

## NEGOTIATING BORDERLANDS: REPRESENTING CHILDHOOD IN RECENT ASIAN AMERICAN NOVELS

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Immigrant literature deals with the meeting of two worlds, negotiating issues of beginnings and rebeginnings for its between-world characters. The repetitive use of the figure of the child as a metaphor for experiences such as adaptation, adjustment, and learning within a new environment invites the examination of childhood narratives and the specific advantages they offer for the presentation of these themes. The clash of two worlds as lived by a child, and how the child manages to reconcile them, consciously or not, by finding a place for him or herself in multicultural America is a recurrent theme in the three Asian American novels dealt with in this paper: Gus Lee's *China Boy*, Patti Kim's *A Cab Called Reliable*, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*. Each of these novels presents a protagonist-narrator who must deal with a double experience of loss: a personal one through the death or abandonment by the mother which leads to a separation from the heritage culture. The strategies of survival and adaptation devised by the narrators point to both the child and the immigrant's imperative to begin again, finding a place for themselves in the world they are immersed in, illustrating how the process of growth in a child serves as an analogy for the internal process of immigration and adaptation to the new world. The voice of the child becomes pivotal to two fundamental concerns of the presentation of the Asian American subject: how the self is constituted and how meaning itself is established. The choice of focalizer –the writer's manipulation of point of view– signifies a message in itself. Often the child openly confronts two cultures from a privileged situation: it is the nature of youth to «absorb» what is most suitable for one's circumstances and to reject that which does not suit one's reality. In a sense the child's experience is by nature one which reconciles. Both cultures co-exist on a day to day basis within the child and assimilation of the new culture becomes imperative for survival.

The question of who looks and who sees is crucial to the study of the presentation of childhood in literary texts where the writer is almost always an adult. The interplay of two focal points, that of the experiencing child and that of the observing or reminiscing adult, offers a double vision: the child's experience and the adult narrator's use of that experience. Moreover, as Richard Coe has pointed out, childhood constitutes an alternative dimension, one which cannot be conveyed by the utilitarian logic of the responsible adult; not «accuracy» but «truth» –an inner, symbolic truth –becomes the only acceptable criterion (2). It is, as Stuart Hanabuss observes in «The Child's Eye: A Literary Viewpoint,» a useful device for writers: «It has enabled them to recreate with vivid reality the early experiences of childhood, the enhanced seeing and sensing state which adults are said to relinquish, and also recall past securities and simplicities in a vein of nostalgia and escapism» (103). Nonetheless, in the case of the child narrators being examined here there is no attempt to escape when the adult narrator looks back: the backward glance searches for understanding. The adult narrator often takes advantage of the imagining, the creating, the remembering, the retelling of the «truths» experienced from the child's perspective to focus the experience of personal and communal identity from the very beginning. In the three narratives of childhood considered here, the search for a valid beginning to the telling frequently mirrors the narrators' own search for the stage at which they become the individuals they now feel themselves to be.

It is, to an extent, the attempt to mirror the events and circumstances that have made the characters what they are at the moment of narration that transform the texts into ethnic *Bildungsroman*. The search for an opening, the act of recapturing the first memory, or isolating the moment when the child first becomes aware of its identity, is crucial. The element of interest here is not so much in the child character per se as in a state of awareness, a point of new and conscious beginning, for which childhood is the most obvious analogy. If, as Laurie Ricou asserts, «rebeginnings» insist on being a framework for understanding, it follows that the narrating memory continually analyzes childhood for the defining incident (35-36). The question of the child's adapting to personal and cultural circumstances and the emotional responses these arouse become a major aspect of the employment of this point of view. If the between-world writer's situation is the intense reworking of questions that ultimately refer to issues such as oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, and authenticity, the child's point of view –characterized by naiveté and marked by an awakening to the realities of a complex world –is a fascinating commencement to understanding the process of the creation of the multicultural subject (Davis 16).

The process of the young Asian American subjects' emotional and cultural development may be traced by studying the role that certain institutions play in their lives. The family, in its human and cultural dimension, marks the primary world-view and development of the child narrator. In all three novels, the family is fractured because of the loss of the mother, marking the protagonist's experience and possibilities. The parallel between the loss of the human mother and that of the figurative «motherland» heightens cultural implications as the dramas unfold. Secondly, community-based institutions like public schools, churches, or the Y.M.C.A. become instrumental in filling a void and changing the protagonists' lives,

becoming the gateway to America for the children. These diverse mechanisms play a crucial role in both personal and cultural adjustment to life outside the safe, familiar haven of home when the child is thrust into a very different reality through which personal and cultural adjustment –or the absence of it– are conveyed through the narrative voice of the child. Pain over loss will be followed by decision-making and strategies for survival, making them representative of the Asian American *Bildungsroman*, and paradigms for immigrant narratives in general in their treatment of childhood as metaphor for the immigrant or between-world character's journey. In all three works there is a cultural «before» and «after,» the end of a life and the beginning of a new one.

Each of the novels centers on specific aspects relating to the loss of a mother/land and the manner of adjusting. Gus Lee privileges the role of food in the negotiation of identity because of the emotional impact the culinary dimension of life has on young Kai, the main character. For the boy, his mother and the food she prepares for him are part and parcel of the Chinese world that is their emotional, and therefore «real» home. Despite being born in the United States, Kai literally lives in a parallel world which is Chinese, protected from what is foreign to the Old World way of life. This parallel world is shattered by his mother's death when he is six, leading to the loss of all that represents the culture of the heart. The specificity of this Chinese American text is such that the recounting of the boy's growth and maturity parallels his cultural development: the end of childhood implies the modification of his Chinese identity. Kai's status as a foreign child resembles a stage in development like that of childhood, ensuring that American acceptance is tied to his realization of manhood (So 149).

The identification between food and Kai's mother is emphasized in the first few chapters of the book. She provides the meals and the meaning behind everything: «Eat, my son, eat!» she would encourage, as she «carefully extracted and then placed the valued fish's cheek on my plate. I smiled, for this meant she loved me» (41). Caught eating a peanut one day, Kai remembers being picked up by his mother, whisked to the bathroom and made to throw up while she wailed: «Please, please, Only Son! NO, NO PEANUTS! It weakens your shigong, your vital spirit! Here! Take some Chiing chun bao, the liquids of life! ... I did not wait my entire life to finally have a son, here, in this remote world, to have you die of peanuts!» (21). When she dies, Kai mourns through food: «I ate less, performing an unconscious, immature child's 'ching ming' by offering my food to my lost and missing parent» (52).

The relationship established between food and the child's sense of security occupies a central place in the novel. Kai seeks solace in food in times of deepest confusion or sorrow. The emotional charge he receives keeps him going, be it from the greasy fries in the panhandle restaurant or from the coveted baked dumplings and steamed cakes from Chinatown. When a certain food is imposed by an adult, as often happened with Edna, his white stepmother, it becomes another tool for torture. Meals become «fresh breadsticks, boiled cabbage, flinty lima beans, hardy brussel sprouts, and undercooked hamburger stew» (82). The arrival of a stepmother is a crucial and determining factor in Kai's life: her food implies manipulation and forced change. The child will have to learn to survive alone. But the first Mrs. Ting's presence continues

to be very palpable for the little boy. Though her portrait no longer hangs where it once did, to him it is still there. The bedspread where she once sat is still there for him to rub his hand against, and the smell of burnt toast brings her back immediately. The memory-inducing capacity of Kai's senses is continuously developed by Gus Lee as the boy survives by getting himself «adopted» in the local Y.M.C.A. by its Italian American guardian Tony Barazza. The cafeteria and all its enticing smells and noises fill a void. The Y.M.C.A. will be the training ground for survival skills so necessary at school and in the neighbourhood; it will also introduce him to the wider world of multicultural America. The personal, physical, and cultural growth acquired here will be crucial in his decision to finally stand up to Edna's dictatorship at home.

Patti Kim's novel, *A Cab Called Reliable*, begins with an apparently simple auto-diegetic narrative technique which is enriched by the growth of the focalizer Ahn Joo. The pervasive element in this text is the experience as felt by the child and the re-experience of the memories which return to haunt -the pivotal incident being her mother's abandonment:

I turned onto Burning Rock Court and skipped the rest of the way, keeping an eye on the cracks in the sidewalk. Dandelions grew out of them. I stopped to pick a bunch. Then, from a distance, I heard my little brother crying. I looked up and saw that he was being carried by my mother into a cab. She was wearing her brown and white polka-dotted skirt that clung to her thighs. She took long strides away from our home into the cab and thumped shut the door. Hiding behind a tree, I counted the dandelions in my hand. There were only four. When I heard the approaching car, I looked up to see my mother's stony face behind the half-opened window of a sky-blue cab with 'reliable' written on the door. (3)

The departing mother has left a present –something considered a luxury because Ahn Joo had only seen those little white frosted cakes in shop windows or in storybooks. The scene has been set for the rest of the story; in a note written in Korean the mother instructs the child to eat the cakes slowly and deliciously and wait with patience because she will come back to get her (9). The child attempts to come to terms with the situation but at the same time fears her father's reaction. She hopes to leave for a far better place –perhaps to the place of her childhood in Korea. She idealizes the place of her birth, which remains a vague memory and where her parents were happily married and they all fit in.

The father figure presented in the early pages of the novel is portrayed as Ahn Joo observes him: distant and frightening at times, because of his violent behavior towards her mother. Abuse is something the little girl has lived with since her arrival in America. But the father is all the family she has left. Because of her traditional Korean upbringing she feels he must be kept happy, so his rice must be prepared properly and everything must be in its place when he arrives home each day. At the same time, the mother's abandonment marks a newly-discovered independence for a girl who has been very much controlled. Left alone practically the entire day, there are no culturally set restrictions to her behavior. She can be whatever she wants to be and no parent

figure is there to remind her of what she really is. This abandoned child has no place to go except her own mind, where memories abound and the imagination can be set free.

School and all that an education implies becomes the child's escape. The special relationship established with the enticing world of the written word becomes another refuge. Loneliness and isolation drive her to write letters to her mother which will never arrive at their destination. These serve as an interior monologue of escape for the protagonist focalizer in the manner in which they seek to show how well things are going and why mother should return now that things are so much better. In much the same manner, the prize-winning writing assignment which is an «ode» to her mother becomes another interior monologue for Ahn Joo, as she attempts to reconcile herself with negative memories of her mother. The different approaches used by the young writer protagonist manifest how the child desperately searches for what her father can not give her. Ahn Joo is obsessed with the meaning of «reliable,» that word written on the cab her mother fled in, and continually meditates on its possible implications in her daily life. Words and their possibilities will continue to be an escape, making her an expert liar in order to survive in an adult world that refuses to understand her. She invents versions of her family life and speaks authoritatively on a Korean culture she knows nothing about. Finally, it will be her means of liberation, as she will make a life for herself manipulating words. Metafictional hints at the end of the novel imply that the written text itself serves as her epiphany, particularly when she discovers the truth about her birth: she is adopted. The mother she longs for is not hers, nor will she return. A mature Ahn Joo understands, at the end of the novel, that she must leave her father and begin a new life, stripped of the personal and cultural baggage she had carried as a burden for so long. She may always feel different; but there will be no burdens because she can choose to have the best of both worlds.

The loss of the mother in all three novels is crucial in the negotiating of identity: there is a before and an after for the child who will learn to live on a borderland. Ivah Ogata, the main character, is the central unifying force in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*. She, the narrator-protagonist, must pick up the pieces of the shattered lives her mother's death has left behind, as she is transformed into the keeper of the house. Yet her only real reference is precisely her dead mother. The opening lines are representative of the tone and point of view consistently present throughout the novel:

«Love's king-size bread works the best, white, for Maisie, Blu, and me. The crust on the king-size loaf isn't dark brown and papery, but doughy and soft. We eat mayonnaise bread for a long time after Mama's funeral. It's been two months now and it's still our primary food. Poppy plays 'Moon River' over and over on the piano he got from the dead deacon garage sale last Easter. He never cries for our dead Mama in front of the three of us ... *I know where he wants to go. And who the dreammaker is.*» (3)

For the Japanese American child growing up in the multifarious world of Hawaii, the loss of the mother implies a separation from the cultural touchstones that give the

family stability and identity. Ivah's struggle involves making sense of the established codes within the community, fighting poverty, and educating her siblings.

The poetic quality present in this literary work lies in the manner in which Ivah's experiences are presented. The memories of her mother permeate her daily existence, and her efforts to make a life for herself and her younger brother and sister. Sensations are interweaved with memories which are voiced in lines that seem straight out of a poem. The children's vivid imagination, coupled with the extravagant natural and complex cultural world of Hawaii blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality for them. Their belief in magic stems from their experiences, as cats and dogs become their spiritual allies in the war between good and evil. Survival does not seem so difficult when supernatural allies help out. Thus, the mother, in Ivah's eyes, has not abandoned them -her presence can be felt through the magical behavior of these animals. It is, once again, the child's view as Stuart Hanabuss notes, good and pure, that is channeled against hostile forces and inevitably wins (110). Ivah must protect Blu and Maisie from the perils that their mother can no longer shelter them from, ranging from the social worker to the perverted Uncle Paolo. Ivah, however, can not totally belong to her brother and sister's fantasy world. Her changing body reflects her changing mind: the fears looming inside her surface as she cries in rhyming lines: «Mama, you died and didn't leave me a damn clue, teach me how to be a mama too» (37). Her vision of her father has also changed: she senses his weakness and fear after her mother's disappearance. There is not much she can do except «hold the fort»: food manages to get to the table and her siblings are looked after, but her father roams in the world of his memories. Another poetic device Yamanaka employs is the use of pidgin, a culture-specific language of the place and time of childhood. Pidgin characterizes and represents the world Ivah is limited to, just as the acquisition of correct English opens up a wider world of an education and opportunities. Two adult characters, Big Sis and Miss Ito, offer Ivah a way out of her situation through a scholarship that will allow her the schooling she deserves. The opening of this door is also accompanied by the discovery of a secret: the true story of her parents' courageous efforts to build a life for themselves and their children. Ivah must hear this story in order to rise above her circumstances, and decide to leave the place for a better future. This narrator-focalizer also relieves herself of a burden –but there is no radical cutting off. She must leave to make life better for herself and for them. She affirms her links with the land and the culture, but understands that she cannot remain.

In all three novels, the American dream is achieved through education –symbolized by institutions like the Y.M.C.A. or the neighbourhood public school–very often entailing a possible loss of the heritage culture as the child enters American mainstream life. Yet the breaking away does not demand a turning away. The child figure illustrates the complex process of adaptation, of the creation of the hybrid ethnic subject that learns how to fit in, embracing elements of both cultures. The focalization of this experience finds its perfect embodiment in the growing child who, as the universal adage wisely states, is father/mother to the man/woman. The before and the after are, ultimately, an end and a beginning. There is an end to the cultural absolutes imposed by the families of all the protagonists and the beginning of a new life for them comes when they make the personal and cultural decisions that will establish their place within the American world that is their home.

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