

## JULIE OTSUKA'S WHEN THE EMPEROR WAS DIVINE, A HEART-WRENCHING EVACUEE'S DIARY

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*Abstract: Julie Otsuka chronicles historical events, her narrative being defined by both a tone of emotional restraint and by a lack of fleshed-out protagonists. A host of succinctly described characters inhabit the novel, coming across as generic figures that embody the suffering of Japanese Americans' communities.*

*Claiming a place, being in constant pursuit of others' acceptance as someone caught between cultures-neither here nor there-, driven by the urge to become vocal, facing, therefore, strenuous emotional dilemmas time and again, all the aforementioned reasons lead Julie Otsuka to undoubtedly jump at the opportunity of balancing views and triggering debates through her art.*

*Keywords: literature as a catalyst, ethnicity, mainstream American society, assimilation demands.*

### 1. Introduction

Writing empowers Julie Otsuka to reconcile past and present, thus forging a more inspiring future, and it also helps her to articulate an unmistakable identity over time. At the core of her writing lies the determination to come to grips with both the mainstream American society and the ethnic background.

Furthermore, throughout the literary work under discussion, *writing* acquires various meanings, to the point where the novel engages readers in a different analysis relative to the manner in which ideas might transgress time and space frames. In the light of this, I argue that *first, second and third*, writing is assigned the primary role in the novel.

Additionally, not solely for enumeration's sake, I should underscore more *writing* values like: a) writing as asserting one's identity in the world; b) writing in order to recover one's past and strive to keep it alive, in other words to succeed in committing one's past to a higher memory; c) writing to make a powerful statement; d) writing to come to terms with oneself; e) writing to gain a voice, to make oneself heard and seen; f) writing to grapple with history; g) writing to cope with one's anguished experiences; h) writing to reconcile past events with present feelings; i) writing, therefore, to reaffirm one's bicultural identity through the lens of both *positive* and negative stereotypes; j) writing in order to negotiate past mistakes and also shift perspectives.

Julie Otsuka's novel chronicles historical events, being defined by the writer's tone of emotional restraint as well as by a lack of fleshed-out protagonists. Therefore, a host of succinctly described characters inhabit her narratives, coming across as generic figures that embody the suffering and existential dilemmas of Japanese Americans' communities.

There are no names for the main characters except the generic appellations of *the girl, the boy, the children, the mother, and the father*. There are no particular names assigned to any of the family members, yet each of them displays a wealth of feelings, carefully nurtured and guarded, therefore preventing the plot from turning into an emotionally aseptic and obscured one.

With this in mind, I argue that their anonymity might be thought of to enhance the human side since, by not being named, the protagonists may as well account for a prototype-like-figure, embodying the idea of arbitrariness, sublimating suffering while exposed by the case of so many American citizens of Japanese descent, entangled in nations' disputes.

The five parts of the novel, *Evacuation Order No. 19, Train, When the Emperor Was Divine, In a Stranger's Backyard, Confession* substantiate the fact that readers' perspective on this particular aspect of American history is infused with subsequent inquisitive questions and instances of startled bias.

## *2. Bewilderment and Betrayal among the Issei and Nisei: Japanese Internment, World War II*

*When the Emperor Was Divine* charts the experience of one family during the World War II evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans. As one of the only recent works of fiction written by an American of Japanese descent, it marks an important milestone in the literary representation of the Japanese American internment experience. In its unusual narrative style and innovative approach to character development, it breaks new aesthetic ground, returning public attention to a shameful moment in U.S. history.

Structured as a novel in five parts, each section of Otsuka's narrative centers on a different member of an anonymous Japanese American family. In one sense, in referring to these characters simply as 'the woman' or 'the boy,' Otsuka invites her readers to see them as prototypical victims of wartime racism and government injustice. At the same time, Otsuka's keen eye to the details that constitute each character's experience reminds her readers of the variety of ways in which specific individuals encountered and reacted to Japanese American internment. (Oh, 2007: 232-3)

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, Japanese Americans were widely suspected as supporters of the aggressive militarism of the Japanese Empire. Despite the absence of any evidence of sabotage or espionage, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which led to the forcible internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom had been born in the United States.

Japanese Americans were forced to dispose quickly of their property, usually at considerable loss. They were often allowed to take only two suitcases with them. Internment camp life was physically rugged and emotionally challenging. (Powell, 2005: 162)

The binary demand of the experience of internment was that the Japanese American subject must choose between Japanese and American affiliations. This identification choice was coercively enforced through incarceration on the grounds of 'enemy alien' identity, in so far as Japanese Americans were assumed to have a primary loyalty to Japan which overrode any subsequent loyalty to the United States.

Enemy aliens, those who declined to swear allegiance to the United States, were branded as 'disloyal', and were transferred to disloyal camps. 'Loyal' *nisei* possessing citizenship were eventually allowed to leave the camps and to return to civilian life, and in the short term, were given the opportunity to further 'prove' their loyalty by fighting for the

United States. The crisis of identity that the initial shock of internment brought is followed by the inner turmoil and agony engendered by the loyalty questionnaire later. (Grice, 2002: 163)

3. *When the Emperor Was Divine, a Timely Reminder of the Nature of Prejudice and Alienation*

It is four months after Pearl Harbor and signs appear overnight all over the United States instructing Japanese Americans to report to internment camps for the duration of the war. For one family it proves to be a nightmare of oppression and alienation. Explored from varying points of view – the mother receiving the order to evacuate; the daughter on the long train journey; the son in the desert encampment; the family’s return home; and the bitter release of their father after four years in captivity – it tells of an incarceration that will alter their lives for ever. Based on a true story, Julie Otsuka’s powerful, deeply humane novel tells of an unjustly forgotten episode in America’s wartime history.<sup>1</sup> A woman reading a sign in the street, a sign that has surfaced overnight, triggers the unravelling of the narrative thread in Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine*. Her restraint behaviour does not betray in any way the grave matters she has just learn about: ‘The sign had appeared overnight. On billboards and trees and the backs of the bus-stop benches. It hung in the window of Woolworth’s. It hung by the entrance to the YMCA. It was stapled to the door of the municipal court and nailed, at eye level, to every telephone pole along University Avenue. [...] She wrote down a few words on the back of a bank receipt, then turned around and went home and began to pack.’ (Otsuka, 2013: 3)

The author manages to create an intriguing story by skilfully interweaving fictional and historical events. Julie Otsuka sketches her characters with brush strokes of detachment belying the horrendous shifts in their lives. Mother, daughter, son, left at the mercy of hazard, take turns in astonishing readers with how much forbearance they are capable of. The Evacuation Order No. 19, since this is what the sign in the street read, will disrupt the woman’s life for ever. Whatever the task at hand –packing, parting with her family’s dearest memories and the like–, is tackled far from haphazardly, but in the most methodical way. It does not take a toll on her in a demonstrative manner: ‘In the living room she emptied all the books from the shelves except Audubon’s *Birds of America*. In the kitchen she emptied the cupboards. [...] Tomorrow she and the children would be leaving. She did not know where they were going or how long they would be gone or who would be living in their house while they were away. She knew only that tomorrow they had to go.’(Otsuka, 2013: 8-9)

The evening prior to their departure, mother and daughter are chit-chatting, seemingly heedless of how their existence will be configured starting the following day. Yet, underlying this instance of mother-daughter bonding, there is a heavy load of racism as well as the mother’s desperate attempt at sheltering her daughter from the hurdles ahead of them.

*‘Is there anything wrong with my face?’ she asked.*

*‘Why?’ said the woman.*

*‘People were staring.’*

*‘Come over here,’ said the woman.*

*The girl stood up and walked over to her mother.*

*‘Let me look at you.’ (Otsuka, 2013: 15)*

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<sup>1</sup> Kelley Kawano, “A Conversation with Julie Otsuka”. Retrieved October 10, 2016. <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0902/otsuka/interview.html>.

The second part of Julie Otsuka's novel, *Train*, maintains the same third person singular narrative voice, this time bringing in the foreground the eleven-year old girl: 'It was September 1942 and her face was pressed against the dusty window of the train. She was eleven and her hair was black and straight and tied back in a ponytail with an old pink ribbon. Her dress was pale yellow with wide puffy sleeves and a hem that was beginning to unravel. Pinned to her collar was an identification number and around her throat she wore a faded silk scarf. Her shoes were Mary Janes.' (Otsuka, 2013: 24)

Evacuated from Berkeley, California and lumped together, first to the assembly centre at the Tanforan racetrack, south of San Francisco, and afterwards to Topaz, Utah, the family has to go with the flow through the sorrows of life<sup>2</sup>: 'The girl had always lived in California – first in Berkeley, in a white stucco house on a wide street not far from the sea, and then, for the last four and a half months, in the assembly center at the Tanforan racetrack south of San Francisco – but now she was going to Utah to live in the desert. The train was old and slow and had not been used in years.' (Otsuka, 2013: 25)

Going on such a long and unsettling journey, the girl unveils, through her eleven-year old lens, an attempt at adjusting to their new existential dynamics, beyond any crumb of hope or comfort. Eluding a syncopated present, she indulges in a wave of nostalgia, drawing heavily on stacks of postcards sent by her father some time ago: 'Soon the boy fell asleep and she took out her father's postcards from her suitcase. [...] On the back of the card her father had written her a short note: *Finally, summer has arrived. I am in good health and hope you all are well. I know your birthday is coming up soon. Please let me know what you would like and I will order it from the City of Paris department store in San Francisco and have them send it to you. Be good to your mother while I am away. Love, Papa.*' (Otsuka, 2013: 42)

Julie Otsuka's narrative intersperses large passages of dispassionate rendition of a series of events, engulfing her anonymous characters, with outbursts of anger and despair. Dreams become increasingly interwoven with reality to the point where the protagonists are troubled by distinguishing one realm from the other: 'At Tanforan the partitions between the stalls did not reach all the way up to the ceiling and it was impossible to sleep. The girls had slept. Just now she had slept. She had slept and dreamed about her father again so she knew she was not at Tanforan, either.' (Otsuka, 2013: 44)

Topaz, the empty bed of a former salty lake, greets the evacuees in the dustiest manner possible, lifting layers and layers of sand, genuinely animated whirlwinds that bounce carelessly among the indefinite *guests*.

The third part, entitled the same as the novel, gives the floor to the boy by scrutinizing his feelings, impressions, needs, and manner of coping with the upside down reality that surrounds him, or just the way of merely internalizing it. In the absence of his role model, his long ago vanished father, the boy is longing for a father figure, seemingly

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<sup>2</sup>Guiyou Huang (Ed.), *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature*, (Vols.1-3).Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009; pp. 455: "In the official euphemisms employed during the war, they were first 'evacuated' to one of 16 temporary 'assembly centers' (all but three located in California) and later transferred to one of 10 long-term 'relocation centers,' built in isolated desert and swampland locations: Gila River and Poston in Arizona; Jerome and Rohwer in Arkansas; Manzanar and Tule Lake in California; Granada (Amache) in Colorado; Minidoka in Idaho; Topaz in Utah; and Heart Mountain in Wyoming. Poston opened first on May 8, 1942, and Tule Lake was the last to close on March 20, 1946. Since the end of the war, most published writing and public discussions about these places use the terms *concentration camp* and *internment camp*."

replicated all over the place by the other Japanese American males' silhouettes of quite similar features. Another racist stereotype, in reference to the Asian appearance, surfaces throughout this chapter. Lamenting his father's absence, the boy fantasizes about a ubiquitous image of his missing parent: 'In the beginning the boy thought he saw his father everywhere. [...] they all looked alike. Black hair. Slanted eyes. High cheekbones. Thick glasses. Thin lips. Bad teeth. Unknowable. Inscrutable. That was him, over there. The little yellow man.' (Otsuka, 2013: 49) Lost among familiar faces, still none of these does really qualify for what the boy is yearning as none of the men incarcerated at Topaz is his father.

Being alive and still together become the only assets the boy, the girl and their mother are left with. By no stretch of the imagination could their existence behind the barbed-wire fence acquire other meaning than striving to remain alive despite their whimsical fate<sup>3</sup>.

*They had been assigned to a room in a barrack in a block not far from the fence. The boy. The girl. Their mother. Inside there were three iron cots and a potbellied stove and a single bare bulb that hung down from the ceiling. A table made out of cratewood. On top of a rough wooden shelf, an old Zenith radio they had brought with them on the train from California. A tin clock. A jar of paper flowers. A box of salt. [...] There was no running water and the toilets were a half block away." (Otsuka, 2013: 50-51)*

Always on their guard, the family charts the first rules that need to be followed with the utmost care. The boy, as everyone else, for that matter, seems daunted by the incessantly emerging question: 'Why?' What has he done, though he hardly remembers anything deserving such a punishment like being exiled from his universe, being isolated under those conditions, left with no other option than waiting, enduring, and ruminating for endless days and nights about the reason that has brought him here in the first place?

When the uncertainty rules, worse things might happen all the time, therefore, the Japanese Americans had better do nothing else but grin and bear it. After all, there are rumours sustaining the undeniable benefits represented by the very incarceration, as this is just a form to ensure their safety: 'Every week they heard new rumors. The men and women would be put into separate camps. They would be sterilized. They would be stripped of their citizenship. They would be taken out onto the high seas and then shot. They would be sent to a desert island and left there to die. They would all be deported to Japan. They would never be allowed to leave America.' (Otsuka, 2013: 70)

Scars never to be healed. The image of a father entirely vulnerable, asked to leave his home only in a bathrobe and worn out slippers. Defenseless, at the mercy of unleashed forces, and in such an incomprehensible hurry for a boy of eight: "They had come for him just

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: "At their peak occupancy in November 1942, the 10 camps held 106,000 internees, but the total number in WRA custody during the war was 120,313, a figure that includes children born in camp, seasonal workers released from assembly centers, transfers from the Department of Justice internment camps and from Hawaii, institutionalized persons, and 'volunteer' evacuees. Living conditions at both the assembly and relocation centers were substandard; the most serious problems concerned sewage and sanitation, overcrowding, food shortages, inadequate medical and educational facilities, and a chronic, debilitating lack of privacy. Communal toilets and showers did not have partitions, and whole families, regardless of size, were housed in single rooms, at most 20x25 feet, with no running water or floor-to-ceiling partitions. Housing did not adequately protect against severe weather conditions. Internment was a complex event that cannot be fully understood except through multiple political, social, and psychological issues. However, at the center and circumference of all specific issues or episodes of the internment are two fundamental ironies. One is the difference between the treatment of Japanese Americans in Hawaii and on the West Coast; the other is the government's method of hastening to certify the loyalty of interned Japanese Americans soon after their imprisonment by making them eligible for combat duty and for release from the relocation centers."

after midnight. Three men in suits and ties and black fedoras with FBI badges under their coats.<sup>4</sup> ‘Grab your toothbrush,’ they’d said. This was back in December, right after Pearl Harbor [...] The Christmas tree was up, and the whole house smelled of pine, and from his window the boy had watched as they led his father out across the lawn in his bathrobe and slippers to the black car that was parked at the curb.’ (Otsuka, 2013: 73-74)

Being finally released from the concentration camp in the desert of Utah doesn’t even remotely amount for the family in the novel to go back to their previous life. The mother, accompanied by her two children, has still a house to return to, but no acknowledged identity within the local community. The deplorable state of the house speaks volumes about how the family’s rights of ownership have been infringed upon in more than one way.

In spite of not being informed about their crimes, the Japanese Americans are both punished and rewarded in accordance with the legal framework applied to criminals. Upon their release from Topaz camp, each of them is offered a symbolic amount of money without any further explanation. The suffering inflicted on them is far from being over: “The war relocation authority had sent each person home with train fare and twenty-five dollars in cash. ‘It doesn’t add up,’ our mother had said. Three years. Five months. Twenty-five dollars. Why not thirty-five, or forty? Why not one hundred? Why even bother at all? Twenty-five dollars, we later learned, was the same amount given to criminals on the day they were released from prison.”<sup>5</sup> (Otsuka, 2013: 117-118)

Their identity, unbearably shaken by the concentration camp, comes under new scrutiny once they are back in California. The war is over but the hatred, distrust, and prejudice amassed by the locals, while the family has been away, have not vanished into thin air. More waves of race-based discrimination take their toll on the recently returned Japanese American citizens: ‘We looked at ourselves in the mirror and did not like what we saw: black hair, yellow skin, slanted eyes. The cruel face of the enemy. We were guilty. Just put it behind you. No good. Let it go. A dangerous people. You’re free now. Who could never be trusted again. All you have to do is behave.’<sup>6</sup> (Otsuka, 2013: 119-120)

Separated from his family for more than four years, the father reunites with his children and wife during a Sunday late afternoon. Bearing the indelible signs of war, visibly aged and with a rather degraded health, their father’s sight challenges children’s memory and

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*: ‘On December 7, within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor, FBI agents swept through Japanese American communities and arrested individuals previously identified as potential security risks. All together, about 8,000 were placed in five internment camps run by the Department of Justice, one in Hawaii and four on the continent. After this point, however, the experience of Japanese Americans in Hawaii and on the continent diverged.’

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: ‘The idea of redress was proposed at the JAACL 1970 national convention and eventually led to the formation of three national committees and many local groups around the country. The redress movement gained momentum in the late seventies and reached a turning point during public hearings conducted in 1981 by CWRIC. Their official report, *Personal Justice Denied* (1982-1983), is based on a study of government archives, internment scholarship, and public testimony from people involved in implementing internment and from hundreds of former internees and their descendants. The report led to the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which wrote into law all five of the commission’s recommendations for redress, including an official apology and symbolic payment of \$20,000 to each of the more than 80,000 survivors.’

<sup>6</sup> Guiyou Huang (Ed.). *The Columbia Guide to Asian American Literature Since 1945*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006; p. 6: ‘Japanese Americans, faring only slightly better than their Chinese counterparts during the first four decades of the twentieth century, experienced one of the most humiliating injustices in American history: evacuation and internment by the government after Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The Chinese became the heroes and the Japanese the villains, in public perceptions of the two Asian subgroups. However, the internment of the Japanese in essence differs little from the exclusion of the Chinese six decades earlier: both resulted from legalized racism initiated by the national government and enacted at the local level.’

deeply shatters their conviction that they will meet again the same person ordered to leave the house in just a bathrobe and a pair of battered slippers several years ago. The reunion falls short of what the children would have expected, as they are in deep shock, overwhelmed with confusion, desperate to grasp an image of their good-looking father. The boy and the girl instantly freeze when attempting to reconcile memories with beyond belief present facts.

The last part, suggestively entitled *Confession*, makes a statement about how excruciating the pain can become when nations and ideologies clash. Caught in between, the sacrificed people's suffering beggars description. Mainly guilty of being Japanese, the evacuees are held responsible for a number of undocumented offences, and consequently rendered silent. The confession, made in first person singular, represents Julie Otsuka's literary decision of empowering the father to speak up again. By turning his confession into a vocal protest against the experiences he has been put through, Julie Otsuka chooses a denouement that dramatically unbalances the narrative detachment and restraint, running through almost the entire novel: 'Who am I? You know who I am. Or you think you do. I'm your florist. I'm your grocer. I'm your porter. I'm your waiter. I'm the owner of the dry-goods store on the corner of Elm. I'm the shoeshine boy. I'm the judo teacher, I'm the Buddhist priest. I'm the Shinto priest. [...] I'm the slant-eyed sniper in the trees. I'm the saboteur in the shrubs. I'm the stranger at the gate.' (Otsuka, 2013: 142-143)

#### 4. Conclusion

We have seen how *When the Emperor Was Divine*, a Japanese internment narrative, echoes the hardship, misjudgment and harrowing race-based discrimination endured by a Japanese American family during the World War II. Julie Otsuka's narrative bridges the gap between reality and fiction by envisaging her anonymous protagonists to act as genuine spokespersons for the Japanese American community during the internment. Reading the novel prompts us to feel at times puzzled by the author's detached manner of evoking the intricacies that abound in her characters' destinies. Notwithstanding the fact that we tap into a cataclysmic world, the protagonists' tone is mostly a restrained one as they are grappling with the abyss ahead. Hardly any outbursts of anger are prompted thanks to their immensely balanced way of tackling the issues at hand. Moreover, their forbearance when confronting myriad incongruities undoubtedly catches readers' attention. Initially inoffensive citizens, assimilated into the mainstream American society, the Japanese Americans, irrespective of their status of *issei* or *nissei*, shift from a worse to the worst scenario, as they are attached incomprehensible labels like *evacuees* and *number-internees* on the grounds of a collective high treason suspicion.

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