and conceptual inadequacies and disadvantages coerced them into perpetual silences, indeed into a quasi-colonial status, is even *more profoundly in shadow*. The female figures, as the novel unveils, are interstitial subjectivities subjugated doubly to gender politics, to the dynamics of class and the strata of

race-ethnicity in a nation that only appropriated them in the model of the colonized.

It is deemed essential to secure the female figures as multi-colonized subjectivities and to situate this analysis amid subaltern studies before diving into the manifold manifestations of their muted agencies as well as their traumatic and pathological sufferings as inscribed onto their material bodies. Indeed, the novel's structure assuredly begs the reader to approach it from the lens of the materiality of the female body and of its subjection and subjugation to the various levels of patriarchy, exclusion, and abjection.

3. Interstitial Creatures of Liminality: From the Labour Camp to the Concentration Camp and the Im/Possibility of Home

The novel's chorus of narrators creates an unmistakable collective counter-memory in the Foucauldian sense; the resistant sort-sacrificial to use Foucault's term- that is targeted against received and indoctrinated truth, that opposes history as knowledge and relentlessly interrogates the veracity of history, "imply[ing] a use of [the latter] that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory - a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (1977, p. 160).

In her novel, Otsuka deftly counterpoises the collective with the individual, offering glimpses of individualization all while amalgamating those in a sweeping and powerful collective voice that re-presents the gender-specific sisterhood of these females. Although the novel sacrifices characterization as an integral element of fiction, the effect of autonomy and individuation is maintained all throughout, because of Otsuka's daring technique of the inexhaustible and layered collection of stories, or vignetting, which is so balanced that the reader identifies with the joint and pluralistic 'we' just as much as he/she does with the multifaceted individualized stories kernelled within. Consequently, the collective speech act is then understood as part of a synergistic crowd-memory that the novel creates and not as diminutive to characters' development.

The historical circumstances faced and endured by Otsuka's 'subaltern' manacled this subjectivity amidst various ideological and patriarchal structures that conspired to efface their chance of being heard, indeed to their inaudibility in

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the vocal sense. I maintain throughout this article that their inarticulate attempts for audibility are rerouted and instead portrayed by Otsuka as taking on a different shape. That is to say, their expressiveness is graphematically inscribed on their bodies and on their gradual and painful metamorphoses, that their trauma influences them physiologically.

Afflicted by the ordeal of multiple-stroke disillusionments and traumas, the trauma of cultural displacement, the disillusionment upon discovering their husbands' true identities, and of being tirelessly laboured and exploited under a masculine-imperialist ideology, and the bleak and harsh reality of being a Japanese in a country that secludes them in all sorts of ways, the female characters in the novel got so heavily disrupted and were blackjacked into predestined lives. Consequently, they ended up demonstrating signs of gender rejection and of premature aging that culminate in a pathological and psychological androgyny. These signs, I argue, are read as bodily externalizations both of being silenced and of attempting to speak and striving to be heard. Otsuka tended to these "figures of fadeout", to invoke Spivak once more, valorising them as the pivot around which her narrative revolves. She traces their footsteps throughout their multiple displacements, beginning from their first migration with the hope of realizing "the American Dream" to their incessant back-breaking drudgery and the difficulties of assimilation up until their post-war cleansing and disappearance to the unknown. They literally fade out by the end of the novel, leaving behind their emblematic lives and abandoning all hopes of integration.

To begin with, the women that constitute the collective voice of the novel were paired with their husbands through matchmakers, or "Baishakunin", and ventured across the ocean, filled with longing and dread, in pursuit of the dream of better lives. Before their journeys, the girls dreamt of many things: of escalating the social ladder and conducting better lives, of their husbands, and paradoxically of the same Japan rice paddies that they had so desperately wanted to escape. They articulated an ambivalent set of feelings and aspirations wondering what would become of them in this alien land; Otsuka pictures their hopeful visions in the following way, "we imagined ourselves an unusually small

people armed only with our guidebooks-entering a country of giants. Would we be laughed at? Spat on? Or worse yet, would we not be taken seriously at all? (p. 12). They have chosen to marry strangers in America than grow old with farmers in their villages, anticipating that their workload will be mitigated in America, imagining that “the women did not have to work in the fields and there was plenty of rice and firewood for all” (p. 12). The chapter “Come Japanese” details the crowd’s expectations picturing them as “Lilliputians” travelling to this giant land; “this is America; we would say to ourselves, *there is no need to worry*. And we would be wrong” (p. 20).

Indoctrinated to fulfil the role of obedient and subservient wives for which they had been prepared since their girlhood, they boarded the boat occupying its lowest, filthy and dim steerage, an emblem of stratification that heralds yet other looming hierarchally-structured existences. “A girl must blend into a room: she must be present without appearing to exist” (p. 11), they were indefatigably instructed by their mothers and, hence, compelled to the rigidly delineated gender roles of the effaced and objectified females. Their lineage and social status as impoverished and underprivileged serves to heighten their plight and deep sense of alienation later on in the novel as the possibility of establishing a home in this new land is repeatedly proven a dizzying mirage and an unattainable chimera.

The females’ first slam of shock and disenchantment emerges as soon as their ship docks and they realize that “the crowd of men in knit caps and shabby black coats waiting for [them] down below on the dock would bear no resemblance to the handsome young men in the photographs, that the photographs were twenty years old” (p. 20). The females were disoriented and achingly frustrated with this confusing and unsatisfying homecoming. One deceit followed another as their hopes about well-being and America were dashed inchmeal. The characters’ figurations of femininity were equally disrupted and pulverized as they embarked on their first phase of patriarchal objectification, whereby their bodies were claimed by their husbands as theirs. In the chapter “First Night”, Otsuka piercingly layers the various ways of marriage consummation that she describes, in the majority of the gleaned vignettes, as graphically amounting to a violation of the ‘subaltern body’,

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They took us for granted and assumed we would do for them whatever it was we were told... They took us by the elbows and said quietly, “It’ s time.” They took us before we were ready and the bleeding did not stop for three days. They took us with our white silk kimonos twisted up high over our heads and we were sure we were about to die. *I thought I was being smothered.* They took us greedily, hungrily...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 violently, with their fists, whenever we tried to resist. They took us even though we bit them. They took us even though we hit them. They took us even though we insulted them... They took us even though we knelt down at their feet with our foreheads pressed to the ground and pleaded with them to wait. (pp. 20-21)

“They took us”, the stream of voices concludes, in multihued ways “and in the morning when we woke we were theirs” (p. 23).

Soon after their marriages were ‘effectual’ through consummation, they were consigned, each to her new “home” which looked pretty much the same in situation and standing. They soon realized that they ought to occupy the fringes and the edges of the whites’ towns “where they would let [them] ... and wandered from one labor camp to the next in their hot dusty valleys—the Sacramento, the Imperial, the San Joaquin—and side by side with [their] new husbands, [they] worked their land” (p. 24). Evelyn Glenn rightly maintains that “settlement in the United States for these groups meant not assimilation, but transition to the status of a racial-ethnic minority” (p. 5). Women in these groups had to work outside the home even after marriage and motherhood, and they continued to be restricted to the same menial occupations as the immigrant generation. The females’ upcoming bitter realization was that they were seen as particularly suited for, and only suited for the base work that “no self-respecting American would do” (Otsuka, 2011, p. 28), occupying hence a “racial-ethnic status and position that became more or less synonymous badges of inferiority” (Glenn, 1986, p. 5). The collective voice poignantly discloses, “*THEY DID NOT* want us as neighbors in their valleys. They did not want us as friends... and we

wondered if we had made a mistake, coming to such a violent and unwelcoming land. *Is there any tribe more savage than the Americans?* (Otsuka, 2011, pp. 32-33).

Otsuka incorporates vivid descriptions of the racism and stigmatization that the Japanese Americans endured as a racial-ethnic minority as filtered through the lens of these females. “We made ourselves small for them”, the collective point of view narrates, “—*If you stay in your place they’ll leave you alone*—and did our best not to offend. Still, they gave us a hard time” (p. 44), and so they retreated and learned to live at a distance from them, congregated in J-towns or on the borderlines of their cities. Their marginalization was not simply sensed from the part of the Americans but equally deepened from their husbands’ part.

Soon enough “home” for these female characters was reduced to a number of barely-habitable dwellings, scattered here and there on the Western coast. In one such long and compact passage, Otsuka layers the homes of these females in the following way, describing their social ranks in this new country,

Home was a Cot in one of the bunkhouses...Home was a long tent... Home was a wooden shanty...Home was a bed of straw... Home was a corner of the washhouse... Home was a bunk in a rusty boxcar... Home was an old chicken coop... Home was a flea-ridden mattress in a corner of a packing shed... Home was a bed of hay atop three apple crates beneath an apple tree... Home was a spot on the floor of an abandoned schoolhouse... Home was a patch of earth in a pear orchard... 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 shovelling up weeds for the boss for years. (p. 25)

Shortly upon their settlements, the females learned the sore truth that they were imported from Japan as “free labour” (p. 32), and were, hence, concentrated in subordinate race-stratified labour that manacled them either to fields’ work or to the gender-stratified domestic chores. Equipped with the few “rescue” words they learned from their husbands and the essential directives of survival, they were constantly reminded of their marginal position; “better yet, say nothing at all”, the voice narrates, “you now belong to *the invisible world*” (p.26 Italics

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mine). Kept behind the shadow of their husbands who purported to know the American ways better, they were further instructed not to engage in any conversation and to rather “*leave the talking to [them]*” (p. 27). In his sense, the females were literally and metaphorically silenced and deprived of any form of agency whereby they could own and articulate their subjectivities.

Otsuka does not fail to remind us that these female characters are objectified twofold: through patriarchy as well as through labour. They found themselves appropriated into a prefigured template regarding the female body and her gender role as silent, subservient and dependent on the male counterpart. The exilic and diasporic reality in which they found themselves caught into allowed them little options for agency outside the leadership of their husbands. Their bodies, then, became sites on which mappings of difference, discrimination and exoticism were inscribed and countless practices of violence were enacted. “In the fields my wife is as good as a man” (p. 27), they would say, and in no time at all this was true, and when one of the females was reluctant to fulfil her role, her husband objected declaring that “[*he*] asked for a wife who was able and strong” (p. 27).

As a result upon the recognition of their place and role in these communities and in their households, the females began shunning away from their femininity and their gender and all that it stood for, entering a depressive state upon the realization that no bright future lies ahead and that for those who longed to go back home, that was no longer an option. Otsuka sensitively captures their reactions as she writes, “Some of us wept while we worked. Some of us cursed while we worked. All of us ached while we worked- our hands blistered and bled, our knees burned, our backs would never recover” the collective voice painfully narrates (p. 27). As defence mechanisms, the females yearned for Japan, “[singing] the same harvest songs [they] had sung in [their] youth” (p. 28) , and imagined, in a desperate escapist proclivity, that they were back in their towns. Escapism was their only venue; the voice narrates: “by day we worked in their orchards and fields but every night, while we slept, we returned home” (p. 28). They resorted to recourse to memories of the homeland

to conceptualize and remedy their disrupted subjectivities and the mortifying sense of dispossession.

Reflecting upon their situation, they learned that their bodies were geohumoured and taxonomized as the “best breed of worker [the Americans] had ever hired in their lives. *These Folks just drift; we don’t have to look after them at all*” (p. 28). Otsuka describes this essentialising classification as follows:

They admired us for our strong backs and nimble hands. Our stamina. Our discipline. Our docile dispositions. Our unusual ability to tolerate the heat...they said that our short stature made us ideally suited for work that required stooping low to the ground. Wherever they put us they were pleased. We had all the virtues of the Chinese- we were hardworking, we were patient, we were unfailingly polite- but none of their vices- we didn’t gamble or smoke opium, we did not brawl, we never spat. We were faster than the Filipinos and less arrogant than the Hindus. We were more disciplined than the Koreans. We were soberer than the Mexicans. We were cheaper to feed than the Okies and Arkies, both the light and the dark. *A Japanese can live on a teaspoonful of rice a day.* (p. 28)

They were, thus, deemed “an unbeatable, unstoppable economic machine” of the entire western United States. With the impossibility of resistance or retraction, the females absorbed themselves in their work and became obsessed with the thought of conducting one more self-punitive and monotonous work after the other.

From the decisive apprehension of their grim and insoluble predicament in this alien land, their mental health exacerbated as they lost interest in life. Consequently, they oddly allowed themselves to be comforted by their husbands, for despite the fact that they were part of their misery calling upon them as extra labour to this land, they were all they had. One of the accounts captures this sense of loneliness and fading out so sensitively, the collective voice narrates: “sometimes he looked right through us without seeing us at all, and that was always the worst. *Does anyone even know I am here?*” (p. 29). They have become invisible and “*SECRETLY*, [they] hoped to be rescued from [their husbands]” (p. 30), declares one of the voices. As a result of such deep and melancholic state, their sentience was severely impaired and they grew

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emotionally numb, swamping themselves in endless labour; as expounded “we forgot about makeup. Whenever I powder my nose it just looks like frost on a mountain”, the narrative voice expresses the collective view of one of the females,

We forgot about Buddha. We forgot about God. We developed a coldness inside us that still has not thawed. *I fear my soul has died.* We stopped writing home to our mothers. We lost weight and grew thin. We stopped bleeding. We stopped dreaming. We stopped wanting. We simply worked, that was all ... But it was not we who were cooking and cleaning and chopping, it was somebody else. And often our husbands did not even notice we'd disappeared. (pp. 33-34)

Their dejected and morbid state of mind and body caused them to withdraw from life, to disclaim their subjectivities and to abnegate all claims to their feminine bodies. From this point in the novel on, the narrative becomes shadowed by an androgynous subtext, wherein the females' alienation, negation and exploitation start to transubstantiate into a pathological and psychological form of androgyny. They escaped from their gender and their bodies demonstrating ample signs of gender denial, transgression, and premature aging. In this sense, Julie Otsuka laudably captures and stresses the gender-specific risks of exile vis-à-vis the female Japanese body. Otherwise said, she emphasizes that the traumatizing and unsettling experiences of these females in exile influenced them physiologically and showcases how the signs were corporeally imbued all over their degenerating bodies. The majority of them knew for certain that there was no retreat, no outlet, and no home to go back to; “*If you come home*” their fathers had written to them “*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.* And so we stayed in J-town with our new husbands, and grew old before our time” (p. 43).

Otsuka realistically re-imagines these females' lives, restoring them to their private and disowned history, stressing their subjugation to the various alienating experiences, and animates through dense and accurate descriptions their feelings and emotions. Oja maintains that fictional history deals with individuals in their immediate historical contexts which, as opposed to macro-

histories or meta-narratives, emphasise inner factors, emotion and mentality. This form of fictional history called “microhistories” is impressionistic, subjective and meshes gradually into fiction (Porter, 1993, p. 338). In this sense, *The Buddha* showcases the vulnerability and helplessness of these females by showing how they were repeatedly inculcated by their husbands and told that “the only way to resist... was by not resisting” (2011, p. 45). Acting accordingly, they bowed and in the process of resignation, they suffered mentally, emotionally and physically, by folding up their kimonos and putting them away in their trunks.

Otsuka describes how the females’ quandary is yet to amplify with the experience of bearing and rearing children. They “gave birth quietly, like [their] mothers who never cried out or complained” (p. 48), and they assumed full responsibility for the upbringing process; a typical gender role that they had to fulfil regardless of their jobs outside their homes. They managed through their lives through communing with other females and with the American women that they serve. Otsuka makes certain to remind her readers of the strong sisterhood liaisons that bind all women despite race or generation. Commenting on the arduous tasks of motherhood, the collective voice declares, “they never gave us even five minutes of rest”, fleshing out their asymmetrical familial realities with their husbands who:

Were silent, weathered men who tramped in and out of the house in their muddy overalls muttering to themselves about sucker growth, the price of green beans, how many crates of celery they thought we could pull this year from the fields. They rarely spoke to their children, or even seemed to remember their names. *Tell number three boy not to slouch when he walks.* And if things grew too noisy at the table, they clapped their hands and shouted out, “That’s enough!” (p. 53)

The children, in turn, grew distant from their fathers. They were included in the fields and labour as soon their mothers could take them along. Beyond the farm, the children soon learned, there lived “strange pale children who grew up entirely indoors and knew nothing of the fields and streams” (p. 54), and who lived by exceedingly privileged standards. Beyond the farm “they’d heard, wherever you went you were always a stranger and if you got on the wrong bus by mistake you might never find your way home” (p. 55). At school, the kids

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were segregated in the same manner that their parents were, but as second generation immigrants, the children gradually adjusted, accepting the language and assimilating the American ways of living. "One by one all the old words we had taught them began to disappear from their heads", the narrative voice recounts, and "... they spent their days now living in the new language" (p. 59), relinquishing their Japanese origins and adopting new names. The female characters were soon to experience another form of estrangement from their own children as their modes of life became incompatible;

Soon we could barely recognize them... they were loud beyond belief...They preferred their own company to ours and pretended not to understand a word that we said... They refused to use chopsticks...They spoke perfect English just like on the radio and whenever they caught us bowing before the kitchen god in the kitchen and clapping our hands they rolled their eyes and said, "Mama, *please*. (pp. 60-61)

This subjoins to the many layers of estrangement that they had undergone; only this time it came from their own offspring, in whose presence they had wished to be consoled and to seek refuge and solace. The generational gap was intensified as their children sought American ways of living and behaving and their parents were stuck to their old ways due to the fact that America allowed them little room for assimilation or inclusion. "MOSTLY, they were ashamed of us", the voice narrates, "Our floppy straw hats and threadbare clothes. Our heavy accents. *Every sing oh righ?* Our cracked, callused palms. Our deeply lined faces black from years of picking peaches and staking grape plants in the sun" (p. 61); with each passing day the gap grew wider and more difficult to breach, and they seemed to slip further from each other's grasp. The females were soon to experience a duplication of their predicament as projected onto their children, as the chorus voice states, "no matter what they did they would never fit in. *We're just a bunch of Buddhaheads* (62).

In no time, the experience of the Second World War and the condensation and materialization of all previous forms of anti-Japanese sentiments were to coalesce in their most hideous and infamous ways. The Japanese Americans, as the female chorus voice reminds us, became singled out over night and were

called the enemy and asked to dismantle their lives in a matter of days. They got evacuated and deported to desolate regions that they did not even know of. It was all because of “the stories in the papers” (p. 67) that exacerbated the mania of Japanese espionage, which was targeted at all people who belonged to their race, despite age or gender. Reduced to names and categories on a list, which had been drawn up hastily the day of the attack, the females, who are for the first time accorded names in the novel, started getting rid of anything that might suggest their husbands had enemy ties. The narrative point of view describes how they resorted to obliterating not simply who they are but equally extinguishing any cultural emblem of their race in the following way:

every evening at dusk, we began burning our things: old bank statements and diaries, Buddhist family altars, wooden chopsticks, paper lanterns, photographs of our unsmiling relatives back home in the village in their strange country clothes. *I watched my brother’s face turn to ash and float up into the sky.* We set fire to our white silk wedding kimonos out of doors, in our apple orchards, in the furrows between the trees. We poured gasoline over our ceremonial dolls in metal trash cans in J-town back alleys. We got rid of anything that might suggest our husbands had enemy ties. (pp. 67-68)

Their extreme feelings of guilt that engendered past the attack caused the females to rationalize their situation in ways that characterize as degenerative and pathological. Ultimately, they wore the other’s inferiorising gaze and inculcated the guilt, as the narrator voices “and we wondered why we had insisted for so long on clinging to our strange, foreign ways. *We’ve made them hate us*” (p. 68). Their situation was becoming intolerable with the endless waiting of the next measure to be taken against them. When the presidential evacuation order was made, they did as they were told packing their bags and gathering up their children and “from every town in every valley and every city up and down the coast, [they] left” (p. 80). Their forced departure culminated in a fade-out, in all its ample meanings, and stands as proof to one of the most infamous episodes in American history. “Many of us had lost everything and left saying nothing at all” (p. 81) the narrative voice bitterly declares, and “Futaye, who had the best vocabulary of us all, *left speechless*” (p.81 Italics mine). The last chapter

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“Disappearance” shifts to the point of view of the Americans, heightening the effect of the disappearance of the Japanese whose traces have vanished from the Western Coast towns. “We speak of them rarely now, if at all”, the voice comments, “although word from the other side of the mountain continues to reach us from time to time- entire cities of Japanese have sprung up in the deserts of Nevada and Utah” (p.98). In the final pages of the novel, Otsuka captures so profoundly the subalternity of the Japanese Americans, and re-imagines, paradoxically in the form of a fade-out, their presence in a historical novel that seeks to intervene in mainstream historiography.

4. CONCLUSION

For articulating what had never been said before, novel is a turning point in the consciousness of Japanese-Americans. The reader can sense the vestiges of obliteration and of accounts long lost to oblivion, through Otsuka's aim of being conversant with matters pertaining to a gendered racial-ethnic minority. Indeed, the novel encapsulates an ardent effort-relying on extensive documentary evidence and historical record-to establish a claim to truth and reconstruct the past. The subalternity of these mail-ordered brides of the first generation is thus not simply recalled, but re-narrated, reclaimed and revalidated as occupying a place in American history through this endeavour of historiographing the subaltern subjectivity. To this end, the novel fosters a strong sense of collective consciousness and renders, efficiently and without essentialism, a subversive minority consciousness through the plurality of the voices.

The lack of characterization and of plot are, thus, not to be understood as diminishing of Japanese American individuality but as reflecting and invigorating the gendered diasporic experience of these females as one block, and giving voice, in a communal or tribal thrust, to these deprived subjects. What results could thus be duly considered an insurgent-consciousness that demonstrates the extent to which the perspective of rewriting the past is capable of divulging completely new and fresh findings. Otsuka tended to this task of retrieving the Japanese female consciousness in this novel and in its prequel *When the Emperor was Divine*. In answer to the question: can we awaken the

dead and ventriloquize the subaltern? While it is beyond real and tangible recovery, Otsuka proved that positioning the subaltern once more at the centre and voicing their concerns, issues and factional histories are sufficient enough and adequate to recreate a new counter-memory that supplants and subverts older ones.

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