

The Dubious Quest for the Ancestral Homeland: Asian Immigrants' Struggles for Assimilation into American Society in Julie Shigekuni's *A Bridge between Us*

Wen-Po K. Ko

Abstract

As a popular theme in Asian American authors' works, Asian immigrants of the first few generations in the United States, haunted by their ancestral homeland, still cling to their home traditions. This paper examines the ties and tensions between four generations of a Japanese American family, as well as the theme of their quest for the ancestral homeland, in Julie Shigekuni's *A Bridge between Us*. Settling down in the New World under the influences of their home culture, most of the major characters in the book feel more or less nostalgic for their roots. But their yearning for the spiritual and cultural home in Japan is dubious,

for they also strive to leave their Japanese heritage behind in order to assimilate into American society.

Keywords: Asian Americans, Tradition, Japanese, Cultural heritage

In a predominately white nation known as the Melting Pot, the USA, Asian immigrants along with African and Hispanic immigrants are minorities. With the amelioration of the social status and the availability of education, the increase consciousness among minorities of their ethnic groups is well reflected within their literary works. The minority writers' obsessions vary. While African Americans are sensitive about racial discrimination and social inequality that afflicted them for over three centuries, Asian Americans are more concerned about the conflicts of their ancestral culture with the New World. Numerous Oriental descendants, raised as American citizens notwithstanding, still encounter considerable difficulties in settling down in the European-based American community. The uneasiness of naturalization along with the influences of their ancestral heritage on their life in the new land finds expression in their writings. Such a tendency is demonstrated in Julie Shigekuni's novel, *A Bridge between Us*, which explores the ties and tensions between four generations of a Japanese American family, the Hitos, in San Francisco. In parallel to the underlying theme of domestic problems is a sub-theme of the family members' mental quest for their ancestral homeland. Most of the major characters, haunted by homesickness in various degrees, yearn for a return to the land they came from, and yet they, instead of planning to relocate back to Japan, strive to leave behind their Japanese traditions to become assimilated into American society.

The quest for the ancestral homeland is a salient theme in this Japanese-American family saga Shigekuni portrays. As a common

response to the new culture, Asian immigrants, particularly the first three generations, are much affected by their home traditions and unable to exorcise their parents' and grandparents' influences. Asian immigrants' comparatively stronger attachment to their home culture can be ascribed to that the places they came from, especially China and Japan, have a long history and thus are tremendously impacted by the old traditions. The literary works of the Asian-American writers, particularly the first and second generations, invariably exhibit such symptoms of homesickness. In Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, the narrator Lai's mother, Mah, the first generation, finally goes back to visit Hong Kong after twenty-five years' departure. The climax of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is Jing-Mei Woo's return to China to see her twin sisters who have been separated from their mother soon after their births. The Korean woman Haesu, in Ronyoung Kim's *Clay Walls*, travels to Korea with her children to visit her natal family. Even those who are financially unable to make the long journey express their great yearning in one way or another; the Chinese immigrants in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, victimized by their American oppressors, shout their longing for China through an aperture they have dug in the earth. Indubitably, a visit to the ancestral homeland has been the wishes of many newly settled Asians in the United States.

In *A Bridge between Us* the Hito household's quest for their origins dramatically lasts for five generations; it starts from the first settler, goes into a latent period in the fourth generation, and is culminated by the fifth generation that eventually makes a journey back to Japan.

Although each generation's thoughts keep turning homeward more or less, none of them consider seriously renouncing their American citizenship. This is especially true of Tsuyoshi, the first-generation settler, who struggled to survive despite tremendous hardships that perturbed him in this foreign land. As the Prologue indicates, Tsuyoshi immigrated to California in the late nineteenth century under certain distressed circumstances. He was abandoned by his wife who, unable to endure the adversity, went by herself back to Japan. Despite the misfortune, Tsuyoshi settled down with his newly born daughter, Reiko, and survived the ordeals. Although the text provides no sources explaining why he decided to hang on, it is obvious that his financial embarrassment was what prevented him from relocating back to their hometown. His predicaments as well as homesickness were exhibited through his constantly being lost in thought. As his daughter recalls, "[O]n foggy mornings my father planted himself beside the window..... and gazed motionless through the gray shadow" (*Bridge* 16).

The overwhelming desire for going home that haunted Tsuyoshis is not shown by Reiko who grows up as the second generation in California. Because of her father's influences, she retains to a certain extent the Japanese cultural heritage she takes pride in. As she states, "I am proud that my father raised me according to Japanese tradition, even though I have never set foot in Japan" (*Bridge* 13). Nevertheless, Reiko struggles with the reason for settling down in the new country. At her father's demise, she flirts with the idea of going home: "For a time after his death, I even considered leaving San Francisco for Japan"

(*Bridge* 20). In the next few years, she encounters a serious dilemma as to whether to leave or stay: “I could not explain to Isamu why I have to stay in America, not leave my home for Japan” (*Bridge* 21). In this respect, readers are reminded of other literary works that depict how unsuccessful Asian immigrants migrate back to their ancestral homelands. The heroes in Lesley Namioka’s *Who’s Hu* and Eleanor Wong Telamaque’s *It’s Crazy to Stay Chinese in Minnesota*, unable to cope with their plights in America, choose to resettle in China. Reiko, however, finally finds a reason to remain in San Francisco; out of her self-esteem she is determined to take over her father’s barbershop, which is a disgrace under her husband’s inheritance.

The yearning for the homeland in Japan seems to cease in Rio, Reiko’s daughter, the third generation, and yet the reader should be aware that the quest is simply latent, hidden in Rio’s unconsciousness. Born and raised in California, she is an American through and through, without Japanese cultural heritage, and, unlike most Asian family members, is totally not solicitous for the welfare of her family. In studying Rio, the reader can hardly apply what Stephen Souris, in commenting on *The Joy Luck Club*, suggests, “A culturally nuanced reading of the novel might begin with the fundamental orientation toward the group rather than the individual in Asian cultures generally” (116). Rio doesn’t have the vaguest notion of dedicating herself to the family. Furthermore, she is a rebel who seems to delight in contradicting her parent. Convinced that her father Isamu was murdered by her mother, Rio detests Reiko so much that she does everything possible to

defy her. At the age of fifteen she elopes with her boyfriend Sadamichi, only to be deserted by him shortly after their illegitimate matrimony, and when she finds herself financially unable to raise her baby, Goro, she returns to Reiko, not to reconcile, but rather to continue her life-long conflicts with her own mother. The domestic incongruity aggravates when the daughter messes up with the mother's lover, D, developing a freakish love triangle extremely unusual in Asian traditions, and through the mother's interference, the daughter ends up marrying Tadashi, a man to whom she finds no attachment. All in all, Rio's behavior toward her family represents a complete break with the Japanese tradition.

Lacking in Japanese heritage as Rio might seem, she is not entirely devoid of the quest for her grandfather's home country. Careful readers will find in the text that her Japanese background still has profound impact upon her. Tormented by the family miseries, she attempts to commit suicide, and what is noteworthy is that her suicide attempt links to a dream vision which reminds her of her roots: "Then I began visiting an old part of the country in my sleep; maybe it was Japan" (*Bridge* 137). The heroine has never visited Japan, nor does her mother, but nevertheless she gives expression to the flimsy, subtle, undefinable feeling for her origins in a dream in due course. Dreams and fantasies are generally conceded as a manifestation of the unconscious mind; the innermost wish that lies in the unconscious mind since childhood may emerge in disguised forms, such as in dreams or in language. As Sigmund Freud states, "[T]he wish manifested in the dream must be an infantile wish.....Dreaming is a fragment of the superseded psychic life of the

child” (379, 389). Rio’s dream mirrors her wishes of visiting her forefathers’ homeland, which she euphemistically phrases as “an old part of the country in my sleep” (*Bridge* 137).

The subconscious yearning for visiting Japan that occasionally crosses Rio’s mind does not exist in her son, Goro. By his generation, the adaptation to the new culture is apparently complete. Pursuing a preaching career as a Christian minister, he embraces not even an iota of Eastern religious belief, but the tenacious Japanese tradition nevertheless has influences upon his life. First of all, he bears no grudge against her mother even though the latter never has “the proper, maternal feelings for him” (*Bridge* 136). Besides, the fact that he supports his mother and grandmother, living all under one roof, is quite traditional in Asia. His aversion to sharing house chores with his wife, Tomoe, is also very common in the patriarchal Japan and China where husbands are in large measure not domesticated. The wife complains to herself, “He comes home at the end of the day, kisses me on the cheek, and then disappears into his study” (*Bridge* 76). Inheriting both Eastern and Western traditions, Goro neither questions his own identity nor feels nostalgic about Japan. Well settled down as he appears, he suffers from the problem of fatherhood that afflicts many Asian American husbands. As Frank Chin and his co-authors, in their book, *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, write, “A constant theme in Asian American literature.....is the failure of Asian American manhood to express itself in its simplest form: fathers and sons” (35). Goro is regarded by his wife as an inconsiderate husband, and by his daughter Nomi a lousy

father, and yet domestic disagreements never seem to trigger him to doubt his own identity between the old and the new cultures.

Just as Goro is well adapted to the new community, so his wife Tomoe is accustomed to American way of life. A second-generation immigrant from another Japanese family in California, Tomoe is never haunted by dreams of moving back to Japan, nor is she perturbed by the fact that she is an American. What greatly frustrates her, however, is her domestic predicaments; in addition to taking care of two children and serving Goro like a traditional Japanese wife does, she has to endure living with her parents-in-law. The relationship between her and Rio is not in rapport; Rio perceives that Tomoe "has managed to express her hatred for me through acts of kindness" (*Bridge* 59). Whereas Asian women traditionally have to tolerate their mothers-in-law, who can be unreasonably harsh on their sons' spouses, American mothers seldom live with their sons under the same roof, and hence the frustration of Tomoe, an American, is readily comprehensible to readers. To overcome the distress, the wife engages herself in working for a travel agency as a career woman, and the ironic part about her job is that she is fully conversant with all major cities and countries the world over, and yet she never dreams of traveling across the Pacific Ocean to visit her parents' hometown. Evidently, both Goro and Tomoe are well settled down; America is their home.

The Hito family's quest for the ancestral homeland, after a latency period, emerges in the fifth generation, Nomi, who culminates in her unprecedented pilgrimage to Japan. However, Nomi's visit to the

ancestral homeland is not motivated by her poor adaptation to the new world; rather, it is the result of her going to the opposite extreme, strangely enough. Nomi, presumably the author's persona, naturalizes well in the States. Like her parents, Goro and Tomoe, she is an American in terms of mentality and consciousness. The text provides very few sources about how the Hitos interact with American communities, but descriptions about Nomi's sexual life, which can be found in abundance, suggest she assimilates so successfully that she never suffers from a sense of alienation thousands of immigrants do. Nor is she disturbed by what Elaine H. Kim, in her article, "Such Opposite Creatures: Men and Women in Asian American Literature," points out: "For the Asian American woman writer, gender and ethnicity cannot be separated: she never ceases to be both her racial and her gender self" (80). Nomi appears to be so accustomed to, and accepted by, the new culture that gender and racial discriminations never become her concern. Still less does she feel what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong phrases in her book, *Reading Asian American Literature*, as "racial shadow" (78). Raised in a society that rejects the restraints of propriety and sexual prudery, Nomi has been given to fornication since her early teenage, cherishing memories about her sexual intercourses with countless white boyfriends—"Eric in front of the Arboretum and Richard in the pool and Todd so many times I lose track" (*Bridge* 120). She even confides to her grandmother with unflinching honesty that her new boyfriend Porter "pushes me up against the phone and spreads my legs apart with his knee and kisses me on the mouth" (*Bridge* 151), a graphic depiction about sex rarely found even

in white American girls' confessions to their parents or grandparents.

Nomi's wanton sexual life, instead of making her settle down in the States, renders her restless, weary of the country, and desirous of going to such an extreme as fleeing America. Ever since she started to flirt with Eric she has hallucinated that there is a mysterious force that allures her to go away; as she addresses the unknown force, "And so you begin with Eric. At first you are Eric. You are the one so close to me who is not me. You begin as the thing I have hoped for, to travel outside myself and far away" (*Bridge* 85). Prior to her copulation with Eric in daylight at Golden Gate Park, she is haunted with the imagery of fish, which she associates with love and escape. She speaks to the unknown party again, "You are some flaw in my logic that allows me to mistake a sudden appreciation of fish for love, and love for a desire to be some place far away" (*Bridge* 95). While she is in a quandary— "I want to run away, and I wish I could think where to go" (*Bridge* 88) — she seeks counsel from her grandmother, Rio, who replies that such an ideal place is "[s]omewhere familiar but far away" (*Bridge* 92). What with Rio's hint and the photo of the geisha in a blue chrysanthemum kimono in Rio's chamber, Nomi identifies their ancestral homeland as where she should go. Under the illusion that the geisha in her reverie beckons her to visit Japan, she claims, "We agree to meet in Japan" (*Bridge* 93).

Though the Hito family's quest for the ancestral homeland is put into action by the fifth generation, a wish shared by thousands of immigrants, it is important to note that the homebound journey is not

motivated by Nomi's nostalgia for her roots. As an American, the girl is perturbed by her dilemma about what her position in the family should be; on the one hand she and Rio find each other congenial, and yet on the other she seems to be distressed by the good rapport which becomes a burden to her. Regarded by her mother as "a bridge between" the family members, the girl takes no delight in playing such a role. While making a practice of seeing Rio downstairs regularly, she is sometimes weary of the routine: "Why do I have to be the one to come downstairs and visit my grandmother? I hate sitting here in this dark room with its funny smell and my grandmother whose life seems to depend on me alone. I have a sudden urge to run, but I don't" (*Bridge* 91). In a troubled state of mind she decides to go on a pilgrimage to Japan, convincing herself that "Japan is my pact with my grandmother" (*Bridge* 119). Simply put, through the journey she fulfills both her wishes of fleeing the country and her grandmother's expectations for visiting their ancestral homeland.

Given her dubious motivation, Nomi's long flight to Japan proves to be absurd. Unlike Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, in which the author traces up to the seven-generation forebear Junta Kinte in Africa, Nomi has no intention to know or seek her roots. Her trip to Japan is performed like a ritual, nominally a pilgrimage but in reality an escape from the boredom of her life in California. Consequently, she is not thrilled with seeing the people of her race as soon as she sets foot in Japan. She is even tempted to ignore the old couple, Mr. & Mrs. Yamashita, who, entreated by her parents, meet her

at the train station. The heroine observes, "I have come all this way not to have to care about family..... I want to walk past them, pretend I am someone else" (*Bridge* 197) . It is most odd that a young woman who, after a long journey, arrives alone in a foreign land and spurns the effusive welcome of her parents' friends who come to accommodate her.

The absurd journey renders Nomi's sojourn in her ancestral homeland dismayingly unproductive. Whereas the author of *Roots* returns to the Gambian village of Juffure and talks to a *griot*, an oral historian who tells the Kinte family story, Nomi simply dawdles away days in Kyoto and Tokyo to nullify a dream. Incapable of speaking Japanese and uninterested in learning the language, she almost lives like a recluse in her ancestral land without even paying a visit to any of her relatives. Although her pregnancy may account for why she refuses to see them, her indifference to the people and culture there is the factor that makes her a complete foreigner. The text provides only a few brief and fragmented conversations between her and the local residents. After leaving the Yamashitas she checks in a "four-and-a-half-tatami-mat room" in Tokyo and secludes herself further, nearly cutting herself off from all human contact; as she observes, "I spoke to almost no one in Tokyo. I had no friends" (*Bridge* 198, 200). More ridiculous is that she, instead of devoting herself to studying Japanese to become more communicative, requests her grandmother to mail her such great philosophy books as Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* and Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, which are improper for an alien like her to peruse during her overseas sojourn.

Readers might question why the heroine bothers to fly across the Pacific Ocean to her native fatherland without meaning to experience the cultural life of her race. A convincing explanation for her unproductive days in Kyoto and Tokyo is that her primary purpose of visiting Japan is to give birth to her baby, which she may abandon for adoption without letting any family members in San Francisco know. Unlike Rio who eloped and later boldly returned to her mother with an infant, Nomi never discloses her pregnancy to any souls, including her beloved grandmother. Fearing that her “pregnancy would leak back to my mother in San Francisco,” Nomi deliberately leaves the Yamashitas “to save my life like a convict fleeing from the scene of her crime” (*Bridge* 198). The heroine is noticeably eccentric in that while she is wanton enough to get sexually involved with a number of men and keep her grandmother well informed of her promiscuous experiences, she is indisposed to divulge her childbirth to any souls including her confidante.

In the last analysis, the Hito’s five-generation quest for their origins produces nothing of great significance except dumping an undesirable child in their ancestral homeland. That a mother is willing to give up her own child is not uncommon in real life, but very few parents would ditch their babies the way Nomi does without a justifiable reason. The two mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* fail to keep their own infants for some cogent reasons; Suyuan Woo abandoned her little twin daughters because of the turmoil of the war, while Yingying killed her fetal because of her hatred for the baby’s father. In contrast,

Nomi discards her infant for reasons best known to herself: "I left Japan thinking I was leaving behind parts of my mother and grandmother that I didn't want, parts of myself that I no longer needed" (*Bridge* 214). Suffice to say that her journey contains four-folded purposes: hiding and obliterating her childbearing; paying homage to her forefather's homeland and then eliminating her Japanese background; estranging herself from her family, particularly her mother and grandmother who have become more like burdens than supporters to her; leaving her ignoble past behind forever. No wonder after she comes "abruptly" back to San Francisco she does not apprise her folks of her return, in sharp contrast to most tourists who are eager to share their overseas adventures with family members and friends. Nomi's story is strongly reminiscent of the hero Stephen in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*; a young man who, susceptible to racist derision, attempts not only to make his escape but also discard his Japanese heritage utterly. Nomi's efforts to renounce her racial background manifest her wishes to assimilate fully into American society.

The quest for the ancestral homeland in *A Bridge Between Us*, which lasts for five generations, is notably dubious. Starting from the first immigrant who set foot on North America, the Hito household has progressed a long way for settlement. Each generation is haunted to a certain extent by the conflicts between their original Japanese identity and the new American consciousness, which prompt the family members to look back to their origins. However, because the Hitos are well adapted to their new way of life, they never suffer from a serious sense

of rootlessness or alienation. The family's ultimate pilgrimage to their ancestral homeland made by the fifth generation, instead of being motivated by a sincere desire for seeking their roots, has more practical purposes than ontological significance. By interweaving four distinctive female voices, the author dramatizes a haunting tale of love and conflicts in this Asian American household that struggles to become assimilated into American society. As Kim contends: "Asian American women's writings insist on identity and difference in multiple layers of selfhood and community" (92). Through the book the author seems to insinuate that, for the immigrants, glancing back at one's origins in the ancestral homeland is not as important as looking forward to the future in the new world.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

- Haley, Alex (1976). *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. New York: Doubleday.
- Kim, Ronyoung (1987). *Clay Walls*. Sag Harbor: Permanent P.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong (1980). *China Men*. New York: Knoph.
- Kogawa, Joy (1981). *Obasan*. Boston: D. R. Godine.
- Namioka, Lesley (1980). *Who's Hu*. New York: Vanguard P.
- Ng, Fae Myenne (1994). *Bone*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Shigekuni, Julie (1995). *A Bridge Between Us*. New York: Doubleday.
- Freud, Sigmund (1996). *The Interpretation of Dream*. Trans. A. A. Brill. New York: Gramercy Books.
- Tan, Amy (1989). *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Putnam's Sons.
- Wong, Eleanor (1978). *It's Crazy to Stay Chinese in Minnesota*. Nashville: T. Nelson.

Secondary Sources

- Chin, Frank (1991). "Chinese and Japanese American Literature." *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*. Jeffery Paul Chan (ed.). New York: Meridian.
- Kim, Elaine H. (1990). "Such Opposite Creatures: Men and Women in Asian American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review*. 29: 68-93.

Souris, Stephen (1994). "Only Two Kinds of Daughters: Inter-Monologue Dialogicity in *The Joy Luck Club*." *Melus*. 19: 99-123.

Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia (1993). *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. New York: Princeton UP.