

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)

**CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication**

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## GENDER AND OTHER FORMS OF MARGINALITY IN JOY KOGAWA'S OBASAN, ZADIE SMITH'S WHITE TEETH AND AMY TAN'S THE JOY LUCK CLUB

Adela Livia Cătană

Assist., PhD, Military Technical University, Bucharest

*Abstract: This article focuses on the overlap between gender and other forms of marginality in three worldwide critically acclaimed novels: Joy Kogawa's "Obasan" (1981), Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club (1989) and Zadie Smith's "White Teeth" (2000). Based on the technique of close reading, it uses examples selected from the chosen books and proves that women undergo simultaneous discrimination, with respect not only to their biological sex and the social limitations which come with it, but also to their ethnicity, class, religion, age etc. As the authors' biographies pertain their texts, the article pays great attention to the fact that the narrated events mirror real life experiences in an artistically and condensed manner and promotes the idea that marginality has nowadays become a "space of power".*

*Keywords: cultural spaces, discrimination, ethnicity, gender, marginality.*

The analyses of 'gender' and other simultaneous forms of 'marginality' can often become a process of categorisation. These concepts cannot be fully defined without embedding them in socially pre-established categories enforced by various theoretical views and perpetuated across time and spaces. In order to provide a better understanding of our study, we propose a series of parallels between theory and example. We combine explanations regarding 'gender' and 'marginality' with exemplifications selected from three worldwide critically acclaimed novels: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). These books reflect ideas such as: life in-between cultural spaces, the negotiation between multiple identities and the quest for Self-authenticity. Although, their plots are set in Canada, the United States and Great Britain; countries which nowadays promote the principles of equality and multiculturalism, either as "the cultural mosaic" or "the salad bowl", the female protagonists of these books undergo simultaneous discrimination, with respect not only to their biological sex and the social limitations that come with it, but also to their ethnicity, class, education, age, etc. It is astonishing however, to find out that marginal individuals can prove resourceful and powerful, making themselves extremely visible among the dominant group.

The term *gender*, comes from the Latin *gener-*, as in *generare*, meaning 'to beget', and is related to *genus* and *genere*, which makes reference to words such as 'birth', 'race' and 'kind'. If in grammar, it identifies different groups of nouns as masculine, feminine and neuter, in imagology, it deals, as Verstraete explains, with "someone's (self-) perception as being male or

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female and the images of masculinity and femininity that go with it” (329). These self-images are not only the result of people’s perception of their own sexual identity but also that of the others (Verstraete 329). To put it short, men and women are not only what they think they are but also what others think about them.

According to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (25), gender identity is not connected to the biological sex of a person but to the society and the historical context that person lives in. From a young age, individuals begin to appropriate their identity through images, discourse, social institutions, and interiorize it through education, cultural consumption, and bodily behaviour. Judith Butler extended the concept of ‘gender’ and dissociated it from the sexual body and its pre-discursive substance. In her view, ‘gender’ is a “social product” inscribed on the surface of the body through behaviour, gestures and clothes; in other words, through “performativity” – a repeated bodily performance which can be imitated, parodied and subverted (Butler 153). The process of appropriating gender identity leaves, however, room for interpretation and misconceptions with far-reaching and typically disastrous implications or consequences. Gender stereotypes project men as strong, rational, able to operate in the public sphere, whereas women are weak, emotional and confined in the private sphere (Verstraete 329). Reinforced through repetition or “performativity”, these projections lead to the emergence of the patriarchy, where males hold primary power, moral authority and social privilege, and women are forced to repress their own natural drives and desires, becoming inferior and extremely vulnerable.

In the three novels proposed for analysis, *Obasan*, *White Teeth* and *The Joy Luck Club*, most female characters have to appropriate a submissive behaviour in relation to their husbands (though some of them are not necessarily abusive) and society as a whole. They are expected not only to act according to the stereotypes which project them as being obliging, emotional and weak, but also to embody these stereotypes in a self-convincing way.

In the first novel, *Obasan*, the old aunt, expresses her submission to her husband, Uncle Isamu, extended family and neighbours by following the cult of silence. Basically, she never speaks more than five words at a time. Even when other people are arguing or crying, *Obasan* does not complain. She is always servile and quiet. A mother figure in the book, her attitude can be explained by two Japanese phrases: “Kodomo no tame”, or “for the sake of the children” and “gaman shimasho”, or “let’s endure” (Kogawa 219). *Obasan* does what she is expected to do and uses silence as a sort of a shield to protect herself. Her strategy, however, has a devastating impact on her niece, Naomi, who despite being abused by her neighbour, cannot expose him, nor talk about her horrible experience. Caught like a “small animal” in Old Man Gower’s big hands (Kogawa 67), Naomi suffers in silence and grows up with a sense of self-depreciation. Unlike *Obasan*, Naomi does not voluntarily retain herself from talking; she is simply too scared to express her thoughts, feeling that “speech often hides like an animal in a storm” (Kogawa 35).

Zadie Smith’s female character, Clara Jones, resembles *Obasan* due to the fact that she is also a submissive housewife and mother figure. Although, she marries Archie Jones, an unimpressive and much older man, she fulfils the role of the ‘Angel in the house’ and shapes

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her looks and behaviour according to his needs. Thus, in his view she becomes “the most beautiful thing he has ever seen, [...] the most comforting woman he had ever met . . . her wide grin revealed possibly her one imperfection. A complete lack of top teeth in the top of her mouth” (Smith 22). She is that “thing” which has to be beautiful for her husband, comfort him, and bare his child. Her missing top teeth, which are usually interpreted as “her ancestral roots”, are lost in a bike accident caused by a man, Ryan Topps, who “stood up without a scratch” (37). This sole imperfection proves how weak she is as a woman, both from a physical and a psychological perspective. Clara is not, however, the only prisoner to her pre-established role. Alsana Iqbal, for instance, is caught in a pre-arranged marriage and forced to take care of her husband and sons. She endures a poor life and spends her time sewing clothes in order to pay the bills; a repeated activity which makes her feel alienated. Domestic life can make women feel limited and frustrated or just as Betty Friedan writes in her bestselling *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), suffer from the “problem that has no name” (5). Yet, working women can be equally affected by their socially pre-established role. Despite being a horticulturalist and a writer, Joyce Chalfen must also dedicate all her time to her house chores and family, becoming overprotective too emotional, “too woman” (Smith 46); a typical ‘Yddishe Mamme’.

In Amy Tan’s novel, it is mentioned, right from the beginning, that a woman’s value “is measured by the loudness of her husband’s belch” (17) and that she has to obey him. Life with a man can be extremely hard, but without one, it can become even worse. For instance, An-mei’s mother, the wife of a respected scholar, loses all status when her husband dies. Raped by the wealthy Wu Tsing and forced to become his concubine, she commits suicide in order to free her daughter. Another character of the book, Lindo Jong, is betrothed at infancy and urged to marry when she is only twelve years old, as her family needed the money. In her husband’s house, she has to endure humiliation and exploitation, until she decides to run away and face unknown dangers. Similarly, Ying-ying St. Clair feels extremely vulnerable after her husband leaves her for an opera singer. She has an abortion and lives in poverty for ten years until she has the chance to emigrate and change her fate. Nonetheless, the unfair interpretation of the economic equality between men and women can also lead to indignation and bitterness. A relevant example is that of Ying-ying St. Clair’s daughter, Lena, who establishes her husband, Harold Livotny, in his own company, helping him with the initial money and ideas. Eight years later, the couple continues to share expenses equally, although the husband now earns much more than his wife does.

The characters mentioned above prove that gender and gender stereotypes are not autonomous, but “intersected” with other forms of identity such as ‘ethnicity’, ‘class’ or ‘economic status’, ‘religion’, ‘age’, etc. Being a woman means “to take up a temporary position in a changing context” that involves not only gender relations but also all other types of social relations even if they do not necessarily “cohere into a one identity [and] are antagonistic in various respects” (Verstraete 330). The women depicted by Kogawa, Tan and Smith, cannot be fully understood without taking into account the fact that they are also Japanese Canadians in the 1940s, Chinese immigrants to the USA, an unpopular Jehovah’s Witness with Jamaican roots, a Bangli Muslim, or a Jew, in nowadays Great Britain, middle class or extremely poor,

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educated or illiterate, old or young. These women become marginal not only because of their pre-conditioned gender roles and relations with men but also due to the ‘intersectionality’, simultaneity and antagonism of their ‘multiple identities’.

In *Obasan*, Naomi faces a double discrimination. Not only that she is a little girl perceived as being weak and easy to take advantage of but also a Japanese Canadian during the Second World War, a visible minority and a “yellow peril” (Kogawa 57). Ethnicity turns the protagonist into a subject of mass hatred, being treated worse than the Germans. Her early encounter with racism begins with the other children in the street who call her and her brother: “the Jap kids”. Their identity crises can be seen in Stephan’s riddle: “We are both the enemy and not the enemy” (Kogawa 69) as well as in the chicks/chickens episode on page 181:

*There are fifty small yellow pawns inside and three big blue checker Kings. To be yellow in the Yellow Peril Game is to be weak and small. Yellow is to be chicken. I am not yellow. I will not cry however much this nurse yanks my hair. When the yellow chicks grow up they turn white. Chicken Little is a large Yellow Peril Puff. One time Uncle stepped on a baby chick. One time, I remember, a white hen pecked yellow chicks to death, to death in our back yard. (Kogawa 181)*

The little girl does not want to be yellow, no more than she wants to be weak and vulnerable. The white hen becomes a symbol of the motherland which does not only abandon the girl (just as her natural mother did in order to take care of her relatives in Japan) but also terrorizes her. Naomi’s marginalization does not cease with the end of the war and years later, in 1972, she continues to feel discriminated upon, especially when is asked questions such as “How long have you been in this country?” (Kogawa 7). Moreover, her marginalization deepens when her brother win his official Canadian badge, while she remains the same Jap girl.

In Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, Irie, a teenage girl, whose name means “Ok, cool, peaceful” in Patois, is definitely not at peace with herself. Just like Kogawa’s protagonist, Irie struggles because of her gender and racial identity. Coming from a mixt family with British but also Jamaican roots, she finds it almost impossible to meet the physical standards promoted by the White London society she lives in:

*Now, Irie Jones, aged fifteen, was big. The European proportions of Clara's figure had skipped a generation, and she was landed instead with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes and guavas; the girl had weight; big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth. (Smith 268)*

Irie is ready to make any sacrifice in order to be accepted and become one of the Others. Desperate to fulfil mainstream beauty standards and impress Millat Iqbal, a boy she loves, Irie dyes and straightens her hair. Her gesture does not have the expected results and the teenage girl becomes subject to more frustration and alienation from society.

The female characters from *The Joy Luck Club* are also struggling to overcome their marginality by reinventing themselves as individuals. Although they are well aware that their skin and hair are and will always be Chinese, they know that their inside can change. Thus, a

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Chinese mother who immigrates to the “Land of Promise” hopes that no one will look down on her daughter because she will “speak only perfect American English” and assimilate the lifestyle and values of their new country:

*I taught her how American circumstances work. If you are born poor here, it's no lasting shame. You are first in line for a scholarship. If the roof crashes on your head, no need to cry over this bad luck. You can sue anybody, make the landlord fix it. You do not have to sit like a Buddha under a tree letting pigeons drop their dirty business on your head. You can buy an umbrella. Or go inside a Catholic church. In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you. (Tan 254)*

A major problem emerges, however, when both mothers and daughters begin to feel Outsiders in the United States as well as in China. In order to avoid being mistreated, most of the protagonists have to dissimulate her intentions and hide their “Chinese face” (Tan 258). For instance, when Lindo Jong first comes to America, she has to pretend that she does not want to live there forever, but work as a scholar and then go back to teach people in her home country. On the other hand, her daughter, who “is all American-made”, needs to be at peace with her ethnic identity and plans to go back to China though she is told that the moment people will look at her or hear her speak, they will know that she is an outsider and treat her accordingly.

Marginal as they are, the protagonists depicted by Kogawa, Smith and Tan, undergo a “dynamic process”, which involves not only the “struggle to gain access to resources, and full participation in social life” (Anderson and Larsen 241) but also the overcome of “physical location and distance from centres of development” (Sommers 7-24), the management of multiple identities and Self-reinvention. Though they seem vulnerable and arouse readers’ empathy, these female characters are extremely resourceful. Just as Kimblere Crenshaw argues, the marginal can surpass mainstream discourse and implicitly its status of “vestige of bias or domination” (1242). ‘Difference’ is actually the key element which offers these women “empowerment and reconstruction” (Crenshaw 1242) and we may also add unity. In *Obasan*, Naomi is part of a culture which involves selflessly, the veneration of the mother, solidarity and intimacy. She reinvents herself in connection to her long lost mother, quiet Obasan and rebel Aunt Emily. In Smith’s novel, the Bowden women are also connected not only at a physical but also at a spiritual level being similar to Matryoshka dolls: “... if this story is to be told, we will have to put them all back inside each other like Russian dolls, Irie back in Clara, Clara back in Hortense, Hortense back in Ambrosia” (Smith 295). Irie represents the central point of this matrilineal chain and she succeeds to accept her present only after exploring and better understanding her past; the past of her family. Moreover, after sleeping with both Magid and Millat, the twin brothers with identical DNA, she gives birth to a daughter free from paternal lineage. In *The Joy Luck Club*, there seems to be a lack of consensus between the women of different generations and cultures: “My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more.” (Tan 37). Yet, Suyuan’s statement is representative of the struggle to maintain the mother-daughter bond across cultural and generational gaps: “A girl is like a young tree” she

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said. “You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. This is her only way to grow strong and straight. But if you band to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak.” (Tan 191). The ideas of female unity and self-perpetuation can be found also in the episode when Jing-mei “June” Woo encounters her sisters: “My sisters and I stand, arms around each other, laughing and wiping the tears from each other’s eyes. Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long cherished wish” (Tan 288) or even in the game of mah-jong, played by four female friends, whose places at the table are taken by their daughters, after their deaths.

It is important to underline the fact that, the female characters depicted by Kogawa, Smith and Tan, are also the beneficiaries of a positive change in the discourses of the dominant regimes, which projects ‘marginally’ as a “space of power” and gives the marginal a voice (Hall 34). This major transformation is very well emphasised by Stuart Hall in his article, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity”:

*The emergence of new subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, new communities, hitherto excluded from the major forms of cultural representation, unable to locate themselves except as decentered or subaltern, have acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves for the first time (34).*

Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, can very well reflect Hall’s words, as the whole novel presents an actual battle with silence. By responding to Aunt Emily’s call to “write the truth”, Naomi overcomes her traumas of sexual molestation and abandon, the condition of marginal with multiple identities, and reinvents herself through therapeutic narrative. Through writing, this “pathologically silenced girl finds her voice” (Banerjee 101). Despite the fact that her hatred and greed “remain as constant as human nature” (Kogawa 250), Naomi is able to hope for a better future. This idea of agency via female voice is also present throughout Smith’s novel and initiated by Clara and Alsana. The two women realize the importance of overcoming problems through communication as “their husbands told each other everything. That it was they themselves who were kept in the dark” (Smith 55). This sort of interaction, which exists outside the established societal boundaries, deeply influences Irie and helps her reinvent herself through declarative ‘performatives’ and verbalization. Likewise, in *The Joy Luck Club*, women use their parties and the game of mah-jong to bound and heal, as these are good opportunities to share their traumatic experiences. They defy the misogynistic reflection: “Confucius say a woman is worth a thousand words. Tell your wife she’s used up her total” (Tan 264) by choosing not to remain silent and express, instead, their will and expectations.

Just like the characters they portray, Kogawa, Smith and Tan recognize the need for women of different ethnicities, classes, ages, to step outside the boundaries of marginality and find “a room of one’s own” (to quote Virginia Wolf’s famous essay), and a voice. Born to a Japanese family, in Vancouver, in 1935, Kogawa uses *Obasan* to convey many experiences of her own - the cruelty of racism and gender discrimination as well as the devastating effects of silence. The daughter of a Jamaican mother and a British father, Zadie Smith uses Irie’s voice to reveal many problems shared by the second generation of immigrants and the double

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marginalization of a mixt-racial girl living in London. Likewise, Amy Tan, the second child of a family of Chinese immigrants, born in Oakland, California, is not too far from her characters either. The dilemma that the daughters from *The Joy Luck Club* have to face regarding their multiple identities and social their alienation, has its roots deeply embedded in the life of the author herself. Literature becomes a common voice for these three writers, who are able to find the ‘means to speak for themselves for the first time’ and overcome their marginalization. Although such novels, written by women about women, are usually labelled as “écriture feminine” (Cixous 876) or “parler femme/ womanspeak” (Irigaray 130) and thought to be far away from “the poetic word [...] which fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture” (Kristeva 36), we perceive them as being inspiring and empowering. Kogawa, Smith and Tan produce, just as Professor Monica Bottez underlines, works “of superior artistic achievement” with a “convincing fusion of the objective and the subjective on the symbolic level of the narrative discourse” (286). They are not meant to be just an “écriture feminine” (Cixous) or a “womanspeak” (Irigaray) – a marginal literary creation – but cross the boundaries of the genre, captivate scholars’ attention worldwide and why not, become central, become part of the canon.

From characters to authors, the overlap between gender and other forms of marginality proves that the quest for self-authenticity and empowerment can be extremely difficult, full of obstacles, stereotypes and misconceptions. Yet, as liberal discourses change, we conclude that discriminated individuals, their struggles and needs, have migrated towards the central, receiving a voice as well as a room of their own and becoming a point of great interest in contemporary Western society. In this regard, the three novels explored here, *Obasan*, *Joy Luck Club* and *White Teeth* may represent the embodiment of this revolutionary change.

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