

Falling Under the Double Shadow: A Study of Subalternity in Julia Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*

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Abstract

Julia Otsuka is a powerful voice in contemporary Japanese American literature. She tries to retrace the history of first and second-generation Japanese immigrants through two of her novels When the Emperor Was Divine and The Buddha in the Attic. The latter is a realistic portrayal of the Japanese women who become passive victims at the hands of patriarchy and the colonial white masters, making them doubly oppressed. This paper aims to study the plight of Japanese picture brides who were subjected to forces, guided by discourses of gender, culture, ethnicity in the novel The Buddha in the Attic. The paper also tries to illustrate how the first-generation Japanese (Issei) women confine to silence as a result of their fear, confusion and submission.

Keywords: *subaltern, double oppression, agency, silence, gender.*

The term subaltern is taken from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971). The term was used to refer to the subordinate or the proletariat class. In recent years, the term has come to include various groups like peasants, labourers, women, tribals and those who were discriminated against in terms of their class, caste, gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Gayatri Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), argues that the subalterns could not leave a mark upon history as they were not allowed to speak for themselves. She gives a negative answer to the question, can the subaltern speak? She opines that subaltern women lack agency and stands under the double shadow of colonialism and patriarchy. Thus, they are doubly oppressed.

Julia Otsuka is a third-generation Japanese American writer and painter who portrays the subaltern condition of Japanese women who immigrated to America in search of a new home in two of her novels *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) and *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011). Both illustrate the plight of Japanese Americans before and after the internment period during the Second World War in America. Otsuka was awarded the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for *The Buddha in the Attic* in 2012.

The Buddha in the Attic discusses the practice of picture brides which was prevalent in the early 20th century in America. Here, the Japanese immigrant labourers, who work in the plantations owned by the White Americans, seek brides from their home country with help of a

matchmaker who sends their photographs to the respective bride's family. Often the photographs sent are retouched, old or of different men completely. The Japanese brides become aware of this fact only at the time of their arrival. They are helpless and are at the mercy of the grooms in the foreign land. Most of these women decide to become picture brides due to various socio-economic reasons which include familial obligations, escape from poor conditions or just to follow the trend. This journey in search of freedom ends up in disappointment. They are forced to work as labourers in the plantations with their husbands or as maids in the kitchens of the White Americans.

The Japanese women faced the challenges of learning the new language and the American way of domestic life.

It was their women who taught us the things we most needed to know. How to light a stove. How to make a bed. How to answer a door. How to shake a hand...

How to sound cheerful on a telephone even when you were angry or sad. How to fry an egg. How to peel a potato. How to set a table...How to wash a lipstick stain out of your husband's favorite white shirt even when that lipstick stain was not yours. (*The Buddha in the Attic* 39)

They were also sexually exploited by their white masters. Those who do not comply with the demands of their masters were punished brutally. Thus, making them victims of both patriarchy and racial prejudice.

In the novel, Otsuka also shows how Japanese women lacked agencies over their bodies. The women stress the fact that they were 'taken' by the men, during the first night of their marriage, not with their full consent. They had to give birth to children as long as their husbands want them to. "We gave birth to so many children we quickly lost track of the years" (*The Buddha in the Attic* 57).

The women lacked a voice of their own mainly due to two reasons. First of it was their failure to master the English language and second, their husbands always spoke for them, denying them the opportunity to express themselves. "But for now, our husbands told us, please leave the talking to me. For they already spoke the English language. They understood the American ways" (*The Buddha in the Attic* 27).

The children of the Japanese women, who are the second generation of immigrants, become assimilated to the American culture easily than their parents. They become detached from their Japanese ancestry and traditions even after their mothers' efforts to instil it in them. But being rejected by the White American communities, they are put into the chasm of rootlessness and uncertainty.

The plight of the Japanese women worsened after the Pearl Harbour attack by Japan on America which paved way for the start of the Second World War. They were viewed with suspicion after this incident and forced to move to internment camps leaving all their hard-earned assets. The last part of the novel shows how they lose their voice completely after reaching the camps. The narrative is taken over by the White neighbours who take charge of their possessions. No one gives a second thought when the Japanese neighbours do not return and are completely forgotten.

The women in *The Buddha in the Attic* are not given specific names or identity by Otsuka. Their narrative is

formed from their collective experience. The absence of an identifiable individual voice also stresses the characters' fragmentation. Starting from being the picture brides to having ostracized for suspicion of treason, one can notice that the women are passive victims of the forces that are beyond their control. They need to constantly reinvent themselves each time they are put in a different environment. The writer being a Japanese American is successful in providing a female point of view to the plight of her ancestors who became passive recipients of future decided by others. According to Otsuka, they belong to an invisible world where their presence is completely ignored, making them the subaltern subjects.

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