

## **JAPANESE AMERICAN VOICES IN CONFLICT IN FISH HEAD SOUP BY PHILIP KAN GOTANDA**

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*Abstract: The present research paper is intended to focus on the conflicts between the four Japanese characters from Philip Kan Gotanda's "Fish Head Soup". One of the aims of the present paper is to bring to the fore aspects related to the ways in which the characters from Gotanda's play interact by using their public and private voices as guiding points in their life choices, in this way proving that the four characters are unable to communicate efficiently. Another aim of the paper is to reflect on Michel Foucault's own interpretation of power in relation to knowledge and discourse because different forms of power encountered in Gotanda's selected play can be gained through the characters' consciousness of the world and revealed through their speech. Hence, the analysis will identify and work with concepts related to new historicism, an approach that focuses less on historical facts, and more on different representations of power and the structures of a culture. A third aim of the paper is to comment on how the characters' voices and implicitly behavior point to a certain loss of Japanese identity in the American space, thus proving that the four characters are representatives of Japanese Americans who are in fact misfits in a white society.*

*Keywords: discourse; power; ethnic identity; culture /vs/ society; inner /vs/ outer voices*

The present research paper focuses on three important issues, namely on the interaction between the characters, on the American society depicted in the play which constantly exercises power over individuals with weak behavior and on issues related to Japanese identity in the American space. Gotanda's "Fish Head Soup" introduces four family members who are haunted by the ghosts of their own past in this way bringing to the fore aspects related to the conflicts that have arisen between the four characters. The family is torn apart by both familial and generational conflicts. Papa, for instance, exists in an illusionary world being unable to provide

for his family and thus constantly needing help from his wife and son. Dorothy, Papa's wife, is no longer willing to be the obedient wife anymore and seems to be spending less and less time at home. In fact, she is infatuated with an American Japanophile and has an affair with him. Victor, the older son, is a war veteran who is now confined to staying at home and taking care of his father in this way being emasculated. The only family member who at first sight seems to be in his right mind is Mat, the prodigal son who returns home after years of faking his death. Mat is the one who realizes that the family members are indeed traumatized by the racist views of the American society. While Mat attempts to convince the family to mortgage the house to finance his cinematic aspirations, each member confronts his/her internal manifestations of racism that ironically bind them together.

When analyzing the play one must pay attention to the ways in which the characters give meaning to their own interpretation of communication thus questioning their ideas and actions that would eventually help in understanding the unseen issues of a Japanese family. The paper will show that there are instances which depict the four family members being haunted by the ghosts of their own past, while on the other hand it will provide an insight into the tragic moments that led to the present situation. Because the family members constantly contradict themselves, through their discourse they prove that they refuse to acknowledge aspects related to their life in America, but at the same time they seem to have troubles in creating a real bond to their Japanese heritage. Hence, the present paper will specifically analyze the different ways in which inner and outer voices function in the Japanese American society as reflected by Gotanda's work, in this way bringing to the fore issues connected to memory, family history and more importantly, the power relations present in the play. Although "Fish Head Soup" provides an insight into the dramatic lives of Japanese Americans that fail to understand their own family issues due to miscommunication and stubbornness, the analysis will reveal the characters' awareness that racism and discrimination can either set them apart or bind them together.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper will be to comment on numerous instances in which the four family members are haunted by the ghosts of their own past, while on the other hand it will provide an insight into the tragic moments that led to the present situation. The demonstration focuses on ethnic identity which play crucial roles in the American society, as reflected by Gotanda's work, as well as on a new historicist approach of the post World War II period.

For these reasons it is of extreme importance to first discuss some key terms relevant for the present analysis. The first selected term is ‘power’, which is considered to be the most important concept in new historicism, and according to Foucault’s writings, among which one should mention his *History of Sexuality* and *The Birth of the Prison* – where power is represented differently – one understands that power in itself is not a thing, but a relation. We could also agree to the fact that it refers to the relations of domination and resistance seen from social, political and cultural points of view. Moreover, due to the belief that “power is everywhere” and “comes from everywhere”<sup>1</sup>, one should agree that the concept does not link to a unitary structure, but rather a kind of ‘metapower’ in the sense that it is the centre of numerous relations at all levels across the society, thus representing mechanisms of both selection and exclusion.

Another relevant key term is ‘discourse’ which refers to “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern”.<sup>2</sup> To put it differently, it refers to statements, texts and relationships that work together in order to form practices and fields of study in society.

According to Peter Weinreich as cited in the chapter “Ethnic Identity” from the *Encyclopedia of Applied Developmental Science*, the term ‘ethnic identity’ represents: “one’s identity as situated in a specific social context is defined as that part of the totality of one’s self-construal in which how one construes oneself in the situated present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future”.<sup>3</sup> What is more, if we were to discuss Thomas Eriksen’s own interpretation of ethnic identity, which states that it refers to “the relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as culturally distinctive”<sup>4</sup>, then we could easily agree that the term not only refers to the acknowledgement of one’s identity in a particular

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. London: Penguin, 1992. p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1987. p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> “Ethnic Identity.” *Encyclopedia of Applied Developmental Science*. Ed. Celia B. Fisher and Richard M. Lerner. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005. 415-420.

<sup>4</sup> Eriksen, Thomas. “Ethnicity, Race, Class and Nation.” *Ethnicity*. Eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 28-33

ethnic group, but also in a particular society which is able to identify, accept or reject certain members belonging to a group.

When reading the play, one could easily observe that the characters seem to interact to each other, but instead the only interaction is between themselves. For instance, at the very beginning of the play Dorothy tries to tell Victor that the toilet is fine, but Victor is not paying attention and says: "I'm trying to fix the toilet".<sup>5</sup> Another example of failed communication is presented when Mat, who already arrived home and spent the night with his family, is trying to convince Papa to sign the contract for the house mortgage. When doing so, Papa claims that "Mat's not my son. Victor's my son".<sup>6</sup> These examples clearly show that the characters do not 'talk' to each other, but instead 'speak'. They do not seem to pay attention to their interlocutors and rather seem to talk to themselves. All these aspects clearly link to the misunderstandings between the characters.

Some of their numerous conflicts in the family revolve around the three family members who blame Mat for their troubles while Mat blames them for his own. Victor is 'taking care' of the house because of Dorothy's absence and his traumatic past in Vietnam, while Papa relieves tragic moments in his life i.e. his early years in the concentration camp and Mat's drowning in the river. Mat, on the other hand, claims that he has run away because he was ashamed of how his father reacted when he was verbally abused by an American. While Mat's memory is so powerful that he simply cannot bear to look up to his father, the reader understands that the pride of a Japanese was to keep silent and endure everything that came from the hostile white society. Moreover, the informed reader could relate Gotanda's "Fish Head Soup" with Julie Otsuka's historical fiction *The Buddha in the Attic* in which the nameless characters painfully acknowledge that "the only way to resist [...] is by not resisting".<sup>7</sup> One could easily recognize that Papa is trying to fight against the white supremacy in his own way, namely by keeping his feelings under control.

The already mentioned conflicts go hand in hand with the representations of power depicted in the play, representations seen through the lenses of knowledge and discourse. For instance, all characters are aware that the American society has power over weak individuals like

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<sup>5</sup> Gotanda, Philip Kan. "Fish Head Soup". *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays*. Seattle: University of Washington, 1995. p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Gotanda, Philip Kan. *Ibidem*. p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Otsuka, Julie. *The Buddha in the Attic*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. p. 52.

Japanese Americans. Papa reminisces about the time when he was forced to sell his land after the War, Dorothy still wonders what she has done wrong to be put in a relocation camp, while Victor remembers the moment when he was wounded in Vietnam. He painfully acknowledges: "They wouldn't pick me up, the medics, I was lying there, bleeding all over, they were picking everyone else up. I kept screaming, 'I'm an American, I'm a Japanese American, I'm not VC'. But they wouldn't pick me up".<sup>8</sup> Clearly, his confession is one of the most powerful ones in the play probably because of the insistence on his war trauma. Even if Victor is an American citizen, his trauma is related to his race. He was discriminated based on the color of his skin instead of being acknowledged as an honest American citizen.

As stated before, power relations are concerned with mechanisms of both selection and exclusion. In his few moments of clarity, Papa mentions something related to his decision of selling his land right after the World War II started. Because he was 'selected' to move in concentration camps, he was, implicitly, excluded by the American society. The same could be said about Dorothy, who still wonders what she has done wrong to be sent in camp. Victor seems to be the most visible example of selection and exclusion because he expressed his desire to fight for the United States in Vietnam and he was accepted. However, when he was wounded, the American soldiers refused to help him. He obviously felt excluded (hence his war trauma) and this instance makes the reader wonder if there was a time when he was accepted at all by the society in which he lives. Mat also goes through several processes of selection after faking his death. He has the chance to appear in commercials and films, but his climax is the adult film shot in Tokyo. Because he did not have the chance to become an American actor, he took advantage of his Japanese appearance and of the stereotypes that revolve around his culture. What is shocking here is that Dorothy watches his film when she meets her American Japanophile in the hotel room. Clearly all characters are haunted by their own mistakes and each of them exposes one another in a more terrifying way.

In terms of how the Japanese identity is seen in the American space depicted in the play, one could only add that all four characters are aware of their own sickness in one way or another. Even if Papa, Dorothy and Victor seem to be infected with the racist disease, Mat is the only one who has a chance to escape it. In fact, when Papa repeatedly said the 'you're not my son' phrase,

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<sup>8</sup> Gotanda, Philip Kan. *Ibidem*. p. 37.

he meant to say that Mat cannot be his son because he was away for so many years and there is a chance that he might not be infected. When trying to describe the family's disease i.e. racism, Papa claims: "The moment you leave your mama's stomach it begins to feed on you. Entering your body, your blood, your mind – so that your thoughts, your thinking, it's all filled with the sickness. The sickness that is pushing and moving your life with its silent hands. Cutting its way into your skin with lies, into your body, all inside of me. Eating me up, like a cancer, eating me away..."<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, this quote presents the shift from the personal pronoun 'you' and possessive adjective 'your' to the object pronoun 'me', thus succeeding in distancing from the reader, who probably identifies with 'you' and 'your' and approaching towards his own feelings and thoughts. Hence, Papa succeeds in creating a bond between his description and himself. It is as if he already knows that 'you' and 'me' make 'us' – the people from the society who are striving to succeed in everyday life.

Mat is another character who hopes to avoid the family's sickness, but finds he has already inherited it and claims that: "Then I hear this tiny voice. Coming from somewhere deep inside me. I couldn't recognize it before. And I wouldn't put a name to it because I knew if I listened to it I would die. But this time. This time I had to listen to it. And I knew what it was. It was you, Papa, you. And as I listened to you inside me I felt the fear. The intimidation. The sickness. [...] I felt you inside of me. But papa, it wasn't just the sickness. No, no, it was much, much more. It was the ability to see it, give the sickness a name".<sup>10</sup> By giving racism a face and a name, one could easily agree that the characters acknowledge the existence of racism as it becomes an empowering experience and a collective response. Moreover, in terms of discourse, one could state that Mat's inner voice gains power and, thus, turns into a voice that anyone could hear and identify with. His voice is no longer his own, but his Papa's and it is intimidating because Mat realizes that one cannot let go of his/her heritage. The sickness is frightening because it is real and one has to fight it, embrace it and live with it at the same time.

But whose sickness is Mat talking about? Is it really his own or is it referring to the sickness of the society? Because the disease bears the name of 'racism' and also because 'ethnicity' is connected to 'us' while 'race' is bound to 'them', according to Banton in Eriksen's

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<sup>9</sup> Gotanda, Philip Kan. *Ibidem*. p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Gotanda, Philip Kan. *Ibidem*. p. 66.

study,<sup>11</sup> there is no doubt that Mat is talking about the American society and its own problems connected to immigrants of Japanese descent in the post World War II years. When eventually identifying with his own kin, Mat claims that: “They’ll run Papa. They’ll have to run because it won’t be just my voice... It will be out voice – yours and mine. Mama’s and Victor’s, Ojiichan’s and Obaachan’s, on and on. GATHERING LIKE A STORM DEEP DOWN INSIDE AND HURLING OUT WITH A FURY OF BEATINGS, HOWLS AND SCREAMS! THEY’LL HAVE TO RUN – CUT, BOUND, RIPPED TO SHREDS BY ITS FORCE!”<sup>12</sup> In other words, apart from recognizing that he cannot run from his racial background, Mat is not attempting a riot against the people who have harmed him and other family members as well. One could also add that, despite the effects of racism, people can rise above it and claim a nobler sense of humanity. Individuals can in fact change and transcend their situation of powerlessness by bringing together people who share the same experiences and talk with the same voice.

Hopefully, this paper has demonstrated that Gotanda’s characters play crucial roles in the American society, as they wage a war against racism by struggling with both inner and outer conflicting voices. This paper has also proved that representations of power can make themselves visible not only through oral discourse, but also through the characters’ inner voice. More importantly, one should remember that power plays a crucial role when looking at the relationship between society and individuals as it is concerned with the process of selection and exclusion. While the parents had to spend some years in relocation camps, Victor was selected to fight for the country in which he was born and lived. At the same time, there were instances when the characters were excluded by the American society: while both Papa and Dorothy seem to have lost parts of their identity throughout the years, Victor is still haunted by his own traumatic events related to the Vietnam War. In a similar way, Mat was selected to act in Japanese adult movies, thus proving that his own process of exclusion had already begun.

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<sup>11</sup> Eriksen, Thomas. *Ibidem*. p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Gotanda, Philip Kan. *Ibidem*. p. 66.

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