

A NEW HISTORICIST READING OF JULIE OTSUKA'S THE BUDDHA IN THE ATTIC AND WHEN THE EMPEROR WAS DIVINE

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Abstract: As the title states, this paper aims to connect key terms related to new historicism with the Japanese American ways of thinking as reflected in Julie Otsuka's fiction. More importantly, the present paper brings to the fore not only concepts specific for the field of literature seen from a new historicist perspective, but also aspects that circle around the language and the culture encountered in the two selected works, thus proving that the approach of new historicism can indeed make itself distinguishable in the Japanese American sphere. Because this paper is intended to focus on more than one discipline, it will have as main purpose the analysis of the two creative works from three different perspectives (language, literature and culture) while focusing on power relations, discourse and ideology in the contemporary Japanese American context.

Keywords: power, discourse, ideology, ethnicity, gender identity.

This research is concerned with power relations that function in the contemporary Japanese American society as seen in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* and *When the Emperor Was Divine*, while analyzing aspects related to the language used and, to a lesser extent, the culture encountered in the selected novels. The present paper aims at connecting key concepts related to new historicism to Japanese American studies, a domain that is gradually gaining popularity worldwide. Profoundly interdisciplinary, the new historicist approach will look into several knots that will integrate social history and the Japanese and American culture reflected in Otsuka's historical fictions. Thus, this analysis will manage to differentiate itself from what has been written before, both in terms of coverage and approach.

The informed reader knows that before tackling key concepts that can be easily encountered when discussing new historicism, one finds it of great importance to briefly present the two selected works belonging to Julie Otsuka. *The Buddha in the Attic* gives the floor to Japanese women who sailed their way to America in the hope of gaining a better life as picture brides. They begin their story full of hopes by introducing their husbands and their children only to end it with their acknowledgement of being forced to give up their Japanese customs in favor of new American ones. *When the Emperor Was Divine*, on the other hand, offers an insight into any Japanese family who managed to survive the injustices that came with World War II. It is, in fact, the story of a father, who is taken away by authorities in the middle of the night, and a mother with two children who are forced to leave their home and head for a concentration camp in Utah. More importantly, Otsuka's historical fictions deal with issues related to Japanese ethnic and gender identity in the American space. What is really surprising is that, apart from presenting historical events seen from the Japanese perspective, the characters from *When the Emperor Was Divine* are nameless. The same could be argued about *The Buddha in the Attic*, not only because the characters do not have names, but also because they talk with the same voice, thus using first person plural in all their recollections.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, one could easily agree that the nameless characters could speak for any Japanese who identifies with them. It should be added that the social positions occupied by women and to a lesser extent by men in a patriarchal society, and the racist views of a white society towards people who look and act differently, hint to the fact that discrimination was and still is a powerful practice in contemporary America. Otsuka's novels aim towards an interpretation of history from a feminine perspective that seems to create a world in which representations of Asian countries and America were merely viewed as products of fiction due to the cultural practices that contributed to the construction of the new historicist critical approach. In other words, Otsuka's characters can be seen as the embodiment of any immigrant, in this way speaking for the masses of people who decided to better their lives by migrating to other countries. It should be noted that the reader is supposed to learn from the common lives of Asian people in America, as these immigrants struggle with the ideologies imposed by the society in which they were born and the ones imposed by the one in which they live.

Nevertheless, it is relevant for the present study to first name and briefly comment on certain key terms that will be referred to when talking about a new historicist interpretation of Otsuka's novels. First, one should put emphasis on Michel Foucault's writings because they bring to the fore concepts such as new history, episteme, power, ideology and even discourse – terms that help in understanding and analyzing literary texts through new historicist lenses. According to Foucault, **new history** (taken from *The Archeology of Knowledge*) emerges from the history of thoughts, of science and of philosophy, but not from proper history because proper history “appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favor of stable structures”¹. To put it differently, new history seeks to determine the relations between different fields of study and at the same time it refers to distinct ways of correlating the dominance between them. Another concept that is present in new historicist analyses is **epistemé** (borrowed from Foucault's *The Order of Things*) and is defined as being similar to a period of history, referring not to ordinary events but to a type of knowledge from a certain time. More exactly, an epistemé is a “period in the history of thought and knowledge”². One could argue that both *The Buddha in the Attic* and *When the Emperor Was Divine* reveal ideas that shape the knowledge of the 1940s, ideas that seen from the point of view of the contemporary power-knowledge system can still be debatable.

An equally important term is **power** (encountered in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*), a concept thought to be the most important term in the new historicist vocabulary, and it refers to the relations of domination and resistance seen from social, political and cultural points of view. However, it also refers to the pleasures that come after exercising it, in this way being effective. Thus, power cannot only be subversive, but also productive. From a new historicist point of view, power should not be understood as physical power or violence of an individual towards another one. Instead, it should be seen as the ability to make someone comply with the norms imposed without realizing that his/her decisions were not made independently, but from an array imposed by centers of disseminating power. Hence, if, for instance, we were to think of the Pearl Harbor attack which led to public hostility from both Japan and America, then one would immediately link this attack to the concentration camps established for the Japanese. More explicitly, the American society divided its power into several detention camps which permanently observed first and second generation immigrants who were behind barbed wire. If we accept this idea of power, then we could agree with the fact that new historicism is a style of literary criticism which engages with human history as a history of ideas in this way being interested in looking at how the text represents power and

¹ Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1989. p. 6.

² Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. p. 15.

comparing that to social power at the time a text was written. In other words, new historicism lends itself very well to certain kinds of feminist or post-colonial analysis. One looks to the texts being created at a particular time in the hope that the history will help us to see new meaning in the text, and that at the same time the text will provide us with new insights into the ideas of the time.

A fourth key term crucial for present analysis is **ideology** which is explained by John Brannigan as referring to “a condition in which people identify themselves with particular class or sectional interests, and therefore with the values and beliefs of this class or section”³. In other terms, ideology can be seen as a system of ideas belonging to a particular section of society, in which there are, obviously, different group interests and, hence, clashes between groups. If one were to think about the selected novels, the ideological rigidity of the World War II period had numerous consequences on the Japanese immigrants who were constantly humiliated and discriminated. One could think about the Statue of Liberty political cartoon from 1906 which contained the message “Japan – ‘But that Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam?’ Uncle Sam – ‘Oh, that means liberty for Yankees.’”⁴. Apart from being a cultural icon, the Statue of Liberty is in itself a representation of freedom for those who identify with and support the American way of thinking. One could also mention the “Japs Keep Moving – This is a White Man’s Neighborhood”⁵ photograph, which was intended to make immigrants of Asian descent realize that America was indeed a land in which dreams could be accomplished, but only for a selection of people.

The last concept that will be referred to in this paper, namely **discourse**, is again present in Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge* and it refers to statements, texts and relationships that work together in order to form practices and fields of study in society. More importantly, one could add that Otsuka’s novels will also be focusing on language power relations that can be encountered in the Japanese American society. To put it differently, one would try to find and also analyze the way in which Japanese immigrants speak, what words they usually use and to what purpose.

The reader should further agree that new historicism shifts the historicist view to a critique of the ideology of the age by focusing on the politics of form and on the reinterpretation of history, then we could further argue that new historicism looks at all individual views and takes everything into account while at the same time it focuses on how social life and history are represented in various discourses. In trying to prove that new historicism is a viable theory that would perfectly blend in with the fields of ethnic and gender studies, one should briefly present the views of two important figures in the development of this theory, namely Stephen Greenblatt and Hayden White. Although their perspectives on new historicism are different in many ways, the attempt of bringing them together will end in a better comprehension of the new historicism sphere.

Stephen Greenblatt’s view is that a literary work is shaped by collective beliefs, social practices and cultural discourses; these leave **textual traces** in a work of literature and connect it to the extra-textual representational systems of the culture in which it is embedded. He destabilizes the text (a poststructuralist approach) and focuses on its margins, borders, where it connects with other representations in the culture. His reading is generally concerned with power and the way it maintains itself through representation. Power is motivated and mobilized by **wonder** and **enchantment**, two discursive terms that reveal representation as productive and reflective of power. Therefore, the relationship between literature and history

³ Brannigan, John. *Ibidem*. p. 14.

⁴ *Political Cartoon, Statue of Liberty*. Digital image. *Literary Digest*. Fischietto (Turin). Courtesy of Library of Congress, 22 Dec. 1906. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.

⁵ *Japs Keep Moving - This Is a White Man's Neighborhood*. Digital image. A More Perfect Union. Courtesy of National Japanese American Historical Society, ca. 1920. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.

is one of circulation, exchange and negotiation rather than of reference or reflection⁶. In other words, by adopting a new historicist approach, the reader wonders how was the literary work produced, distributed and who would read it. More importantly, when talking about Otsuka's fiction, the reader should be aware that a text is made up of practices, assumptions and structures which function in such a way that it makes the reader wonder how the author describes the way in which Americans treated Japanese immigrants before and after the Pearl Harbor bombing.

Another American (a historian this time) who investigates the formal literary structure of history is Hayden White. He discusses the literary dimension of history as historians deploy the traditional devices of narrative to make sense of raw data and also to organize and give meaning to their accounts of the past. White's theory revolves around a history that is written with the tools of the literary writer. He also claims that historical narratives are verbal fictions with invented contexts and that history gains its explanatory power by processing data into stories. These particular stories take their shape from **emplotment** i.e. the process through which the facts contained in chronicles are encoded as components of plots⁷. He further claims that no historical event can itself constitute a story; it can only be presented as such from a particular historian's point of view. White identifies four possible emplotments: tragic, comic, romantic and ironic⁸. Nevertheless, in order to produce these emplotments, White identifies four master tropes of figurative representation: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony – each of them corresponding to the four types of emplotment⁹. To be more specific, one should think of Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*, where the historical event of picture brides has been emplotted into the novel. This would immediately raise questions about the picture brides. Why did they leave Japan? Why did they choose America as their destination? What would they hope to accomplish? Although at first sight one might say that the Japanese women's coming to America could link to a romantic emplotment, due to their hopes and the short conversation between them and their future husbands, it would soon prove that this historical event perceived as tragic. Another example of emplotment can also be found in *When the Emperor Was Divine*, because the key moment in the novel starts with World War II, when the father from the novel is taken away by American authorities for questioning, thus the emplotment being, again, a tragic one.

Taking these key terms into consideration, one could further agree to the fact that the critical approach of new historicism can be applied to the field of ethnic studies, more exactly to Japanese Americans. One reason for undertaking a new historicist reading of Japanese American writings would simply be because they were considered aliens in the American space. Furthermore, one could claim that representatives of ethnic groups that live in American cities often choose to expose moments in which they suffered oppression and public humiliation both in their countries of ancestral origin and in the country in which they have chosen to work in order to provide a better living for their families. These link to the fact that there are clashes between groups in the United States because of the different ideas encountered in society, hence proving that power is disseminated in such a way that it manages to control the weak individual, the one who has an "odd" behavior and who is not able to relate to a certain kind of ideology.

Representations of power can also be encountered in Otsuka's writings due to the fact that there are many scenes which focus on the oppression of societies and institutions over the

⁶ Felperin, Howard. "Cultural Poetics versus Cultural Materialism: The Two New Historicisms in Renaissance Studies." *Uses of History: Marxism, Postmodernism, and the Renaissance*. Eds. Barker, Francis, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1991. p. 84.

⁷ White, Hayden V. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973. p. 7.

⁸ White, Hayden V. *Ibidem*. p. 29.

⁹ White, Hayden V. *Ibidem*. p. 36.

weak. In *The Buddha in the Attic*, for instance, the no-name women talk about their intention of fully integrating into the American system by dressing and acting in such a way that they would not offend the white. However, the women regretfully recognized that they and their families were discriminated and publicly humiliated in the sense that the institutions exercised power over such weak individuals. For instance, at school the Japanese American children had to stay in the back of the class and they would be last in line at the cafeteria and, more importantly, always apologized with a smile on their face. Another example of exercising power could revolve around the American ushers who gave first and second generation Japanese immigrants the worst seats in the second balconies of the theatres. Even barbers had the power to refuse offering their services when Japanese Americans wanted a haircut. Even if the women notice these injustices, they eventually claim that “the only way to resist, our husbands taught us, was by not resisting”¹⁰. Through these examples the Japanese are portrayed as being discriminated and, at the same time, obedient because they think that if they do not respond to insults with violence they will eventually prevail. From a new historicist point of view, one could also think that resisting ethnic discrimination is also a way of exercising power.

When the Emperor Was Divine also presents episodes in which institutions exercise power over the weak. Because the father from the novel was taken by authorities in the middle of the night under the impression of being a spy for the Japanese Emperor Hiroto Shōwa, the rest of the family was evacuated and taken to a concentration camp. On the one hand, one could discuss the power the FBI has over the father while on the other one should bring to the fore the power centers that control the rest of the family. The last chapter from the novel entitled “Confession” reveals the father’s acknowledgement for his sins. This short chapter could be viewed as a clear example of manipulation meaning that the father recognizes that he was loyal only to his country of ancestral origin and did everything in his power to compromise the lives of Americans. He admits that the Americans were always right and he is responsible for the misfortune brought upon the white people. He further speaks for all the Japanese who were suspected of being traitors and claims that: “I planted sticks of dynamite alongside your railroads. I set your oil well on fire. I scattered mines across the entrance to your harbors. I spied on your airfields. I spied on your naval yards. I spied on your neighbors. I spied on you”¹¹. The father thus speaks with one voice for all the Japanese suspects, while at the same time he refers to any American citizen who identifies with the “you” from the novel. He further makes reference to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria from 1931 and to the Nanking massacre from 1937 only to end up with the Pearl Harbor attack from 1941. Nevertheless, the most powerful impact on the reader comes together with the last lines of the father’s confession in which he urges the ones who question him to put everything on paper, all the offences brought upon the American society, all the Japanese cunning ideas towards the rest of the world, including his last thoughts. He finally asks: “put it down in writing [...] and I’ll sign on the dotted line. Is treacherous and cunning, is ruthless, is cruel. And if they ask you someday what it was I most wanted to say, please tell them, if you would, it was this: I’m sorry. There. That’s it. I’ve said it. Now can I go?”¹². Clearly, his confession is not only his own and, more importantly, the contemporary reader understands that there were Japanese immigrants who did not involve in war affairs of any kind. Hence, the father embraces his Japanese identity and acknowledges all accusations, this being a perfect example of resisting power by not resisting.

The same novel presents instances in which the mother and the two children are oppressed by the American institutions. For one reason, they are forced to evacuate their

¹⁰ Otsuka, Julie. *The Buddha in the Attic*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. p. 52. All further references are to this edition only.

¹¹ Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2013. p.140. All further references are to this edition only.

¹² Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine* p. 143-44.

home and live in a concentration camp in Utah, where the mother would often dream about the sea. Interestingly enough, after their return the mother reminisces about the three years spent in the camp. She claims with sorrow that they used to stand in line for everything they needed, be it food, mail or even shower. The kids also remember that they used to play war and hence had to choose between MacArthur and the enemy i.e. the Japanese. As a consequence, they unconsciously had to choose between the hostile American society which was responsible for their imprisonment and the country of their ancestral origin. Another episode which perfectly describes the oppressive power of institutions over weak individuals is concerned with the family's return and the children's school experience. Just like children from *The Buddha in the Attic*, the boy and the girl from *When the Emperor Was Divine* hoped that they would not be noticed if they sat in the back of the class, they constantly apologized for everything they did.

One could further argue that both *The Buddha in the Attic* and *When the Emperor Was Divine* reveal injustices exercised upon immigrants to a wide audience, in this way presenting past political events in the spectrum of contemporaneity. One could also argue that ethnic groups in America are unknowingly being controlled in such a way that they no longer wish to return to their countries, and instead "independently" choose to remain and work for the host country. They do not reject the American society anymore, and consequently they do not wish to return home. They now get acquainted with and accept "foreign" aspects that circle around themselves simply because they no longer perceive them as being foreign. Furthermore, because the main cultural practice present in every work that defines ethnic studies in general is storytelling, we could not question the power a narrator has over his/her stories. Of course, this issue triggers other aspects related to the narrator's reliability and makes the reader question how much truth is there in their stories. Because many ethnic writers belong either to second or even third generation immigrants, this makes the reader question how reliable the presented events are. Because ethnic writers tell told and retold stories heard from their parents and, more than that, because they bring their own contribution to the story, the writers focus only on some key aspects that are relevant for the development of the story, in this way giving the impression that they alter the past. However, judging from a new historicist perspective, the reader finds out that there is truth in all history, be it American or Japanese history.

If one were to accept all the above stated facts, then he/she would agree that in Julie Otsuka's novels there are numerous instances in which Japanese women are portrayed as being oppressed both by class structure and by their social imposed gender roles of worthless females who entirely depend on male domination. More than often Japanese characters try to challenge their status by rebelling against patriarchy in a rather passive way, as they are believed to suffer oppression simply because they are women. Accordingly, the female characters seem to emphasize the differences between men and women, by bringing to the fore biological differences, such as independence /vs/ interdependence, competition /vs/ cooperation, domination /vs/ submission. It should be added that in both *The Buddha in The Attic* and *When the Emperor Was Divine*, the Japanese women and men alike are confined to hard labor and are controlled by a higher power than gender, namely society. Hence immigrants are the ones upon which power is exercised.

Power can also be encountered when talking about the language used in Otsuka's novels, as this paper also puts emphasis on Japanese and American particularities that reflect the ways in which context contributes to meaning. However, it is of extreme importance to mention that before analyzing different types of approaches to language behavior one needs to familiarize himself/herself with elements specific for both cultures. One should reveal that in

the Japanese language the particle “ka” replaces the question mark¹³. When discussing *When the Emperor Was Divine*, we could argue that because the writer is a third generation immigrant, she was probably not familiar with such particularity and added the question mark immediately after the construction “Nan desu ka?”¹⁴. If one were to translate, then the interrogative sentence would undeniably be followed by two question marks: “What is it??”. There are two interpretations to this problem: the first one could be concerned with western political reasons which imposed Julie Otsuka to introduce the question mark after the Japanese question. Another explanation could be that probably because she was not a native Japanese, but a third generation immigrant in America, Otsuka was not familiar with such particularity.

One could further argue that in terms of phonetics, native Japanese cannot pronounce the consonant “l”, hence an “eru” is heard, and it can be easily confused with “r”, which is pronounced the same as “l”. *The Buddha in the Attic*, this time, brings to the fore the parents’ opinions about their children, second generation immigrants. They observe that apart from forgetting all the customs and good manners their parents taught them, they are also rejecting their ancestry as they gradually give up their Japanese ancestry and replace it with a new American one. The women further observe that “they [the children] pronounced their l’s and r’s with ease”¹⁵. In other words, instead of saying “prease” they are now able so correctly pronounce “please”, or “hello” instead of “harro”. In other terms, one needs to look into several areas in order to develop a well-documented research. When attempting a new historicist approach to Japanese American writings, one should take into consideration the Japanese language particularities and explain them. Otherwise such aspects would be taken for granted by a regular reader.

It should also be brought to light that because power is in a close connection to knowledge, it resides both in oral (as it has been shown in *The Buddha in the Attic*) and written discourse (as it was seen in *When the Emperor Was Divine*). However, probably because the first objective of any person who is willing to learn a foreign language is to understand the oral conversational discourse, *The Buddha in the Attic* further presents the women who reveal that the American horses do not understand the Japanese commands and so they have to learn words like “giddyap”, “back”, “easy” or “whoa”. Obviously, such language is extremely helpful when working on the fields and not when attempting to run a business in a small town. Even though, the women recognize that during their way to America they have learned a few English phrases such as: “‘Hello,’ ‘Beg pardon,’ ‘Please pay me my wages’ – and could recite their ABCs, but in America this knowledge was useless”¹⁶. The reader could see that the Japanese immigrants had no power because they were not able to master neither the oral nor the written discourse. Hence, they were seen as outcasts not only because of their appearance, but also because they did not have the ability of fully integrating into the American system. Again, this is a perfect example of knowledge-power relationship, as only the one who possesses knowledge has true power over the weak.

This paper has demonstrated that Julie Otsuka’s novels reveal aspects connected to traumatic events in Japanese Americans’ lives both in terms of language and cultural difference. Because the main purpose of the paper was to look at *The Buddha in the Attic* and *When the Emperor Was Divine* through new historicist lenses, it mainly revolved around power relations and the structures of the American culture as seen from the Japanese perspective. Through their stories, the narrators exposed the American ideology of the time, thus proving that history in itself is a collection of interpretations that need to be known.

¹³ Hondru, Angela. *Curs de Limba Japoneză*. București: Universitatea Cultural-Științifică, 1983. p. 2.

¹⁴ Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine*. p. 50.

¹⁵ Otsuka, Julie. *The Buddha in the Attic*. p. 74.

¹⁶ Otsuka, Julie. *The Buddha in the Attic*. p. 26.

Moreover, various historical events were emploted into both novels, in this way proving that in the contemporary society one accepts the stronger statement simply because it comes from a higher position. The novels prove that if Japanese Americans were avoided during the early 20th century, they are nowadays acknowledged and listened to due to literary texts such as Julie Otsuka's novels.

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