Narcotizing with Americanism

The Issei and Nissei's Process of Acculturation and Assimilation in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*

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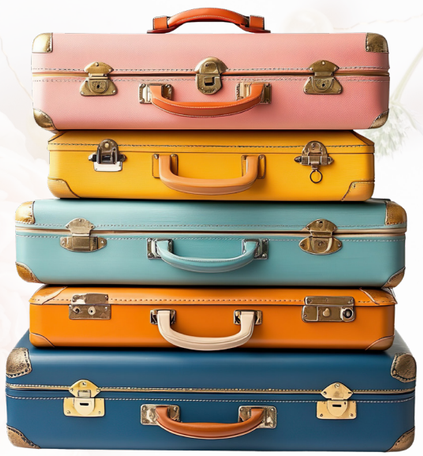

Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* follows the lives of Japanese picture brides, women matchmade with American men using only photographs. The novel begins describing the women's lives on the boat to the United States, where they speculate what their lives will be like when they reach the West, as well as what their husbands will be like. The women are met with disappointment, however, when they discover that their husbands have lied about their wealth, their age, their attractiveness. They dreamed of escaping poverty in Japan only to be met with it in the United States as well. From there, the novel portrays the various, troubling lives of the picture brides as they work alongside their husbands in menial jobs, childbirth, and complicated relationships with their sons, daughters, and motherhood. The women grapple with maintaining and eventually losing their identities as Japanese women. They introduce their children to Japanese culture only to lose them when the children grow to be embarrassed by their immigrant parents and their culture. When the children become young adults and following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the picture brides and their families begin to hear rumors of deportation and face scrutiny from American citizens, believed to be spies working for Japan. Their lives become more difficult and more dangerous in the United States in spite of their attempts to fit in, and they are eventually forced out of their homes and sent to relocate to internment camps away from society. The novel ends with the Americans' thoughts and concerns about the fates of the Japanese Americans they knew, wondering about their lives after the forced relocation. Otsuka, in an interview on *Psychology Today,* states that *The Buddha in the Attic* was inspired by Mary Swan's "1917," Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides,* and Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

Julie Otsuka is a California native born in Palo Alto. She attended Yale University to study art as an undergraduate, pursuing a career as a painter before turning to writing. Otsuka earned her MFA in writing at Columbia University. She is the author of the novel *When the Emperor Was Divine*, her first novel, which narrates the lives of a Japanese-American family during World War II. Other achievements include receiving the Asian American Literary Award, the American Library Association Alex Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

In writing this novel, Otsuka portrays the experiences of Japanese immigrants during World War II. As stated in an article from The Japan Society, "Otsuka, now over three decades later, uses this title to present in fictional form the struggle for Japanese identity in America at the height of the Second World War" (Sohail 1). In an interview on *Psychology Today* with Jennifer Haupt, Otsuka herself states,

> The idea for the novel came to me about ten years ago, when I was touring California for 'Emperor.' After my readings, people in the audience would sometimes come up to me and start telling me about their mother, or their grandmother, or their great aunt, who'd come over from Japan as a picture bride . . . I heard so many variations of this story, and was fascinated. How could a woman—a girl, really, some of these brides were only 13 or 14—get on a boat and sail away to a new country to marry a total stranger? And if I'd been born 100 years ago in a poor rural village in Japan, what would I have done? Because back then, as a woman, your options were very limited. These were some of the questions I wanted to explore in my novel. (Otsuka, para. 3-4)

When asked in an interview posted in Granta, Otsuka claims that using first person plural to narrate the novel stemmed from a desire to keep the story from being constrained to one narrative. She states, "In my research, I had run across so many fascinating stories, and I wanted to tell them all. Using the 'we' voice allowed me to weave them all in . . . Also, since Japan is a very group-oriented culture . . . it made sense to speak of the picture brides as a collective entity" (Otsuka and Ryan 1).

As a means of survival following migration, immigrants must often

attempt to blend into the society and culture of their new country. This is no different in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*, a novel detailing the lives of Japanese picture brides as they struggle in the United States with not only a new culture, but numerous discriminatory events that prevent the women from living the lives they had dreamed of in America. The women's children must suffer through similar events alongside their attempts to successfully assimilate into American culture. In the novel, both acculturation and assimilation are long-lasting processes, affecting Issei (first-generation women) and Nisei (the second generation) respectively throughout all of their lives. However, these processes lost all fruition following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the start of World War II, in which paranoia and racism intersected to maximize harm against Japanese American women and their communities. In *The Buddha in the Attic,* Julie Otsuka demonstrates and critiques the collective acculturation and assimilation of Japanese Americans in the 20th century through their acquisition of Americanism, the loss of Japanese culture, and the ironies of how acculturation and assimilation could not prevent the othering of Japanese Americans.

Before diving into the use of acculturation and assimilation by Japanese Americans in the novel, I would like to define what "narcotize" means. To narcotize generally means to treat something with a narcotic, whether this be alcohol, drugs, or other means. However, because I am discussing narcotization through concepts rather than something consumable, I would like to define narcotize as follows: For the purpose of this essay, to narcotize means "to dull and deaden the awareness of." In *The Buddha in the Attic,* the Issei and Nisei attempt to dull their adherence and connection to Japanese culture, narcotizing via acculturation and assimilation respectively.

> "The Issei's white male employers use Japanese as a means of exotic entertainment while simultaneously shunning speaking Japanese in public."

The Issei women's first methods of acculturation is through the

adoption of the English language: They learn to speak and comprehend English, seeking to know enough to save their lives at the very least, and they study using textbooks even if they proved to be useless once they arrived in America. For example, the novel states, "The first word of their language we were taught was water . . . 'All right' —what the boss said when he was satisfied with our work—and 'Go home'—what he said when we were too clumsy or slow" (Otsuka 24). While it is common for migrant people to learn the language of their new country, part of the Issei women's linguistic struggles stem from having Japanese be both forcibly removed (as they are put at risk for speaking Japanese outside of J-town) and exploited. Alongside the struggles of learning a new language, the women are often prompted by their American employers to speak Japanese to entertain them. The novel states, "Some of them asked us to speak a few words in Japanese for them just to hear the sound of our voice. It doesn't matter what you say . . . Some of them asked us to tie them up with our flowered silk sashes and call them whatever names came to mind . . ." (Otsuka 46). The Issei's white male employers use Japanese as a means of exotic entertainment while simultaneously shunning speaking Japanese in public, even more so after the beginning of World War II. In this way, they exploit yet simultaneously sexualize Issei and Japanese.

Another part of the Issei women's linguistic acculturation is through being renamed by their white employers. The novel states, "They gave us new names. They called us Helen and Lily. They called us Margaret. They called us Pearl" (40). The opposite of the Nisei, the Issei are given new names by their employers, with no care for the women's thoughts and emotions toward the act. Through the act of being renamed, the women's identities as migrants of Japanese ancestry are erased. As Flávia Rodrigues Monteiro states, "The dominant subject is not interested in acknowledging the identity of the 'Other'; instead, they provide a new identity . . . more suitable to the dynamics of the dominant society" (6). The Issei's name and identity changes signify how Asian citizens must often pander to American culture due to the latter's inability to understand and accept diasporic culture. Because whites dominate

American society, however, the women choose to tolerate these names lest it negatively impact their reputations and employment in a foreign country.

The Nisei, however, linguistically assimilate into American society as people who were already born into the United States' culture. Solely taught English in school and using it overwhelmingly in public, the Nisei are forced to downplay and ignore the Japanese language as English is forced upon them. The novel states, "They spent their days now living in the new language, whose twenty-six letters still eluded us even though we had been in America for years . . . They pronounced their l's and r's with ease" (73). Because their Japanese ancestry and language causes them to be othered and shamed, linguistic assimilation is essentially demanded of Nisei citizens, to the point where they have to speak Japanese amongst themselves or in privacy. As Monteiro notes, "A sense of negotiation regarding the new generation born in the US permeates the entire chapter, with the tension between loss and gain concerning cultural aspects" (7). Whereas the Issei must find and eventually understand their place in American society, the Nisei must both reorient their identities and attempt to assimilate using methods that still allow them to maintain their identities as Nikkei, someone of Japanese ancestry. They must juggle their labels as Japanese Americans, as the children of migrant families, and as "foreigners" in a society where they are legal citizens.

The second generation's assimilation does not stop at rarely speaking Japanese; they also rename themselves to blend in better. Because their peers often mispronounced, made fun of, and renamed Nisei citizens, the second generation often renamed themselves using English names that were easier for Americans to pronounce, showing both their accommodation and assimilation into the dominant culture to survive in the United States. The novel states, "They gave themselves new names we had not chosen for them and could barely pronounce. One called herself Doris . . . Many called themselves George . . . Toshitachi was called Harlem because his skin was so dark" (73). Renaming serves as a ritual of assimilation in which the minority group must adjust to the

majority's disrespect. The Nisei redefine themselves in an attempt to Americanize themselves, signifying their need to "prove" that they are American, linguistically, rather than being seen as American citizens because they were born in the US. The Nisei, however, maintain their parents' surnames (Otsuka 74). The surname retainment demonstrates how the second generation upholds both Japanese and American culture while simultaneously being hindered by both, the former because they are minorities in the US and the latter because, while they may speak and behave similarly to Americans, they are still seen as "foreign" by the dominant group.

"Soon after, they realize that their best bet is to disappear and accept their invisibility."

Another survival method that Japanese Americans utilized in the US was through purposeful invisibility and caution. While the Issei women are initially curious and hopeful about coming to the United States, they soon learn to lower their expectations of respect and care from their white employers. Soon after, they realize that their best bet is to disappear and accept their invisibility. The novel states, "Remember to make them feel comfortable. Be humble. Be polite . . . say nothing at all. You now belong to the invisible world" (Otsuka 26). As a minority group, the women soon learn that, while they are "good enough" to be workers, they will never receive the respect or have the same opportunities that white Americans, especially women, receive. The Issei women must learn to navigate life in a country that promised hope yet offered them disappointment and prejudice. The story notes, "When their husbands went away on business they asked us to sleep with them in their bedrooms in case they got lonely" (41). Issei women, regardless of their jobs, often perform tasks for their employers that lie beyond their pay and work responsibilities, noting that they often do things that no white American would do. They find themselves oppressed by white women as well, who use them as emotional sponges with little to no reward or appropriateness, demonstrating how racism, classism, and xenophobia intersected to discriminate against Issei

women.

As women, Issei's push to become invisible is further emphasized due to gender. With stereotypes of women pertaining to submissiveness, domesticity, and passivity, the Issei are oppressed by gender roles and their statuses as Japanese immigrants, as they must be subservient toward their husbands and toward the dominant culture in the United States. The novel lists codes of behavior for the women, stating, "We knew how to serve tea and arrange flowers and sit quietly . . . saying absolutely nothing of substance at all. A girl must blend into a room; she must be present without appearing to exist" (Otsuka 6). Alongside the grueling work the Issei perform, the women continue to do so when they return home: Some have husbands that insist on keeping them pregnant, all are the sole caretakers for their children, and they are expected to remain quiet and subservient toward their husbands. Infertile women are shunned, some even being sent back home, where they are subject to humiliating rumors about their fertility and bodies. In "Voices That Matter," the author states, "Their bodies are properties to be used by men according to their own needs: a wife, a laborer, a child bearer, a companion, a lover, and so on" (Monteiro 4-5). Monteiro further notes, "As women have to perform according to their gender, so do diasporic subjects according to their condition . . . One could say that the objectification of women is extended to the immigrants in general . . . They are there to perform their role and not be noticed" (6). The Issei are not only objectified and used by white men and women; they are harmed by their husbands as well. The women are susceptible to sexual assault from their husbands, used as child bearers and shamed when they are not, and used as laborers by their lying husbands. In this way, the Issei's womanhood and migration statuses intersect to enhance the women's silencing and concealment.

"Whatever you do, don't end up like me."

The Nisei, on the other hand, experience purposeful invisibility as American citizens being denied something white Americans obtain through birthright. As the Nisei are born and raised, their mothers spend

part of their childhoods teaching them methods of survival in the United States, as people of Japanese ancestry and as "foreigners" in American culture. The novel states, "We taught them never to brag . . . It is better to suffer ill than to do ill. You must give back whatever you receive. Don't be loud like the Americans" (Otsuka 69). The novel also notes, "Don't talk to strangers. Study hard. Be patient. Whatever you do, don't end up like me" (72). The Nisei are raised through the various lessons their mothers have learned while being in the United States, many of which cry for independence, silence, and neutrality in the face of suffering. While the mothers impart their knowledge of Japanese culture and language onto their children, they also wish for their children to make good use of their being in the US in hopes that the Nisei will have access to better living conditions and opportunities as American citizens. However, the Nisei continue to face obstacles from their visible "foreignness": They are not white, and are therefore subject to poor treatment, similar to most minorities in the US. The novel states, ". . .they knew that no matter what they did they would never really fit in. We're just a bunch of Buddhaheads" (77). The Nisei are in a position where they must adopt American mannerisms and behaviors, and quickly assimilate into the US linguistically and culturally lest they be humiliated, shunned, or othered in public. However, they are still Japanese Americans, who were deemed people of color in early 20th century America, so they were excluded due to their race, often noted to receive services from Black, Hispanic, and other Asian communities because of the United States' inherent prejudice.

Another way in which the Issei acculturate and the Nisei assimilate is through their loss of Japanese customs and traditions. The women suffer when they come to America, being far from home, subjected to loveless marriages, violence and objectification from discriminatory whites, and their children's eventual isolation from them. In response, the Issei women receive comfort through Japanese culture. The novel states, "We made Buddhist altars out of overturned tomato crates that we covered with cloth, and every morning we left out a cup of hot tea for our ancestors" (34). Because of the finality of coming to America and the distance from their families, the women made do with what they had

to reminisce and regain a semblance of home. They are resourceful in their attempts to revisit their home culture, using what they have in spite of their poverty and maintaining their customs amidst their conditions in the US. However, after years of prejudice, the women eventually discard their femininity and culture, opting to throw themselves into their work to narcotize. The novel states, "We put away our mirrors. We stopped combing our hair. We forgot about makeup. We forgot about Buddha . . .We stopped writing home to our mothers . . . it was not we who were cooking and cleaning and chopping" (37). Eventually, the women learn that, in a way, they are not afforded femininity and their culture in the US. As poor Japanese migrant women, their culture and roles give the women a vulnerability they cannot afford, one that prevents them from fully being accepted into American culture. Because of discrimination and acculturation, the women must set aside their culture and dissociate to ease the pains of living in a country where various systems harm them and their opportunities.

The Nisei generation's abandonment of Japanese culture is similar to that of the Issei's, being done to fit into their role in American society. The children's particular abandonment, however, includes an immense shame and disrespect of their parents and Japanese culture. The novel states, "Mostly, they were ashamed of us. Our floppy straw hats and threadbare clothes. Our heavy accents . . . They longed for real fathers with briefcases who went to work in a suit and tie . . . They wanted different and better mothers who did not look so worn out" (Otsuka 75). The Nisei lean into American culture even in private Nikkei spaces and their homes in J-town, losing the manners and beliefs they were raised with and becoming annoyed at their parents for not having fully acculturated. Shame serves as a huge motivator for the Nisei to assimilate into American culture despite them also being aware that they will continue to be othered in the US. In spite of racism and xenophobia, the Nisei continue to dream big for ideal lives: the lives of white, middle-class families, who were considered ideal.

In spite of how the Nikkei attempted to acculturate and assimilate into American culture, *The Buddha in the Attic* shows how Japanese

Americans were still seen as threats to the United States, even before traitors and lists are mentioned. They are seen as efficient machines for work yet also viewed as threats to the United States' economy. With the beginning of World War II and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were shown to occupy a space where they were seen as threatening and traitorous despite being previously objectified and dismissed as submissive, pliable, and subservient. They were ultimately othered due to their race (alongside other discriminatory power systems) regardless of the extent in which Nikkei adapted into American society. Through her portrayals of linguistic, behavioral, and cultural changes in Japanese Americans in the 20th century, Julie Otsuka shows how acts of acculturation and assimilation, regardless of their method and scale, could not protect the Nikkei from systemic discrimination and prejudice.

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