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Racial Subalternity of the Issei in Select Japanese North American Fiction

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Abstract

After Imperial Japan attacked the Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, the resultant internment of Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians, as per former US President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066¹ and former Canadian Prime Minister King's cabinet-approved Order-in-Council P.C. 1486² respectively, can be seen as the culmination of racial discrimination and prejudice in North America against Japanese North Americans. The war hysteria aggravated the negative sentiments and prompted the respective governments to translate long held racial bias into harsh wartime measures (Robinson n.p.). This paper examines two literary works based on the internment to understand the dynamics of racial domination and subordination in this context. It aims at analyzing the Issei, in particular, and the community, in general, as the racial subalterns in the social hierarchy during the internment. The texts selected for analysis are Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, first published in 1981, and Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine* (2002). The cultural values inherent to the upbringing of the Issei make it possible for them to sustain through the prevalent status quo. The Issei held on to their core Japanese values and cultural codes such as restraint, family obligations, reticence or protective silence, conflict-avoidance, endurance and resignation even during a

catastrophic disruption like the internment. The restrained response of the Issei and their withdrawal into protective silence make them racial subalterns of the society depicted in the respective texts.

Keywords: Racial Subaltern, Internment, Japanese North Americans, Issei, Second World War.

Introduction

The foreword of *Selected Subaltern Studies* (1988) edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highlights that the term “subaltern” has political as well as intellectual connotations. The opposite of it are the groups in power which are called “the dominant” or “the elite” or “the hegemonic class”. The term “subaltern” was coined by Antonio Gramsci who perceived history as a socio-cultural interplay between the hegemonic class and the subaltern, in his words, the emergent class which refers to the mass of people kept under control by repressive and/or ideological apparatuses (vi). Subaltern studies deals with the roles “agency, subject positions and hegemony... [play in] the ontological resistance of all varieties of historical determinism, techno-economic or cultural” (Chaturvedi xiii).

Gyanendra Pandey, in his essay “The Subaltern as Subaltern Citizen” published in 2006, extends the understanding of the term ‘subaltern’ based on two parameters. The term ‘subaltern’ for decades, has been used with reference to the peasants and the working class, inhabiting colonial and postcolonial spaces, in areas such as subaltern studies and deconstructive historiography (Landry and MacLean n.p.). Pandey underscores that subaltern is a relative position based on “dominance and subordination ...produced... and altered historically” (4738). He also argues that difference and subalternity are intertwined as “it is in the attribution of difference that the logic of dominance and subordination has always found expression” (4740). Racial difference is at the root cause of the prejudice and discrimination the Japanese immigrants to North America and their descendants faced during the Second World War. This paper aims at examining the Issei³, that is, the first generation of Japanese immigrants to the continent of North America in select Japanese North American texts as the racial subalterns in the social hierarchy during the period of internment that followed the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941. The texts selected for analysis are Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, first published in 1981, and Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor was Divine* (2002).

Issei and their Immigration to North America

The Issei immigrated to the U.S. “between 1890 to 1915, before the immigration Act of 1924 that banned any further immigration” (Houston and Houston xv). Fugita and Fernandez note that the American Issei initially took up labour intensive jobs and gradually moved on to entrepreneurial undertakings after overcoming legal hurdles such as the Alien Land Law which did not allow Japanese immigrants, who could not be naturalised citizens and thus termed “aliens”, to own land (8, 17-18). Issei men and their Nisei children had wider generation gap as the Issei men used to be ten to fifteen years older than their wives. Language became a barrier to the Issei as they primarily relied on Japanese as a language of communication. This had personal and social repercussions for them.

After Imperial Japan attacked the Pearl Harbour on 7 December, 1941, the internment of Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians, as per former US President Franklin Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066, signed on 19

February 1942, and former Canadian Prime Minister King's cabinet-approved Order-in-Council P.C. 1486, passed on 24 February 1942, respectively, can be seen as the culmination of racial discrimination and prejudice in North America against Japanese North Americans. In addition to that, there was war hysteria that aggravated the negative sentiments and prompted the respective governments to translate long held racial bias⁴ into harsh wartime measures (Robinson n.p.). Such wartime measures signified the institutionalization of discrimination and prejudice on racial grounds. Thus, in this analysis, the Japanese North Americans are seen as racial subalterns during the years of internment.

Around 110,000 to 120,000 individuals of Japanese ancestry were living on the Pacific coast of the U.S. before the internment. Almost two-thirds of them were Nisei, the second generation. In spite of being American citizens, they were incarcerated into interior camps (Fugita and Fernandez 3; Uchida vii). The summary of *Personal justice denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* highlights the fate of the Issei during internment "The same prohibition applied to the generation of Japanese immigrants who, pursuant to federal law and despite long residence in the United States, were not permitted to become American citizens... American citizens and their alien parents were removed by the Army" (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians 2).

In Canada, the first Issei arrived in British Columbia in 1877. By 1914, around 10,000 Japanese, primarily men, were living in Canada (Archived History Beginning). The first wave of immigration continued till 1928. Unlike in the U.S., "about 3,650 Japanese were nationalized in Canada before 1923, after which Canadian nationality was very difficult for them to obtain. By 1941, the Issei had spent an average of 30 years working in Canada" primarily in areas such as agriculture and fishing (The Issei). Over 20,000 to 22,000 Japanese Canadians were interned during the Second World War (Sunahara, Japanese Canadians; Robinson; Canada's Japanese Community). Sixty five percent of them were born in Canada (Robinson n.p.). Having looked at the immigration of the Issei to North America, it would be useful to understand how they become racial subalterns given the national policies, the legislative measures and discrimination on economic as well as socio-cultural grounds due to their race.

Issei as Racial Subaltern

In the introduction to *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (2000) Vinayak Chaturvedi remarks that "the emergence of identity politics and multi-culturalism" made Subaltern Studies a significant critical field in late 1980s in the U.S. (xii). This was a subsequent development after the Civil Rights, Feminist and African American movements of the 1960s and 1970s which brought to the foreground "the inclusion of African Americans, Latino/a Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and American women in the culture of critical discourse...[and] focused principally on the exclusions, silences, and blindnesses of male WASP cultural homogeneity" (West 260). Around this time, Subaltern Studies moved to investigate culture as an entity with the help of "textual and discourse analysis, and away from the economic base as the central zone of power and contestation" (Chaturvedi xii).

A poignant rhetorical question raised in Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) "And that super-European monstrosity, North America? Chatter, chatter: liberty, equality, fraternity,

love, honor, patriotism, and what have you. All this did not prevent us from making anti-racial speeches” (26) is a powerful statement against the racist mindset prevalent in the Western world. Though the preface introduces Fanon’s grave and fierce deliberations about the colonizers and the natives in the French colony of Algeria, this statement about racial discrimination, prejudice and the white hypocrisy is quite relevant to the racially subaltern community of Issei. Throughout the course of history of Japanese in North America we see racial difference to have played a crucial role in the discriminatory legislations passed by the U.S. and Canada, and within the popular perceptions, dominated by fear and anxiety, about the Japanese community.

Ann Gomer Sunahara’s *The Politics of Racism : The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War* (2000) and Gary Okihira’s *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (2001) provide a comprehensive historical overview of the legislative measures enacted by Canada and the U.S. particularly targeting the Japanese immigrants and their descendants in North America. They also shed light on the struggles faced by the community on the socio-cultural and economic fronts as a result of the racist policies of the nations. Sunahara notes that in November 1941, ninety percent of the total population of Japanese in Canada (23,450 at that time) was concentrated in British Columbia. Sunahara points out how Thomas Shoyama, editor of the English edition of the *New Canadian*, a Nisei newspaper emphasized on the election campaigns of politicians of British Columbia that “appealed to the fear of economic competition, fear of social disruption and intermarriage, and fear for personal and national security” (The Politics of Racism 5-7). This essentially indicates how the mutual insecurities of the public and the politicians influenced each other to shape an Anti-Japanese rhetoric.

On the economic front, racist targeting of the Japanese Canadians occurred on two levels. They were considered inferior on racial grounds and hence not eligible for equal pay. However, they were accused of undermining the white interests by working for lower wages. At the same time, they were condemned for superior productivity and longer working hours. Their dedication was seen as a part of larger economic conspiracy. The discrimination on the economic front was supported by socio-cultural claims such as people of Japanese origins are ethnically and genetically incompatible with the Canadian society as they were incapable of assimilation. The social, religious, economic and educational institutions of the Japanese were regarded as evidences of unassimilability (Sunahara, The Politics of Racism 7). Fugita and Fernandez observe that Japanese Americans, like their Canadian counterparts, were restricted to being wage labourers in industries and farms as well as to small restaurants, hotels and stores in the cities. They “were forced into these small business niches because of the discrimination they faced in other occupational areas”. Communal solidarity became crucial for economic survival (9).

Through their rhetoric, the British Columbian racists constructed an image of Japanese Canadians as spies of Imperial Japan. The fact that Nisei had dual citizenship of Japan and Canada, the tendency of Issei to send their children to Japan for a part of their education and also the use of Japanese government educational material in educational institutions of the community were cited as proofs of their claims. More than half of the Japanese Canadians of British Columbia resided in cities, whereas the others were scattered throughout the Fraser Valley and pursued farming, fishing, lumbering and mining. This was perceived by the racists as a strategic edge for the Japanese

in destroying state machinery and military assets in the face of war. For Japanese Canadians it was a vicious cycle given that the economic institutions and opportunities available to the white people were largely closed to them, for instance, extremely limited fishing licences and memberships to trade unions. With such a scenario, the members of the community had to rely on community institutions to earn their livelihood, moreover, in order to be a part of the community, the knowledge of Japanese and attending Japanese schools were essential. Canadian Japanese Association, primarily a conservative Issei organization, and Japanese Canadian Citizens' League, the most active of the many Nisei organisations, were among the notable community institutions. However, "ideological, cultural and generational divisions" rendered the community leaderless during the impending crisis of internment (Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism* 8-10).

The Gentlemen's Agreement limited immigration of Japanese to 400 per year and an eventual revision in 1928 brought the limit down to 150 per year. Canada excluded Nisei from drafting them into military during the Second World War effective from 1939 in fear of their claims to voting rights in the future. Asians were denied voting rights as per a provincial law of 1902. From March 1941 it was mandatory for every Japanese Canadian to register with the government. The efforts of officials, who supported the cause of Japanese Canadians, such as Dr. Hugh L. Keenleyside of the Department of External Affairs, Asst. Comnr. Frederick John Mead in the RCMP, Major General H.G.D. Crerar, Maj. Gen. Ken Stuart and Lieutenant General Maurice A. Pope in the military proved to be in vain given the prevalent political climate.

In January 1943, the Government enabled the Custodian of Enemy Property to sell the properties of Japanese Canadians. This was justified as a measure to finance the internment, in fact it was primarily to permanently discourage the Japanese Canadians from returning to the West Coast. In August 1945, around 4,000 people of Japanese origin were deported to Japan for refusing to move to the eastern part of the country after internment (Sunahara, *Japanese Canadians*). Like their Canadian counterparts, in the U.S., Okihiro notes around half of the Japanese American population lived in concentrated settlements. "Their race, Old World culture, economic competition, segregated communities, and uncertain allegiance to the United States" (104) had generated fear and anxiety among the whites.

A historical overview brings to fore the fact that Anti-Japanese sentiments had started taking roots in 1906 itself with San Francisco ordering the segregation of Asian students, followed by the Alien Land Law passed in 1913 which did not allow Issei to own land. The Western states dictated national policy which culminated into the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907 and Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924. A scenario similar to Canadian British Columbia emerged in the American region of San Francisco where political interest groups such as Oriental Exclusion League in 1908 which was succeeded by The California Joint Immigration Committee in 1924 used the economic insecurities of white labourers and landowners to advocate removal of Japanese from the West Coast (Okihiro 104-105).

With the beginning of the Second World War, organizations such as the Western Growers Protective Association and the American Legion and Native Sons of the Golden West along with labor unions fuelled the Anti-

Japanese sentiments through mass media particularly the print media. Congressman Leland Ford of Los Angeles emphasized on the presence of Japanese Americans along the coast as a security threat to California. Though opinions of others such as Congressman John Costello of Los Angeles and some officials from the Justice Department and the Army were about the aforesaid issue, the Executive Order 9066 signed by President Franklin Roosevelt, which provided for the internment of the Japanese American community, proved to be the final nail in the coffin. It imposed criminal penalties for opposing the order, and the Supreme Court, in test cases brought up by Japanese Americans, affirmed that the evacuation was constitutional. . . . some military officers, including [Lieutenant General John] DeWitt, shared the public's racist attitude toward the Japanese. The Justice Department's abdication of responsibility to the War Department allowed the Army's plan to go forward (Okhiro 106-108). After taking an overview of various political policies, economic insecurities and socio-cultural perceptions that have contributed to racial discrimination against the Issei in the U.S. and Canada, the next sections would locate the impact of such discrimination on the community as expressed through the select works of fiction.

Issei in Kogawa's *Obasan*

Among the Issei victims of internment were Grandma and Grandpa Nakane, the Issei grandparents of the protagonist Naomi Nakane in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*. They were residents of New Westminister. While they were on their annual visit to Saltspring Island, where they had a shop before, in spite of not being residents of the place, they were sent to Sick Bay. Naomi notes Sick Bay, particularly, the Pool was

a prison at the exhibition grounds called Hastings Park in Vancouver. Men, women and children outside Vancouver, from the "protected area" – a hundred mile strip along the coast – were herded into the grounds and kept there like animals until they were shipped off to roadwork camps and concentration camps to the interior of the province. (Kogawa 93)

Grandpa Nakane arrived in Canada in 1893, wearing a "Western suit. . . and platformed geta on his feet. When he left his familiar island, he became a stranger, sailing toward an island of strangers" (21). As a skilled boat builder he established a shop on Saltspring Island. Grandpa Nakane brought his cousin's widowed wife and her son, Isamu, and married her. Isamu, thus, became older half-brother of Naomi's father, Mark Nakane (refer fig.1. and fig. 2.).

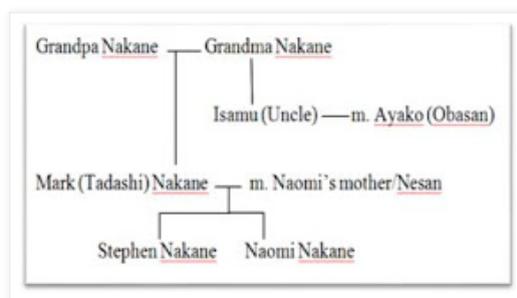


Fig.1. Genealogy of Nakane family

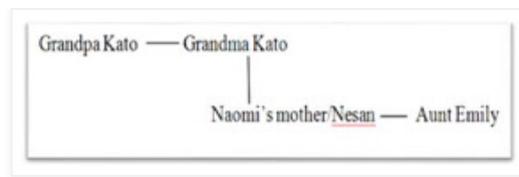


Fig.2. Genealogy of Kato family

Technically, Isamu was an Issei as he was born in Japan in 1889. Isamu's wife Ayako or Obasan was also an Issei who came to Canada and worked as a music teacher. She became a good friend of Grandma Nakane who was "an accomplished koto player and singer" (22) and eventually was married to Isamu.

Emily Kato, Naomi's maternal aunt and a Nisei activist, while trying to find a way out with Mark Nakane, her brother-in-law, in the face of such grave violation of fundamental rights by the government, insists on registering their protest by meeting the officials of Security Commission⁵ responsible for such ruthless measures. She plans to explain them the fact that the Nakanes are not the residents of Saltspring Island. They should not be imprisoned in Sick Bay as other elderly inhabitants of Vancouver and New Westminster have not been interned. Aunt Emily has a better idea of the conditions in the camps as her close friends Fumi and Eiko are present there. Aunt Emily has not lost faith in the democratic machinery of the country and hopes that producing facts before the officials would make them rethink their policies. However, Mark is skeptical when he points out that the officials may not be keen in listening to their story in the face of impending war and national crisis.

Naomi, a Sansei, can comprehend the plight of the Issei during the war "Too old"...I can imagine that my grandmother said much the same thing those dark days in 1942, as she rocked in her stall at the Vancouver Hastings Park prison⁶. Grandma Nakane, Uncle's mother, was too old then to understand political expediency, race riots, the yellow peril" (20).

Internment and Protective Silence of the Issei in *Obasan*

In Kogawa's *Obasan*, at various points in the narrative, Naomi recollects the male family members and acquaintances being interned. She has heard fleeting references to the same from Ayako and Emily. While taking a look at a photograph of Isamu and Mark standing in front of a boat designed by the latter, Naomi notes "Uncle [Isamu] too was taken away... He had no provisions, nor did he have any idea where the gunboats were herding and the other Japanese fishermen in the impounding fishing fleet" (26).

Naomi is quick to highlight that the adults were resolved not to reveal details of the terrible period of internment to the next generation. In Naomi's case the occasional discussions were limited to her parents, Emily, Isamu and Ayako. For the Sansei like her, the memories of internment are "drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence. Everywhere I could hear the adults whispering "Kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children... Calmness was maintained" (26).

A major instance of protective silence seen in Kogawa's *Obasan* is the secrecy maintained around Naomi's mother's disappearance. It is only when Nakayama Sensei, a local minister, reads from the letter exchanged by the

Katos, Naomi's maternal grandparents, that the protective silence maintained for the sake of the children is breached. According to Nakayama-sensei the letters express the deep emotions of "in the time of war – your mother. Your grandmother. That there is suffering and their deep love" (279). Grandma Kato and Naomi's mother who had gone to visit the former's ailing mother in Tokyo were stuck in Japan with the start of the Second World War. When both of them had gone to Nagasaki to help Grandma's niece Setsuko with the birth of her second child, they learn that Grandma's sister, her husband and their mother had died in bombings. Grandma Kato, mother and Chieko, the second child of Setsuko survive the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. However, they are in miserable condition and have witnessed the horrifying suffering and death of other members of the family and their acquaintances. In 1949, Chieko was suffering from leukemia. After learning about the horrifying suffering her mother endured, Naomi observes "The letters take months to reach Grandfather. They take years to reach me. Grandfather gives the letters to Aunt Emily. Aunt Emily sends letters to the Government. The Government makes paper airplanes out of our lives and flies us out of the windows" (291). The letters of the Katos function both as instruments of concealing vital information from the Sansei, employed primarily by the Issei and Nisei to spare the next generation from the tremendous pain that would accompany the revelation of the truth, as much as silent documents of personal history.

One must also note that the Japanese Canadians become racial subalterns in *Obasan* not only because of the all pervasive silence they maintain about their suffering, but also as the appeals and petitions sent to the government officials by Nisei activists such as Aunt Emily with reference to confiscation of property and businesses as well as internment and separation of families in the name of national security fall on deaf ears (44-45). Naomi and her elder brother Stephen, the Sansei, also become victims of the ugly undercurrents of racial subalternity while attending school in Bayfarm internment camp in Slocan. Verbal and physical abuse are the means of establishing and maintaining the racial status quo among kids. The older Japanese Canadian kids use violence against humans as well as animals to vent out their rage in the face of humiliation. Stephen faces violence in school. His glasses and violin are broken.

Print media and consumer products also contribute to the indoctrination of children and serve as instruments of racial discrimination and systematic marginalization of the Japanese Canadians in popular culture. Stephen is given "the Yellow Peril War game" made in Canada where there are "weak, small yellow pawns". Naomi comes across a character called Chicken Little in *Little Tales for Little Folks*. As a child, she associates this with the yellow chicken killed by the white hen in their backyard. Naomi is disturbed and does not want to be discriminated along racial lines. Her deep-seated fear and insecurity due to prejudice is summarized in "Yellow is to be chicken. I am not yellow" (181). Percy Bower a boy in Stephen's school calls him "gimpy Jap" and challenges him to fight with his group. Naomi witnesses the brutal killing of a chicken by Sho, a Japanese seventh grader and Danny, Stephen's classmate. A white girl blames Naomi for keeping her helpless kitten in the skating rink. The images of the helpless animals are symbols of the helplessness of the Sansei kids during internment and as victims of racial discrimination. Peers tell Stephen and Naomi that they would be sent away as they are "Japs". When the children question their father about

their identity he asserts that they are Canadians. The profound conflict in Naomi's mind is expressed when she says "It is a riddle, Stephen tells me. We are both the enemy and not the enemy" (84). The wartime measures prosecuted the Japanese Canadians for their Japanese ethnic roots in times of war hysteria and refused to acknowledge the fact that a majority of those interned were Canadian citizens like Naomi and Stephen. Their race was wielded as a weapon against the Japanese Canadians, in this case, and Japanese North Americans. In general, in the face of war, expulsion and internment. Race became a determining factor in the institutionalized subordination of the Japanese Canadians during the said period. As Sunahara notes in *The Politics of Racism*:

With the announcement of a total uprooting, citizenship became irrelevant. Whether Issei or Nisei, Japanese alien or Canadian citizen, everyone had become an enemy alien.... In addition, all Japanese Canadians, unlike the German and Italian aliens, were required to observe a dusk-to-dawn curfew and to abandon their homes, farms and businesses for an unknown destination.(46)

Japanese Values of the Issei and their Silence

After having examined the socio-historical context of the select texts to understand the wartime measures that were a culmination of racial prejudice and discrimination along with war hysteria, while perceiving Japanese North Americans as racial subalterns during their internment, it is necessary to comprehend the cultural values that made a subordinate position palatable for the time being particularly due the harsh measures. In the literary works that have been analyzed, the Issei emerge as custodians of the Japanese aspects of the community identity. Stephen Fugita and Marilyn Fernandez trace the core values the Issei brought to North America. The Issei were brought up in the Japanese social system that emphasized family as a basic unit of society which was to be the foundation of the powerful nation the leaders set out to build. "Loyalty and filial piety were emphasized to counter "self-conscious individualism"" (Fugita and Fernandez 15). Filial ties were extended to local ties seen in villages, cities and neighbourhoods. In Fukutake's terms cited by Fugita and Fernandez "familistic communitarianism" inculcated on the basis of observing customs, obeying authority and preserving interpersonal harmony was idealized over decisions made by a rational and autonomous self (16).

Majority of the American and Canadian Issei belonged to the farming class that had borne the brunt of the Meiji (1868 – 1912) land tax reforms. They saw temporary immigration as an "opportunity to raise their status in Japan, the so-called sojourner orientation" (Fugita and Fernandez 16). The promise to come home in glory was a crucial driving force for the Issei ("Come Home in Glory"). Issei had Meiji Era aspirations of educational achievements, social mobility and were open to collaborated efforts as a community. Two significant principles dictating the social attitudes of the Issei were *Wa*, which is better translated as "conflict-avoidance", by Miyamoto, Fugita and Kashima, and "*Giri-Ninjō*" that is "obligation and duty" (*giri*) and "responsiveness to the deeper feelings of others" (*ninjō*) (Fugita and Fernandez 17).

The uniquely Japanese social attitudes and responses get reflected in Kogawa's *Obasan*. Kogawa aptly names the novel after Ayako Obasan who herself is an Issei and the literary scene of the novel is dominated by Isseis. The

cultural foundations of Issei of prioritizing norms and preferences of the family and community over individual will and choices, whether in moments of glory or crisis, -a tendency of avoiding conflict; fulfilling duties and giving importance to emotions and responses of others, resulted in preservation and inculcation of attitudes seen in the text. These values proved to be useful particularly in shaping the general response to internment and coping mechanisms that were employed thereafter.

Sunahara quotes from the personal interview of Katsuko Hideka Halfhide, housing coordinator at Kaslo internment camp in British Columbia, conducted by her while writing *Politics of Racism*:

One of the reasons the Japanese people were able to adapt... was that they always had this tradition of working in groups...This was the whole background they could draw from: a great stability and a great sense of social values.... underlying it all was the old tradition [of working together, *tonarigumi*]... (81)

The Japanese core values and cultural codes such as *enryo* (reserve or restraint), *gamen* (patience and perseverance) and *shikataga-nai* (resignation) enabled the Issei and the Nisei to endure internment. (Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism* 149). Naomi's mother in spite of being a Nisei has been constructed as an epitome of *enryo*, *gamen* and *giri-ninjō*, perhaps to indicate the great cultural influence the Issei parents had on their Nisei children, particularly the elder ones, given the first-borns have special significance in Japanese culture. *Giri-ninjō*, that is, prioritizing filial obligations is seen when she accompanies her mother Mrs. Kato while visiting her ailing grandmother in Tokyo even during the war. They further go to Nagasaki to look after Setsuko who is about to give birth to her second child. *Enryo* and *gamen*, that is, restraint and endurance are an integral part of her nature given that she does not abandon Chieko, Setsuko's daughter and a leukemia patient after the bombing of Nagasaki and insists on returning to Canada only if she can bring Chieko with her. Naomi's mother had an option of returning to Canada after war being a Canadian citizen.

Naomi is able to transcend her personal grief due to separation from her mother at a tender age and comprehend the significance of fulfillment of family obligations, restraint and endurance in life of her mother, in circumstances of terrible suffering, deaths and absences (Kogawa 294), perhaps because her upbringing and cultural milieu dictated her mother's priorities, only after the elderly in her family break the culture of silence and reveal the truths that they had concealed from her. It is towards the end of the novel that Naomi is able to piece together the scattered clues to cultural codes of her mother, which she inherited from the Issei, such as the composed response of her mother instead of a bitter scolding during the chicken incident in her childhood (71) and an advice by Obasan during Grandma Nakane's funeral of not being *Wagamama*, that is, selfish and inconsiderate by not honouring the wishes of others (151) and understand that she was expected to consider her personal attachment to her mother and the resultant grief after separating from her as secondary to the significant filial obligations. The sacrifice of personal emotions render Naomi's loved ones with the quality of *yasahi* and *kawaiso*; both values are about being tender and helpful to others in moments of crisis.

Obasan embodies restraint when she joins the elders in maintaining protective silence. Even in a moment of crisis, while Obasan's family is being sent to the internment camp, she is gentle and caring towards Kuniko-san, a

young woman with a premature baby but with no diapers. She also serves Nomura-Obasan, an invalid woman after giving her shelter in their barrack during the internment (62). Naomi's process of realization is completed when she concludes "I had not known that Grief had such gentle eyes – eyes reflecting my uncle's eyes, my mother's eyes – all the familiar lost eyes of Love" (295).

Shikataga-nai, that is, "It cannot be helped" or "I must resign myself to my fate" was an immediate response of the community to the circumstances of internment which were beyond their control (Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism* 79). However, they were persistent and focused on survival in the harsh conditions. Thus, cultural codes inherited from the Issei such as restraint, resilience, endurance, resignation, filial obligations, being sensitive to the needs of others and avoiding conflict contribute to the reticence of Japanese North American community and place them in the subordinate position making them racial subalterns due internment.

Internment and Issei in Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*

Julie Otsuka, a Sansei herself, deals with the dark chapter of Japanese American internment in her novel *When the Emperor was Divine* (2002). Her debut novel "is based on Otsuka's own family history: her grandfather was arrested by the FBI as a suspected spy for Japan the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed, and her mother, uncle and grandmother spent three years in an internment camp in Topaz, Utah" ("About Julie Otsuka"). A salient feature of Otsuka's narrative style is the use of unnamed protagonists and characters. This is done not only to construct representatives of the community in question, but also to create collectivities to foreground the inherent silence of the racial subaltern. Such collectivities are seen in Otsuka's second novel *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011). Not assigning names to her protagonists, is a way of drawing home the point that while constructing a narrative around the racial subaltern, that is the Japanese North Americans, the dominant whites ensured that the subaltern is perceived as a dangerous and perilous collective entity which is resonated in racist and derogatory terms such as "Yellow Peril".

The boy, a Nisei has imbibed the perceptions of the dominant whites. "For it was true, they all looked alike. Black hair. Slanted eyes. High cheekbones. Thick glasses. Thin lips. Bad teeth. Unknowable. Inscrutable... The little yellow man" (Otsuka 49). This description of the Japanese resonates the racial stereotypes prevalent in the society, where individuals were reduced to their common, racial, physical attributes. They were thought of as an enigmatic whole, particularly conveyed through the two adjectives "unknowable" and "inscrutable".

The protagonists of Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine* are the woman, the boy and the girl. The novel begins in the spring of 1942 in Berkeley with passing of the evacuation order for Japanese Americans. Every chapter is a stage in the evacuation process. The chapters "Evacuation order no. 19", "Train" describe the preparation and commute to the internment camp. "When the Emperor was Divine" shows the harsh reality of the internment camp, in this case, Topaz, Utah. "In a Stranger's Backyard" depicts the return of the family from the internment camp and the numerous hurdles, racial prejudice and discrimination they face in order to get reintegrated into the society. The last chapter is titled "Confession" which highlights the preconceptions of the dominant race, the whites, about the subordinate people, the Japanese Americans. There are stringent rules regarding law and order, discipline, language,

food, religion, almost an exercise of erasing the culture of the racial subalterns and training them in the dominant, white, mainstream culture. The rules aimed at taking ultimate control over the community, such that every aspect of their lives could be determined and dictated

The rules about the fence were simple; You could not go over it, you could not go under it, you could not go around it, you could not go through it. There were rules about language, too: *Here we say...Safety Council not Internal Police; Residents, not evacuees*" (61).

Certain instructions are italicized not only to add emphasis but to expose the power dynamics that allow gross violations of rights of the subaltern - their evacuation, internment, unquestionable interference and stronghold on the part of the white majority in the name of war hysteria. The instructions continue "No books in Japanese... No Emperor-worshipping Shintos allowed" (61). Every aspect of the Japanese American life including time and space are regulated and supervised. Derogatory racial terms are used on the street by people and on the boards even by authorities:

There were the rules about time: No Japs out after eight p.m. And space: No Japs allowed to travel more than five miles from their homes. ... the signs that read INSTRUCTIONS TO ALL PERSONS OF JAPANESE ANCESTRY went up all over town. (76)

Destruction of all the objects indicating the Japanese aspects of their identity by the mother shows the deep psychological impact of racial discrimination and war hysteria on the racial subaltern community of Japanese Americans. Being an Issei from Kagoshima⁷, the mother responds with restraint, chooses conflict-avoidance and prioritizes the safety of her family over protesting unjust measures. She chooses to eliminate objects that would identify them as people of Japanese ancestry and would make them vulnerable in the light of harsh, wartime regulations. Her actions are symbolic of being forced to erase their ethnic past, their collective memories as a race, their traditions, which were symbolized by the objects that had been cherished over generations, and annihilating their roots through expulsion and confinement. It was a long-term measure to enable the dominant race to modify them after they return from internment under the pretext of facilitating integration and assimilation:

That evening she had lit a bonfire in the yard and burned all the letters from Kagoshima. She burned the family photographs and the three silk kimonos she had brought over with her nineteen years ago from Japan...She ripped up the flag of the red rising sun. She smashed the tea set and the Imari dishes (75)

Most of the War Relocation Centers⁸ were built in deserts and with similar temporary structures and surrounded by fences. The one at Utah is described in *When the Emperor was Divine*. "It was 1942. Utah. Late summer. A city of tarpaper barracks behind a barbed-wire fence on a dusty alkaline plain high up in the desert" (Otsuka 49).

The War Relocation Authorities were forced to allow recruitment of people from the camps due to labour shortages. Taking up work in the farms during harvest season with the hope of securing freedom for limited period did not resolve the issues for the internees. In fact, they could get a glimpse of the worsening situation outside.

They said they'd been shot at. Spat on. Refused entrance to the local diner. The movie theater. The dry goods store. They said the signs in the windows were the same wherever they went: NO JAPS ALLOWED. Life was

easier, they said, on this side of the fence. (67)

The last line indicates how the racial subalterns come to accept their confinement in the face of the vulnerable position that they occupy in the dynamics.

Rumours of segregation based on gender; sterilization; withdrawal of citizenship, assassination; deportation to Japan; being held hostage for exchange of American prisoners of war and being handed over to Chinese are rampant among the internees in the text. A deep fear and anxiety which were the results of the uncertainty created by the catastrophic mass evacuation are evident in these rumours. The complete authority of the dominant race and the narrative woven to justify the grave injustice as much as to silence the racial subaltern is seen in the following lines “You’ve been brought here for your own protection, they were told. It was all in the interest of national security. It was a matter of military necessity. It was an opportunity for them to prove their loyalty” (70).

On the fifth day after father is arrested by the FBI, the family gets a note from immigration detention center in San Francisco informing them that around eighty three Japanese have already been sent away to camps and he is waiting for his loyalty hearing (90). The loyalty questionnaire was a bureaucratic instrument created by the War Department and the War Relocation Authority in 1943 to apparently test the loyalty of Japanese Americans and to help them form an all-Nisei combat unit. The War Relocation Authority borrowed the questionnaire to begin a probe to test loyalty of adult Issei and Nisei women. Question number 27 and 28 became controversial as they asked the respondents whether they would serve in the army no matter where they were posted and whether they would pledge unconditional allegiance to the U.S. as well as whether they would renounce all affiliations to the Emperor of Japan. The loyalty questionnaire was a result of deep-seated suspicion about the Japanese Americans. Okihiro observes, ...[t]he Pearl Harbor attack revived the stereotype, and public attitudes toward the Japanese crystallized around the familiar themes of treachery and disloyalty, and the Japanese became the objects of white suspicion, anxiety, and anger. The old stereotype fed rumors of espionage and sabotage, and the attack gave substance to the oft repeated fears of the “yellow peril” and the peaceful invasion. The Japanese stereotype circulated in rumor and opinion, in private and public declarations, by unionists and politicians, among farm groups and patriots (112).

The Emperor had an influential, in fact, a sacred position in Japanese society. There was imperial influence on the cultural institutions of the Japanese Americans as well. This influence gets resonated in the title of the novel *When the Emperor was Divine*. The anxiety and insecurity of the wartime authorities got manifested in their insistence on evacuation of the community and holding them behind barbed wires with constant surveillance. Okihiro adds further “race hatred constituted a compelling argument for mass evacuation— to protect them from the threat of riots and acts of violence” (112). Determining loyalty of the internees towards the U.S. took official form through certain special provisions that Fugita and Fernandez point out,

In early 1943, the Army and the WRA attempted to determine the loyalty of individuals in all ten of the camps ... This process was called registration. Ultimately, Tule Lake was chosen to become a segregation center and house the so-called “disloyals” from all of the WRA camps. (56)

In Otsuka's novel, the mother responds positively to swearing allegiance to the U.S. and forswearing loyalty to Imperial Japan. "She'd been in America for almost twenty years now. But she did not want to cause any trouble ... or be labeled disloyal. She did not want to be sent back to Japan... Your father is here. The important thing is that we stay together" (Otsuka 99). As argued earlier, the mother exhibits Issei mindset by prioritizing her family and avoiding conflict even in a critical situation of pledging loyalty.

Otsuka highlights the various impediments faced by the Japanese Americans in the process of reintegration in the society after internment. The house of the family is in a miserable condition. There are evidences of occupation in their absence. However, the neighbour who had been requested to find tenants has not paid a single penny to the family as rent. Some of their possessions are gone. These fictional recreations can be corroborated with actual accounts from the former internees. For instance, Fugita and Fernandez note "Most of the incarcerated who left camp to pick up the threads of their work and family lives faced serious hurdles. For one, the majority had little remaining in the way of economic resources. The period was particularly humiliating for many Issei who had lost all that they had worked for". The pre-war ethnic and socio-economic networks had also been destroyed which in turn reflected in the loss of community ties (107-108).

Otsuka depicts a poignant picture of how the internees were prepared for going back into the society. The officials termed the orientation as "unobtrusive assimilation" (Fugita and Fernandez 108). Embedded in the enlisting of the characteristic italicized instructions are the dictates of the dominant white race to the racial subaltern to adhere to the racial limitations and status quo, "we'd been told, weeks before, in a mess hall lecture" on "...how to behave in the Outside World... *Speak only English. Do not walk down the street in groups of more than three...Do not draw attention to yourselves in any way*" (Otsuka 122). The father, towards the end of the novel, maintains a protective silence characteristic to the Issei as the children note "[h]e never said a word to us about the years he'd been away... never talked about politics, or his arrest... He never mentioned his loyalty hearing before the Alien Enemy Control Unit... We didn't want to know... All we wanted to do, now that we were back in the world, was forget" (133). He suffered from symptoms of anxiety, extreme irritation and suspicion. He serves as the Issei representative of the internees. The last chapter of the novel titled "Confession" depicts the acute guilt and tendency of self-loathing in the male members of the community, who had been arrested and interrogated by the FBI under the pretext of national security. Fugita and Fernandez shed more light on the long lasting consequences of the internment:

When the resettlers left camp for the last time, not only did they face numerous social and economic uncertainties, but psychological ones as well. On the personal and perhaps even subconscious level, some former incarcerated felt either anguish about being powerless to resist the injustice which had been meted out to them or, on the other hand, thought that their own or the ethnic group's inadequacies were somehow responsible for their treatment. (112)

After analyzing Kogawa's *Obasan* and Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*, the Issei, in particular, and the Japanese North Americans, in general, emerge as racially subaltern group during the internment period. Naomi's paternal and maternal grandparents, that is, the Nakanes and the Katos respectively, Uncle Isamu and Ayako

Obasan are the Issei in Kogawa's *Obasan*. The woman/mother and the father are the Issei in Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*. They hold on to their core Japanese values and cultural codes such as restraint, family obligations, reticence or protective silence, conflict-avoidance, endurance and resignation even during a catastrophic disruption like the internment. The restrained response of the Issei and their withdrawal into protective silence make them racial subalterns of the society depicted in the respective texts. These characters pave way to the discussions and the analysis of the role of racial politics, racial discrimination and prejudice during war hysteria and wartime measures that targeted the racial subaltern community of Japanese North Americans in marginalizing and silencing the community during the internment.

End Notes

¹ Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 signed on 19 February 1942

² Minister King's cabinet approved Order-in-Council P.C. 1486 passed on 24 February 1942

³ The term 'Issei' refers to the first generation of Japanese immigrants. 'Nisei' is the second generation and 'Sansei' is the third generation.

⁴ For an overview of various acts passed by American government and Canadian government with an aim of regulating Japanese immigration, possession of assets and citizenship see discussions in the works of Ann Gomer Sunahara (2000); Gary Okihiro (2001); Stephen Fugita and Marilyn Fernandez (2004)

⁵ British Columbia Security Commission was an agency created to supervise the evacuation and internment (Robinson n.p.).

⁶ After the expulsion of Japanese Canadians, they were segregated based on sex and were kept in former women's building and livestock barns at Hastings Park. Those who protested against the segregation were punished. Many men were sent to work in road labour camps. Many opted to work on sugar beet farms outside British Columbia and were exploited in name of apparently guarding their freedom (Robinson n.p.).

⁷ There are autobiographical elements in the novel. 'The woman' was Otsuka's grandmother, 'the boy' was her uncle and 'the girl' was her mother ("About Julie Otsuka").

⁸ See description of Minidoka WRA and The Tule Lake WRA (Fugita and Fernandez 55-56).

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