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"WE STOPPED DREAMING": JULIE OTSUKA'S (UN)TOLD STORIES OF PICTURE BRIDES

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ABSTRACT. ***"We Stopped Dreaming": Julie Otsuka's (Un)Told Stories of Picture Brides.*** Focusing on Julie Otsuka's acclaimed 2011 novel, *The Buddha in the Attic*, this paper will investigate the picture bride phenomenon as a multilayered trade of lives, identities, emotions and expectations, drawing a vivid picture of the protagonists' subjection to exploitation, abuse, discrimination and deceit.

Keywords: *American Dream, collective voice, immigration, Japanese, legislation, marriage, picture brides, socio-historical context.*

REZUMAT. ***"Am încetat să visăm": Julie Otsuka şi poveştile (ne)spuse ale mireselor prin corespondenţă.*** Pornind de la elogiatul roman din 2011 al scriitoarei Julie Otsuka, *Buddha din podul casei*, lucrarea de faţă va analiza fenomenul mireselor prin corespondenţă drept comerţ cu vieţi, identităţi, emoţii şi aşteptări, oferind un viu portret al confruntării protagonistelor cu exploatarea, abuzul, discriminarea şi înşelătoria.

Cuvinte cheie: *Visul American, voce colectivă, imigraţie, japonezi, legislaţie, căsătorie, mirese prin corespondenţă, context socio-istoric.*

1. Introduction

While the general phenomenon of immigration to the United States, alongside the specific cases of various communities, has been and still is under constant and persistent academic investigation, the various historical episodes and ramifications of each case-study are numerous and, therefore, difficult to exhaust. They form, however, the intricate background to the development of ethnic communities in the United States, and they are worthy of close inspection,

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as they are essential to the community members' identity shaping and (trans)formation in between homelands. Illustratively, picture brides are part and parcel of a larger phenomenon, which Yuji Ichioka's article entitled *'Amerika Nadeshiko: Japanese Immigrant Women in the United States, 1900-1924'* addresses in detail: the status of Japanese immigrant women in the early twentieth century United States, more often than not neglected by official accounts.

Observing the rise of Japanese female immigration at the dawn of the twentieth century and pointing at the increasing number of already married women entering the United States, this researcher emphasizes a quite widely spread, institutionalized policy of promoting the permanent residence of Japanese men via the summoning of their significant others from Japan. One of the notable organizations which strongly supported this particular stand was the Japanese Association of America (JAA): its main aim was to advocate cultural assimilation as a means of successful minority integration within the host country's normative patterns. While their strategies were multiple, one of the most relevant for this discussion revolved around the fact that

> Japanese emigration law stipulated that farmers and businessmen were permitted to send for wives, while unskilled laborers were not. Because of this, itinerant men were encouraged to become settled agriculturists in order to take advantage of the opportunity to bring Japanese wives to the United States and make families in their adoptive homes. Once reclassified as agriculturalists, these men could send for their relatives in Japan, or make arrangements to sponsor a 'picture bride' (Kaibara 19).

2. Meeting Halfway: Professional Match-Making

The analysis of such elements of socio-historical and, evidently, legal context, is particularly useful in order to make notions that may seem mundane and ignoble to the culturally unaccustomed mind easier to grasp. At the level of individual, personal beliefs and reactions, which the novel strives to capture and comprehend via its protagonists, the idea of marriage was, oftentimes idealistically, associated with the ineffable, yet desirable ones of emotional connection, spiritual and physical well-being, mutual communication and understanding (despite all obstacles and misfortunes, "deep down, most of us were really happy, for soon we would be in America with our new husbands, who had written to us many times over the months" – Otsuka). In the aforementioned case, the laborers' efforts to find ways to comply with the laws were remarkable, and so was their willingness to find means that would

satisfy both Japanese and American requirements. Understandably, however, from the point of view of the precariousness of most immigrants' situation, the prospect of building a family in the new country was often hindered by the distance from their native country, the costs of a journey back home and the time necessary to find a proper life partner in person.

As a result, the alternative of professional match-making gradually gained ground within the community of Japanese bachelors in the United States. It is, therefore, important for readers of picture brides' - fictional and non-fictional - accounts to be well-acquainted with the specific circumstances behind this practical mechanism, in order to comprehend the reasons for the Japanese workers' quite frequent decisions to

> resort to the so-called picture-bride practice, the third way by which women entered immigrant society. The practice itself did not diverge sharply from traditional Japanese custom. In Japan, marriage was never an individual matter but always a family affair. Heads of households selected marriage partners for family members through go-betweens. An exchange of photographs sometimes took place in the screening process, with family genealogy, wealth, education, and health figuring heavily in the selection criteria. Go-betweens arranged parleys between families at which heads of households discussed proposed unions (Ichioka 342)

As one can easily notice, not only was this practice an adapted version of the customarily employed arrangements of Japanese marriages between suitable partners via a specialized broker; it also promoted the annihilation of individual agency in favor of family decision (preferable, nevertheless, to the fate of "our older and prettier sisters who had been sold to the geisha houses by our fathers so that the rest of us might eat" – Otsuka). While, as emphasized by observers of the phenomenon, to the Western mind such a process might have seemed exotically inappropriate, it appeared extremely natural to the Eastern society of Japan, wherein choosing a spouse was a carefully-planned group transaction rather than an acknowledgement of mutual feeling and appreciation, which were not considered prerequisites of a happy union. Thus, by extension, the practice was understandably embraced by Japanese men working in the United States. It would clearly spare the men various kinds of trouble to simply send one's "demographic information to a marriage broker in Japan, and the agent would match his information with that of a Japanese woman whose parents had also registered her with the broker" (Kaibara 22).

The meticulous match-making to follow included, primarily, elements having to do with the candidates' native region, background and financial status, all of which were theoretically well-meant, yet remarkably indifferent to emotional involvement and, consequently, particularly suspicious to Americans

unfamiliar with such wedding practices. It is this particular side of the entire process that writers like Julie Otsuka highlight in their empathetic fictional versions of such real-life experiences. After the selection had been made,

> after both sides agreed to the marriage, the woman would go to the local magistrate in Japan with paperwork from the broker to register the marriage and be officially entered into her husband's family registry. This registration was the only legal requirement for marriage in Japan – after this, the couple was legally united in the eyes of the Japanese government, even if they had never met (Kaibara 22).

It was in this quite precarious, though legal, bondage that quite a number of Japanese women found themselves, many times as part of a larger family plan, which had little to do with their own private intentions, beliefs, or wishes. In order for their union with literally unknown men to be fulfilled in practice, they were shipped to the United States on long and tortuous ocean voyages, during which, in a considerable number of cases, anticipation and anxiety did nothing but grow. Such neglected aspects of the picture bride 'business' are chosen by Julie Otsuka as nuclei of her novel, *The Buddha in the Attic*.

3. Collective (Dis)Illusionments

Narrated by a collective voice belonging to a group of women whose dramatic transcontinental fates it foregrounds, the story is fragmented and highly impactful, as identities are drowned in the communal emotional rollercoaster of a massive dispatch of traded lives. The ingenious first person plural aids in creating an overwhelming sense of belonging to a community of perpetual migrants, whose future, readily decided by their families, is uncertain while they are travelling towards unknown partners and lives. Moreover, it helps create a sense of unity in diversity, as the voices that blend into the picture bride chorus tell stories of characters whose backgrounds, features, and aspirations may differ, but whose trajectories become similar once they all become part(s) of this peculiar transnational migration: "The youngest of us was twelve, and from the eastern shore of Lake Biwa, and had not yet begun to bleed. *My parents married me off for the betrothal money*. The oldest of us was thirty-seven, and from Niigata, and had spent her entire life taking care of her invalid father, whose recent death made her both happy and sad. *I knew I could marry only if he died*." (Otsuka)

The writer's primary strategy is to unite the characters' thoughts, fears, dilemmas, naivetés, and goals in a colorful puzzle of otherwise muted destinies. The construction of a remote, mediated version of the American dream of prosperity and opportunity is made clear by the women's collective, hopeful, and hardly critical reliance on the pictures they have been presented with, which

feature not only suitable partners, but also transparent symbols of better living in a promised land.

> ON THE BOAT the first thing we did - before deciding who we liked and didn't like, before telling each other which one of the islands we were from, and why we were leaving, before even bothering to learn each other's names - was compare photographs of our husbands. They were handsome young men with dark eyes and full heads of hair and skin that was smooth and unblemished. Their chins were strong. Their posture, good. Their noses were straight and high. They looked like our brothers and fathers back home, only better dressed, in gray frock coats and fine Western three-piece suits. Some of them were standing on sidewalks in front of wooden A-frame houses with white picket fences and neatly mowed lawns, and some were leaning in driveways against Model T Fords. Some were sitting in studios on stiff high-backed chairs with their hands neatly folded and staring straight into the camera, as though they were ready to take on the world. All of them had promised to be there, waiting for us, in San Francisco, when we sailed into port.
> ON THE BOAT, we often wondered: Would we like them? Would we love them? Would we recognize them from their pictures when we first saw them on the dock?" (Otsuka)

Despite their inherent anxieties, unanswered questions and silent prayers, at the beginning of a life-changing journey, encouraging perspectives seemed to await the brides who were not only looking forward to meeting their picture-perfect, too-good-to-be-true husbands, but also to the lifestyle that these presumably honest visual representations advertised. Overlapping the familiar allure of the Eastern men with the sophistication and well-being of the Western, self-possessed home-and-car owners, the photographs were alleged guarantees of determination, success, reliability, full access to the rights and advantages that America had in store. Behind the confidence that had been instilled in them by relatives and friends, the women did, however, feel the need to go beyond the appearances, wondering whether these handsome strangers they were already tied and indebted to would match their romantic expectations as well. Moreover, the natural suspicion that the pictures might not be entirely true to the facts could not be easily overcome, particularly as, in many of the cases, it would turn out to be justified.

In order to better understand the nuances of such situations, one must be well aware of the historical context of the early 1900s in the United States regarding Japanese immigration, determined by major landmarks such as The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Forced to either avoid being drafted or, subsequently, reinvigorate their country's economy by working abroad, the male Japanese workers who had reached Hawaii

and the Pacific Coast found themselves trapped by the strict prohibition of interracial marriages and various other manifestations of the growing American negativity towards them. Thus, the import of picture brides became a justifiable – if not ideal – means for them to start families in their adoptive country, while counting on the unknown spouses' willingness to embark upon an adventure which could, potentially, improve their living standards (alongside those of the families which they left behind).

The rough conditions on the ships crossing the Pacific were obstinately withstood, even countered, by women determined to believe in their chance and in the happy ending to their sacrifice. *"Remind me one more time, I'm Mrs. Who?* Some of us clutched our stomachs and prayed out loud to Kannon, the goddess of mercy - *Where are you?* - while others of us preferred to turn silently green" (Otsuka). In fact, "dreams of an idyllic romantic life for Japanese women were destroyed by harsh reality as the Issei, or first generation women, entered America […] In 1908, the influx of more than 20,000 Japanese picture brides brought change to the situation as men no longer outnumbered women" (Sakamoto 98). The reasons for that particular transformation of the immigration patterns shall be discussed shortly. Nevertheless, in terms of the novel under discussion, it is essential to bear in mind the blatant discrepancies, in most cases, between the women's expectations of their new homes and homeland, and the oftentimes humiliating, diminishing, excruciating experiences awaiting them ("Some of us worked quickly because our husbands had warned us that if we did not they would send us home on the very next boat. *I asked for a wife who was able and strong"*. – Otsuka).

4. Pathways to the American Dream

Apart from the obvious awareness-raising, Otsuka's fictionalization of this real-life experience, shared by thousands of women at a specific point in time, attempts and manages to accomplish an attentive exploration of the psychological mechanisms behind the picture bride process and the motivations and illusions upon which it quasi-implausibly relied. Her collective protagonist(s)' testimonials stand proof of a baffling combination of resilience, stoicism and undeterred, almost religious, faith in the dream. The never-ending sea voyages are presented as pilgrimages in search of salvation, while the cherished, and often deceitful photographs of the husbands, appear to be iconic representations of the new deities to be revered upon arrival.

> ON THE BOAT we carried our husbands' pictures in tiny oval lockets that hung on long chains from our necks. We carried them in silk purses and old tea tins and red lacquer boxes and in the thick brown envelopes from

> America in which they had originally been sent. We carried them in the sleeves of our kimonos, which we touched often, just to make sure they were still there. We carried them pressed flat between the pages of old, well-worn volumes of the Buddhist sutras, and one of us, who was Christian, and ate meat, and prayed to a different and longer-haired god, carried hers between the pages of a King James Bible. And when we asked her which man she liked better - the man in the photograph or the Lord Jesus Himself - she smiled mysteriously and replied, "Him, of course." (Otsuka)

The aforementioned reason for the unprecedented female Japanese immigration to the United States after 1907 was the famous Gentlemen's Agreement, negotiated by President Theodore Roosevelt with the Japanese government: a two-sided deal by which Japan agreed to bar the emigration of male laborers to Hawaii or the United States, while, in exchange, the United States agreed to grant admission exclusively to the families of the Japanese workers who were already on their territory. It was thus that the picture bride way into the grand American (dis)illusion was legally paved, and it is around the clichés and (mis)representations that guided it that *The Buddha in the Attic* ultimately revolves. The ocean voyage of initiation reveals tender, sometimes amusing, yet also quite ignorant perspectives on the part of the women who have been fed with mythical imagery and fairy-tale-like representations of a faraway, though bizarre, land of plenty ("And was it true that the women in America did not have to kneel down before their husbands or cover their mouths when they laughed? (Charles stared at a passing ship on the horizon and then sighed and said, "Sadly, yes.") And did the men and women there really dance cheek to cheek all night long? (Only on Saturdays, Charles explained). - Otsuka)

The abundant depictions of and speculations about the ways in which, throughout weeks of travel, the women projected images of their long-awaited, yet sometimes feared, future existences are highly revealing of the inner struggle that few official records would ever focus upon. Yet, the struggle was real, and the figments of innocent imaginations – equally endearing and worrisome.

> ON THE BOAT we crowded into each other's bunks every night and stayed up for hours discussing the unknown continent ahead of us. The people there were said to eat nothing but meat and their bodies were covered with hair (we were mostly Buddhist, and did not eat meat, and only had hair in the appropriate places). The trees were enormous. The plains were vast. The women were loud and tall —a full head taller, we had heard, than the tallest of our men. The language was ten times as difficult as our own and the customs were unfathomably strange. Books were read from back to front and soap was used in the bath. Noses were blown on dirty cloths that were stuffed back into pockets only to be taken out later and used again and again. The opposite of white was not red, but black. (Otsuka)

Part of an orally transmitted mythology, representation and, inevitably, exaggeration of the unknown, such an account brings together stereotypes of the menacing otherness and inferiority complexes, fearful and disdainful mental pictures of cultural difference. It speaks about the women's dread of an unfamiliar universe in terms that prefigure a difficult adaptation and highlight the heavy emotional burden of taking on a new relationship in a foreign country. Identity-shattering as it is, such an episode may, in some cases, alter one forever, and the prospect of alienation from their own homegrown, Japanese selves haunts the travelers ("We reached out for our mothers then, in whose arms we had slept until the morning we left home. Were they sleeping now? Were they dreaming? Were they thinking of us night and day?" – Otsuka). Otsuka also uses this opportunity to emphasize the fact that hyphenation and cultural transmutation involve mutual bias and suspicion: it is not only the American majority that mistrusts the aliens, whether they are legal or not, it is also the immigrants who harbor preconceived ideas about their foster society before even reaching it and experiencing it first-hand.

Under such circumstances, wherein uncertainty reigns on multiple levels, the women are left with nothing but their own fantasies, worries and determinations, in the physical absence of the betrotheds and still separated from their future lives. Otsuka explores their emotional struggle, bringing it closer to the reader and decoding, up to a certain point, the almost inexplicable consent of so many individuals to be part of a rather debatable ritual.

> What would become of us, we wondered, in such an alien land? We imagined ourselves - an unusually small people armed only with our guidebooks - entering a country of giants. Would we be laughed at? Spat on? Or, worse yet, would we not be taken seriously at all? But even the most reluctant of us had to admit that it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village. Because in America the women did not have to work in the fields and there was plenty of rice and firewood for all. And wherever you went the men held open the doors and tipped their hats and called out, "Ladies first" and "After you." (Otsuka)

5. Inconvenient Truths

Such passages, while capturing the women's reluctance vis-à-vis entering an unchartered cultural space, bring to the fore the core of their beliefs: an American dream that stemmed rather from the precariousness of their home environment than from the envisaged country's realities, an illusion of economic well-being and social courtesy derived from daydreaming of an improved status, not from realistic understanding of the immigrant condition. The actual circumstances were quite different, as emphasized by Helen F. Eckerson's study

on *'Immigration and National Origins'*, which analyzes immigration control in the U.S. via national-origins provisions, going over successive waves of immigration, legally imposed restrictions, and the Asian community's gradual inclusion in the quota system.

Going back to the first records of Japanese immigration to the U.S., signaling the high points of the influx and outlining significant legislation (geographical delimitation clauses, immigration quotas a. o.), the researcher highlights the importance of family reunion to the considerable Japanese immigration rates at the beginning of the twentieth century: "'Picture or proxy' brides came to the United States until the Japanese government agreed in 1920 to stop issuing passports to "picture" brides. This was followed by a period when Japanese men under special legislation went back to Japan to marry and return with their wives. Japanese immigration dropped only after passage of the Immigration Act of 1924" (Eckerson 10). One of the background elements that is particularly relevant for Otsuka's novel and her protagonists' fate in the United States is the diverse reactions to the incoming Asian foreigners from the American media, politics, and academia. They included extreme cases such as James D. Phelan's who, as a U.S. Senator for California, harshly condemned '*The Japanese Evil in California'*, outlining various concerns as to the immigrants' potentially mischievous marriage practices and their implicit goals.

As a direct witness to the arrival of a shipload of picture brides to San Francisco, Phelan chose to focus, at some point, on the women's ordeal upon glimpsing their husbands for the first time. In keeping with his political agenda, he exposed what he claimed to be the real purpose of such unceremonious unions: "They are led away by their masters and serve a twofold purpose, both in violation of the spirit of the Agreement, which was to restrict the increase of Japanese laborers. They are laborers. They work in the fields as laborers, side by side with the men; and, being remarkably prolific, they bear many children to them to swell the increasing Japanese tide." (326). Although obviously generalizing and highly contributing to the growth of the stereotypical, aggressive anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, the politician did touch a sore spot regarding the crushed expectations of the incoming Japanese women, many of whom had been led on by carefully-planned deception schemes.

Otsuka's collective voice does not shy away from evoking such episodes, which dwell upon the dishonesty and despair that dominated an age of broken dreams, on both sides of the Pacific:

> ON THE BOAT we could not have known that when we first saw our husbands we would have no idea who they were. That the crowd of men in knit caps and shabby black coats waiting for us down below on the dock would bear no resemblance to the handsome young men in the

> photographs. That the photographs we had been sent were twenty years old. That the letters we had had been written to us by people other than our husbands, professional people with beautiful handwriting whose job it was to tell lies and win hearts. That when we first heard our names being called out across the water one of us would cover her eyes and turn away - I want to go home - but the rest of us would lower our heads and smooth down the skirts of our kimonos and walk down the gangplank and step out into the still warm day. This is America, we would say to ourselves, there is no need to worry. And we would be wrong. (Otsuka)

The revelation of unspoken and, undoubtedly, inconvenient truths, is essential to Otsuka's novel, as she does not seek to justify the picture bride practice in a socio-politically constrictive context, but rather to analyze its complex, oftentimes negative effects upon the objectified, traded women. Her fictional discourse is based upon careful documentation of the shock and disappointment accompanying the brides' arrival in the United States, which feature quite frequently in research upon this particular cultural phenomenon. To illustrate the close interrelation between Otsuka's epic descriptions and scientific studies of the major topic of her narrative, we shall resort to a highly telling excerpt from Yuji Ichioka's account on *'Japanese Immigrant Women in the United States, 1900-1924'* which, in quite similar passages to the fictional ones, captures the desolating reality of long-distance unions based on deceit:

> Many picture-brides were genuinely shocked to see their husbands. Sometimes the person was much older than he appeared in his photograph. As a rule husbands were older than wives by ten to fifteen years, and occasionally more. Men often forwarded photographs taken in their youth or touched- up ones that concealed their real age. No wonder some picture-brides, upon sighting their spouses, lamented dejectedly that they had married an old man. Husbands appeared unexpectedly different in other ways. Some men had photographs touched up, not just to look youthful but to improve their overall appearance. They had all traces of facial blemishes and baldness removed. Picture-brides understandably were taken aback because such men did not physically correspond with their photographs at all. Suave, handsome appearing gentlemen proved to be pockmarked, country bumpkins. A few disillusioned picture-brides declined to join their husbands and asked to be sent back to Japan (Ichioka 347).

Placing Otsuka's work side by side with such articles, one can fully appreciate both her documentation efforts, and her determination to illustrate a challenging reality with the novelist's tools. In the era of virtual reality, dating websites, Facebook/Twitter/Instagram accounts and all other sorts of media which revolve around the fabrication of images and the projection of convenient and masterfully-tailored versions of the physical and spiritual self, such episodes

may seem mere anticipations. However, in the case of the misled young women that ventured to a Promised Land and found themselves in a bondage they could not even fully denounce - as they had, allegedly, consented to it, even if not fully aware of its true dimensions -, the outcomes of the existential lie they had been pushed into were often destabilizing. Instead of finding themselves in the desired position of becoming respectable, hard-working citizens in a law-abiding, democratic society, a considerable number of them shortly became victims of discrimination, abuse and marginalization, without having ever fathomed that this was going to be their future.

6. Work Ethic and Endurance

According to Otsuka's intertwining stories, many of the picture brides did, indeed, end up as farm laborers alongside their not-quite-gentleman-like husbands, living in improvised camps and shelters at the margins of the bigger American settlements, or simply wandering across the State of California in search of fruit and vegetable picking jobs, in exchange for nickels and dimes, not appropriate salaries. As they barely spoke the language, lacking suitable education or social skills, and being practically dependent on partners who were, in many cases, not much more integrated or successful as themselves, the women's horizon was limited to low-paying, temporary employment, a perpetual state of discomfort and uncertainty, and the frustration of having both little control over their own fate and practically no opportunity to share their plight with the loved ones they had naively hoped to support by leaving Japan ("We developed a coldness inside us that still has not thawed. *I fear my soul has died*. We stopped writing home to our mothers. We lost weight and grew thin. We stopped bleeding. We stopped dreaming. We stopped wanting. We simply worked, that was all" – Otsuka). Nevertheless, many took responsibility for their unfortunate choices and, in spite of the grim perspectives, opted for the preservation of their marriages, in the framework of deeply-rooted Japanese values.

Though unrelated to literary renditions of the discussed matters, Masako Ishii-Kuntz' article on *'Intergenerational Relationships Among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans'* makes interesting points concerning the Asian-American ideal family myth (as integral part of the model minority myth[2]). It emphasizes the respect for the elderly and the traditional value of filial responsibility, including providing financial aid for the parents (23). It is,

[2] While the 'model minority myth' is commonly-known and widely-discussed among (Asian)-American studies specialists, a brief introduction of the concept ("a group whose hard work, initiative, personal responsibility, and success offer proof that American meritocracy works as intended") to a wider readership can be found, for instance, in a recent article published in *The Atlantic*, available at https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/06/professional-burdens-model-minority-asian-americans/485492/

therefore, understandable why many picture brides would go on with what they perceived as their obligations, both to the relatives they had left behind and to their new family. In the racially enlarged context of the American society of the time, "as a result of their strong work-ethic, the Issei became a threat to others; willing to work as cheap laborers and often more successful than white farmers and business owners. The Issei woman was characterized as subordinate and degraded in the society" (Sakamoto 99).

As a direct consequence of this paradoxical double burden, which comes simultaneously from within and without her community, it is easy for Otsuka to create an inner discourse of the generic picture bride: dismissed by the majority because of ethnic clichés, simultaneously pitied and vilified as her husband's imported property, she will, eventually, admit, if only to herself, that, had she known the truth in advance, she "never would have come to America to do the work that no self-respecting American would do" (Otsuka). Nevertheless, the women in this complicated position found themselves caught between the white majority's stereotypical fear of minority dominance and subsequent discrimination (cf. Hosokawa 1980, passim), and their obedience to their parents, whom their conservative upbringing did not allow them to offend. A fine observer and in-depth connoisseur of such problematic allegiances, Otsuka manages to capture the tension in passages such as the following:

> We worked in basement laundries in Japantowns in the most run-down sections of their cities - San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Barbara, L.A. - and every morning we rose before dawn with our husbands and we washed and we boiled and we scrubbed. And at night when we put down our brushes and climbed into bed we dreamed we were still washing, as we would every night for years. And even though we had not come all the way to America to live in a tiny, curtained-off room at the back of the Royal Hand Laundry, we knew we could not go home. *If you come home*, our fathers had written to us, *you will disgrace the entire family. If you come home your younger sisters will never marry. If you come home no man will ever have you again.* And so we stayed in J-town with our new husbands, and grew old before our time (Otsuka)

Apart from creating a believable, communal voice, and succeeding in exposing delicate issues that are habitually left aside by mere statistics, official records, and even most literature other than the autobiographical, confessional type, Otsuka's main achievement is her critical approach to the picture bride phenomenon, which brings to the fore an entire series of potentially unexpected (human) factors in the traded women's sinuous trajectories. Thus, she stresses the unrealistic, constrictive expectations of the victims' old, as well as new, country communities, alongside their tacit and obedient agreement to a system that perpetuated deceit, implicitly creating suspiciousness, unhappiness,

estrangement and isolation ("My husband is not the man in the photograph. My husband is the man in the photograph but aged by many years. My husband's handsome best friend is the man in the photograph. My husband is a drunkard. – Otsuka). While making themselves useful, yet invisible to their American masters, the women "did not mention them in our letters to our mothers. We did not mention them in our letters to our sisters or friends. Because in Japan the lowliest job a woman could have was that of a maid" (Otsuka)

By inserting such episodes into her narrative, the writer emphasizes the extent of the disappointment and debasement encountered by these women in their new, foster (home)land, which appeared all the more serious when compared to the noble, high standards of their home culture. A different type of pressure was added by Japanese organizations in the United States, who strove to counter the anti-Japanese sentiment amongst mainstream Americans by resorting to the persuasiveness of the united family image. The reformers banked on public sympathy, placing an even heavier burden on the Japanese immigrant wives and mothers, who were seen as the main promoters of a transformed, positive, unthreatening image of the entire community. Thus, the JAA went as far as to put together a guide for Issei women, who

> were reminded that they were "obliged to demonstrate the virtue of Japanese women and compel Americans to admit them as first-rate women in their world". The responsibilities these women were charged with in the host country went beyond the typical duties expected by Japanese culture of creating a home of "comfort" and "a place of relaxation", for her husband. In the United States, the Issei wife would also have to run a moral household, discourage "unsavory conduct, foul speech, gambling, drinking, and smoking." The importance of this vigilance was to uphold the good image and national honor of Japan and prevent future generations of Nikkeijin from inheriting the vices of their fathers (Kaibara 24).

Conclusion

By giving voice to the muted, stifled and utterly voiceless, by articulating a complex, yet highly recognizable and identifiable narrative of a particular enclave within the Japanese-American community - the group of women who crossed the ocean as picture brides and faced the ups and downs, potential gains and unexpected consequences of their and their families' decisions - Julie Otsuka unearths a lesser publicized and rather forgotten episode in the contemporary rush of history. As illustrated by the forequoted passages, the collective story-teller simultaneously highlights the diversity within the rather bizarre gathering of protagonists (as relevant as the diversity within the umbrella term of Asian-Americanness itself), and scrutinizes the multiple, challenging, at times insurmountable cultural differences between continentally different societies,

their customs, lifestyles, values, mentalities. Addressing matters of depression, denial, rejection, renunciation, physical and mental degradation ("One sat down one day in the middle of an onion patch and said she wished she'd never been born" – Otsuka), she construes her novel as an opportunity to outline the generous range of actions and reactions that the human mind and behavior can develop and accommodate at times of crisis.

The picture bride phenomenon does not constitute Otsuka's sole focal point (her treatment of internment camps can offer an entirely different research topic), but rather allows her to expand her views to the generations that sprung from the sacrifice of her collective heroines, as she interweaves stories of forgiveness and revenge, kindness and cruelty, gratefulness and spite. She is devoted to the multiple perspectives and manages to solidly anchor a narrative construction that shelters anxieties, sorrows, excitements, disappointments, discoveries of cultural transplantation, while illustrating the layered nature of reality, the convolutedness of history, the intricate nature of human relationships, as well as the intriguing mechanisms of the human mind, with its fascinating, frustrating, sometimes paradoxical everyday workings. Indebted to history, anthropology, sociology, biographical and, evidently, literary studies, *The Buddha in the Attic* is the work of a fine artist not only literally, but symbolically as well, asking important questions from the inner perspective of the forever silent, into which she provides the valuable creative insight this paper has aimed to instantiate.

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