



“PICTURE BRIDES” AND JAPANESE WOMEN’S AMERICAN DREAM: AN ETHICAL STUDY ON *THE BUDDHA IN THE ATTIC* BY JULIE OTSUKA

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Abstract. *The Buddha in the Attic* is not a religious novel as its name might show; inversely, the author, Julie Otsuka, presents readers a vivid picture of the Japanese women who came to America in the early 20th century and wished to change their life via marriages. Through a common perspective of “We”, the novelist truthfully describes the tragedy not only of women but also of Japanese communities in World War II inside the USA as well as a dark part of American history, the matter of race and cultural harmony. This research applied theories of ethical identity and ethical dilemma of Ethical Literary Criticism to study the identity tragedy within *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka.

Keywords. American Dream, picture brides, Japan, culture, Ethical Literary Criticism

1. Julie Otsuka and *The Buddha in the Attic*

Julie Otsuka, one of the emerging authors in contemporary American literature, was born in 1962, in Palo Alto, California (USA) as a daughter of a Japanese couple. Her father was an *issei* (一世: first generation) and her mother was a *nisei* (二世: second generation) who were Japanese descents immigrating into America from their fatherland Japan. A *sansei* (三世: third generation) of Otsuka attended Yale University where she got a Bachelor degree of Arts in 1984. She also gained a Master degree of Fine Arts from Columbia University in 1999.

Both of her two writings, namely the debut novel *When the Emperor was Divine* and the second one *The Buddha in the Attic*, are books with a historical theme. The former, which relates to Japanese-American internment during World War II, was published in 2002 by Alfred A. Knopf. This novel is rooted in the West Coast where her family moved to when she was nine. It tells the story of a Berkeley family evacuating from the place to a Japanese internment camp in 1942. The novel is primarily a story of a family history with many details, which are rather similar to Otsuka’s own family, such as her grandfather was arrested as a suspected Japanese spy on the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and some her other relatives like mother, uncle, and

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grandmother spent three years in an internment camp in Topaz, Utah. [2] These historical events are used again somewhere in her second novel *The Buddha in the Attic*. This novel's title gives readers a feeling of a religious book; inversely, it is not a Buddhist novel but a writing of "picture brides". The novel draws a detailed story of a group of Japanese brides who sailed to San Francisco in 1919 to marry some men in America that they only know through photographs or letters.

The novel, which contains eight sections, describes troubles of immigrated Japanese living in a new country, especially, a new culture that is very difficult for them to enjoy. Besides, the writing is an endeavour of Julie Otsuka to warn people that although the so-called American dream exists, attaining the dream is not easy. Although dreaming of the new bright life in America, instead they spent a life of hired labors, workers, farmers, etc. They might give up their dream (and also leave everything behind) because of World War II which was mentioned in two chapters of the fiction: "Traitors" and "Last Day". The war is not depicted explicitly but as a shadow of the ghost in the story. There are no battlefields, no guns, and no soldiers either, yet the Japanese immigrants had to leave their homes, their shops, their fields, and even their lives on the way to the internment camps that they knew nothing about.

It can be said that history and war are two of the most prominent ideas of both Otsuka's novels. "It's hard not to think about history and war if you're a Japanese American who grew up in California. In my family, 'the war' (WWII) was a common referent. That sleeping bag? Oh it's ojichan's (grandfather's) from 'camp.' (My grandfather was arrested by the FBI on Dec. 8, 1941, and imprisoned for being a 'dangerous enemy alien.') That mess kit? Same." [6] The shadow of war not only exists in *When the Emperor was Divine* but also spreads in the last two sections of *The Buddha in the Attic*. However, it is necessary to define that Otsuka's second work is not a war-theme novel, but it is a chronicle of Japanese picture brides about one century ago. The novel is an important and valuable window to explore one of the stages of history when the Asian ladies came to the United States and built their ideal dreams there.

2. Ethical dilemma and the failed dream

The term "picture bride" refers to the reality in the early 20th century of immigrant workers who were mainly Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean lived in Hawaii, the West Coast of the United States, and Canada selecting brides from native countries via a matchmaker. At that time, matchmakers paired brides and grooms using only photographs (that is the origin of "picture" of the term) and some never-known-each other couples wrote letters via matchmakers' recommendations (that is the reason why there is also another term of "mail-order bride").

Picture bride is a very common phenomenon in the first generation of the Japanese community in the United States. Otsuka's mother is not a picture bride, but the novelist heard

stories from her community and read it on old newspapers and books. To sketch this novel, the Japanese American author had to make a wide finding on the marriage tradition: "I read a lot of oral histories and history books, and old newspapers. I had to learn about two worlds: the old Japan from which the picture brides came, and the America of the 1920s and 1930s which they immigrated to. I kept many notebooks filled with detailed notes about *everything*," shared the author. [2] This serious work helps her drawing out the picture bride's destiny vividly by a large landscape from their landing in San Francisco port, their children, their jobs, their deaths, and their vanishments.

In the first chapter of *The Buddha in the Attic*, which named "Come, Japanese!", the Asian women group gathered onto the boat, "mostly virgins", some as young as fourteen, each of them held a photograph of their future husband. Some of them on the boat were from Kyoto, Nara, Yamaguchi, Tokyo, Kagoshima, Hokkaido, Hiroshima, or from a small mountain hamlet in Yamanashi, from the eastern shore of Lake Biwa. They came from various places in the whole of Japan with their own stories and conditions, which made them decide to escape from their homeland for a new expected dream. Being on the way from Japan to San Francisco, these small and poor ladies maybe had nothing except their fiancé's picture that cultivating their great hopes for a new living period. Their dream of a new life clearly called America as the slogan "Come, Japanese!" Unfortunately, the reality was not the same as the prospected images they created by themselves. One of the ladies while hearing somebody, who totally did not like the gentleman within pictures, called her name from the port, she turned her face and cried. "I want to go home", said the lady. On the other hand, the remaining just lowered their heads and walked down the gangplank. They would say to themselves: "This is America" and "There is no need to worry". They were truly wrong! This is only the beginning of their failed dreams.

They did not meet their handsome-captured marriage objects. On the contrary, the men were awaiting them bearing no resemblance to the young faces in photographs. Hence, eager brides felt a "roughly, recklessly" impression. They were fully cheated by photographs, letters or matchmakers. There was nothing as ideal as they hoped and their wishes nearly ended at the first night when they came to the promised land. "That night our new husbands took us quickly" (Chapter 2: First Night). Julie Otsuka used 51 times of "took us" in the total 972 words of the second section (not including the chapter title). These characters followed by many adverbs such as quickly, calmly, gently, easily, frenziedly, cautiously, coldly or by some explaining sentences like "as though they had been waiting to take us for a thousand and one years", "even though we knelt down at their feet with our foreheads pressed to the ground and pleaded with them to wait", "with the assistance of the innkeeper and his wife", "while concentrating fiercely on some mysterious spots on the wall that only they could see". After the first nightmare, the "mostly virgins" group when they were on the boat to San Francisco began a new life that they had never imagined before. They would like to escape the rice paddies in Japan, but they were

sent to work in the “hot dusty valleys” (perhaps worse than the place they wanted to leave out) or becoming servants in the “big houses” in the suburbs. It is not all. They were caught into a troubled situation as Nie Zhenzhao (聂珍钊)⁽¹⁾ called “ethical dilemma” (伦理两难). An ethical dilemma is one of the basic terms of Ethical Literary Criticism (文学伦理学批评) which landed in academia since 2004 by the Chinese fame scholar Nie Zhenzhao. According to the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC), an ethical dilemma is an inextricable, insolvable or insoluble condition or situation which impacts people’s ethical choices (伦理选择). In the case of Japanese picture brides, their first ethical choice⁽²⁾ is that leaving motherland to America and the motive power hastened them is a new horizon in America. As newcomers in an unfamiliar land, they had to make lots of choices, or ethical choices, to be in being. The question is how they make choices because there are so many difficulties around them. This kind of plight is an ethical dilemma for these Japanese ladies and the cultural distinction is one of the most severe matters.

They realized that differences were not only from their native husbands but also from the culture. There was a big gap between the Japanese group and the whites. They had to face racism because of settling in the local community. “We settled on the edges of their towns when they would let us. And when they would not—*Do not let sundown find you in this county*, their signs sometimes said—we traveled on” or “They did not want us as their neighbors in their valleys. They did not want us as friends.” (Chapter 3: Whites) These signs let them know they were only wanderers in the new land and it would never be their home but their boarded place. Besides, picture brides would be hard to join the society due to the language barrier. They did not speak English and American did not understand their Japanese. Most of them, after 50 years in the United States, only speaking some English words for controlling “American horses” as “Giddyap” (is what you say to make the horse go forward), “Back” (is what you say to make it back up), “Easy” (is what you say to make it slow down) and “Whoa” (is what you say to make it stop). Furthermore, their constitution was not suitable for a new environment, and, as a result, they fell into sicknesses; some of them even died after several days landing on America.

Otsuka writes a sad song with the repeated rhythm of “We gave birth . . .” in chapter three of the novel. The author used 61 times of the language structure that contained many different situations of birth. The picture bride got some babies. They also lost some babies. Some babies also lost their mother. Most of the children had to spend an unhappy life as their parents did. “We laid them down gently, in ditches and furrows and wicker baskets beneath the trees. We left them lying naked, atop blankets, on woven straw mats at the edges of the fields. We placed them in wooden apple boxes and nursed them every time we finished hoeing a row of beans.” (Chapter 5: The Children) The children, later then, mostly enlightened their ancestor’s labour life and, therefore, most of them did not dream to like their mothers or their fathers; they would choose other dreams. One of them wanted to become an artist and live in a garret in Paris, not in America like his parents. One of them wanted to go to a refrigeration school. One of

them wanted to become an engineer to build bridges. One of them wanted to become a piano artist. Some of them wanted to become a state senator, a master seamstress, a teacher, a doctor, even to become a gangster but no one of them wished to become a person like their parents. These dreams, once again, reminded picture brides of their own dreams before moving to the United States. They did not follow the call of hearts but believed in some men who called himself as doctors, lawyers, bankers or any high and prospective affiliations that gave their marriage objects a big dream of brilliant future.

3. Ethical identity, the shadow of war, and the dreams for the next generation

Picture brides seemly did not reach to their hopes, but their children, who were the next generation, would be possible to finish American dreams because they did not need to immigrate and they need not cheat about their identity. In other words, ethical identities of the next Japanese-American generation were changed and the transformation gave them a new chance to implement their first generation's American dream. As same as the ethical dilemma, the ethical identity (伦理身份) is one of the central theories of ELC. Under the opinions of Nie and ELC, the existence of human beings is closely related to ethical relationship, and humankind has their own ethical identity. In the other word, as the human existence, people can not exist without ethical identity. In addition, ethical identities affect everyone's ethical choices; otherwise, the latter will change the ethical nature of the former. Nie claims that: "In literary criticism, Ethical Literary Criticism focuses on the analysis of characters' ethical identity. In the process of reading literary works, we will find that most of the appearance of ethical problems arises from ethical identity. In many literary texts, ethical complex, ethical knot, ethical taboo and so on are associated with the ethical identity." [7, p. 21] Due to changes in the ethical identity of the next generation in the immigrated Japanese community, young people can make so-called American dream come true, but it clearly is not their predecessor's dream but their own dream. It is a pity that both of them ought to let dreams behind due to the war. There were some traitors among the community. Because of war, they had to leave their fields, shops, restaurants, houses, etc., which meant that they were forced to say goodbye to their dreams while their life was being better than before. They left out the town when it was the middle of harvest time. They did hardly see the profits of that last crop. Somebody got their farms easily. It was a bitter fruit for their incessant endeavours.

There is a real event related to the Japanese community at that time: "Executive Order 9066, issued in February 1942, with the heading 'Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry,' was posted on telephone poles on the West Coast, especially in California, where most of the Japanese immigrants and their children lived. Beginning later that spring, they were

rounded up and sent by train to armed internment camps in the interior.” [3] Julie Otsuka does not mention about the order in her book but puts a black shadow of punishment over the Japanese community. Why did the immigrant have to be punished? Because they were potentially spies or causes pertaining to “national security”? It is worth noting that these reasons were not clear and no one knew exactly what happened to the Japanese. The American did not know anything about their Asian neighbours. Everything gradually sank into oblivion and picture brides’ destiny fell into obscurity. They were forced to close their dream under the shadow of war. The appearance of war put them into an ethical dilemma again, this time the trouble comes from their ethical identities. Because they are yellows; they are not American, and they are seen as enemies of the American army in the current war. Ironically, the immigrated Japanese have no land to put their feet, after a long time travelling to America, they are not indigene and the original citizenship is also far away from them now. Hence, the “enemy” concept does not conform to their ethical identity. No matter what they had tried, these pitiful people have conscripted to the tragedy of identity. By a historical view, Julie Otsuka manifests the reality of Japanese immigrants in one of the black periods of American history which Laura Reynolds Adler claimed as “an ugly chapter of American history.”

But if the novel begins like many an immigrant story—upon arrival in an America unlike the America promised—it concludes like no other. In the penultimate chapter, the picture brides and their families are forced to leave their homes, since Japanese and Japanese-Americans, many of them American citizens, were considered potential traitors and arrested and/or sent to camps or detention centers in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. The final chapter is narrated by the townspeople left behind following the internment. It’s an eerie, haunting reminder of an ugly chapter of American history. [1]

War, in the case of the whites in *The Buddha in the Attic*, helped someone to take profits from properties that the Japanese community left. “It was an economic boon for the white farmers who got to take over the highly productive farmland that had been cultivated by the Japanese.” [2] This is an obvious example of ugly history as the reviewer mentioned above.

It should be noted that due to the Japanese men who were prohibited by California’s 1907 anti-miscegenation law from marrying white women, there was “an estimated 10,000 picture brides landing in the United States between 1907 and 1920 when the Japanese government ended the practice.” [3] Japanese brides did not come to America alone, they went together as a big community. Julie Otsuka does not select a single character but a general one. “There would be no main character. I would tell the story from the point of view of a group of young picture

brides who sail together from Japan to America," explained the author. [2] She really creates hundreds of voices that "rise up into one collective cry of sorrow, loneliness, and confusion." [5] This collective group gave a clear response to anyone who thinks that it is easy to gain the American dream or to be harmonious with a new culture.

A group of Japanese ladies played as a chorus, over pages of the novel, there were seemingly not any dialogues or it deeply sunk into the monologue of "We". Non-dialogue characters reminded us to think about Japanese brides' tragedy: They quietly lived and sat down under their disappointment; they had no right to enjoy a new life in a new country although they wished to do it. It is the empty dialogue. It is the no-response conversation. "Dreams of the promised land of "bride exports" was not far for them. They gradually understood the reality that they would be never harmonious into the culture where they immigrated." [4] They nearly gave up everything that belonged to them before landing to America: homeland, identity, life, soul, tradition, religion, and belief. The title of the novel, for an example, does not mean that this is a religious book; by contrast, details of Buddhist tradition do not appear much. Despite its poor religious nature, the title of *The Buddha in the Attic* shows some impressive and profound meanings of cultural conflict between East-West. A harsh life forced the exiled women to forget their culture: "And so we folded up our kimonos and put them away in our trunks and did not take them out again for years." (Chapter 3: Whites) They also left far from their own religions and customs and they even let their heart go to the cold world: "We forgot about Buddha. We forgot about God. We developed a coldness inside us that still has not thawed. *I fear my soul has died.*" (Chapter 3: Whites)

James Truslow Adams⁽³⁾, who was a freelance writer, popularized the term "American Dream" in his 1931 book *Epic of America*: "But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement [· · ·] and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position · · ·"[8] For an American, this dream is an ideal one which covers their material and mental life. Meanwhile, the mail-order brides' dream looks like a fast way for them to leave far away from rice paddies in local places. They would like to change their poor situations and low positions. They made a marriage choice and they realized very soon that "we would never have come to America to do the work that no self-respecting American would do." (Chapter 3: Whites)

Actually, the picture brides' life would be better and richer, but, pitifully, it was not the ending for them. Finally, they disappeared from the community and no one knew about their exact future place. One of the most important reasons is that they were not "recognised by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." As men-

tioned above, they were hard to adapt to a new culture and they were only wanderers in a boarded country.

4. Parents' protection: conclusion

Otsuka began the last chapter by sentence: "The Japanese have disappeared from our town". (Chapter 8: A Disappearance) No whites saw their neighbours or knew about their destiny. They only made some guess and that is all. The Japanese escaped from the town and their stories gradually disappeared off people's mind. Julie Otsuka and maybe many Japanese American citizens seemingly forget their ancestor's story because they do not want to recall by themselves. As same as her first book, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, the novel of picture brides is a way of trying to explore her mother and figure out what happened to her. Otsuka inspired from her own mother with many historical plots to build up the story. When she was ten, her mother was interned along with her brother and mother. Her mother's father was arrested on the day after Pearl Harbor, but Otsuka's mother talked little about what really happened to her when her daughter was growing up. The Asian descent novelist explained this action by: "As a parent, maybe my mother just wanted to protect her children from that knowledge, and let us grow up knowing that America was a very safe place." [1] For a mother, her action might be an appreciable conduct or the correct ethical choice; whereas, for the truth, it is not fair. Many Japanese mothers were tricked by their picture husbands in the past and then they hid their own stories from the children because of protecting their beloved ones. Fortunately, Julie Otsuka has not ignored the history and tried to discover the Japanese picture brides' tragedy. A reason of the tragedy, from the point of view of ELC, is their own ethical identity. Moreover, on the way to search for the American dream, these Japanese picture brides were falling into the situation of ethical dilemma that made them even more tragic. In fact, Otsuka shows a vivid life of a big group of Japanese women. Their failed American dream is an unforgettable memory for themselves, for their community, and for everyone who needs the truth of history.

It can be said that the voice of Japanese mail-order brides is very emotional because they are victims of their dream, cultural barrier, and history. Meganne Fabrega states that: "Otsuka masterfully creates a chorus of unforgettable voices that echo throughout the chambers of this slim but commanding novel, speaking of a time that no American should ever forget". [5] The mail-order brides' destiny is a good lesson for everyone who wants to change their lives in a different culture where they have to face many harsh conditions. Nowadays, there is still a common trend in some parts of the world like Vietnam, where some ladies accept to marry a foreign man (mostly American, Korean, or Taiwanese) to hope a new brighter life. Who dares to declare clearly that they successfully landed in a promised world? Therefore, Julie Otsuka's story is not a private story but a general message for all who would like to risk their destiny abroad. It is also a medi-

ation for oneself and others, which is the way to see history, particularly its darkness and the ghost of war. “*The Buddha in the Attic* is an understated masterpiece about our treatment of the ‘other,’ the distillation of a national tragedy that unfolds with great emotional power.” [2] The Japanese ladies’ sad song has been sung outside their fatherland and spread a tragic rhythm over the worldwide reader.

Notes

⁽¹⁾ Nie Zhenzhao (1952–) is one of the most famous scholars of contemporary China. Nie has become a foreign member of the Academia Europaea recently. In 2004, he published a paper named “Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective” in volume 5 of the Chinese-based magazine, *Foreign Literature Study*, and established a new literary method, which called “Ethical Literary Criticism”, in the academia. As a result, Nie Zhenzhao is regarded as the father of the approach.

⁽²⁾ Ethical choice is one of the most vital theories of Ethical Literary Criticism which relates to two parts of one Chinese term “伦理选择”. Nie’s “selection” word (“选择” in Chinese) has two ways to translate into English: “selection” and “choice”. There is only one phonetic for “选择” ([xuǎn zé]) in Chinese, but it contains two meanings, which described ELC’s ideas about mankind’s ethical selection (the entire process) and ethical choice (the specific actions inside a person). As an individual of the human existence, every person experiences ethical choices at any time, which helps them to finish their ethical selection and become an ethicality creature.

⁽³⁾ James Truslow Adams (1878–1949) was an American writer and historian. He gained the Pulitzer Prize for the first volume of the trilogy on the history of New England (1921–26). His *Epic of America* (1931) was an international bestseller. In this book, Adams introduced the term “American Dream”.

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