

Asian or American:

Gotanda's Quest for a Japanese Identity

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Abstract

Asian American writers are among those who communicate across a range of genres dealing with multiple issues. Asian American literary works do not have a united tradition but rather share certain cultural elements. Despite the different experiences, the common grounds are usually based on the intrinsic process of self-discovery and self-actualization among the characters of those works.

Philip Kan Gotanda (1951-), a Japanese-American playwright has been a major influence in bringing Asian American Narratives to mainstream American theater. In Gotanda's memory play *Ballad of Yachiyo* (1995), the protagonist, Yachiyo, goes through a journey of self-discovery of her identity. How far do racial minorities in the US assimilate American values? And how far do they retain ethnic ties? Gotanda recasts both questions by closely examining the complexity of Yachiyo's ethnic identity.

This paper examines the development of Yachiyo's character in Gotanda's work and traces the elements of self-awakening through the world of traditional Japanese art and culture, i.e. *Bunraku* (puppet theater) and *Seppuku* or *Hara Kiri* (ritual suicide), and the art of pottery making. These elements respectively represent the creative, aesthetic and feminist dimensions of her self-discovery. They also focus on the conflicting social realities of a culture in transition—from Asian to American, and focus on the quest for a Japanese identity. The threads connecting Yachiyo's life are depicted with the same balancing rhythm, shuttling between her old and new worlds. Abraham Maslow's theory of the Hierarchy of Needs will be used to better understand the process of self-discovery.

1. Japanese -American Identity:

The concept of cultural pluralism in the US is increasingly reflected in American theater and drama. A number of American playwrights and theater practitioners, while offering re-visions of the American Melting Pot, challenge its idealistic assumptions, thus inscribing in their work the cultural differences of American minorities. In addition, this new vision often “coincides with a radical departure from the conventional stage realism, resulting in the creation of new dramatic forms” (Maufort 1). Many of such theatrical frameworks serve to express the minorities’ ambivalence towards cultural assimilation into mainstream America. Minority writers tend to dramatize the facets of the new American mosaic in which people are forced to reinterpret their ethnic identities. Still, the relationship between Asian American theater and mainstream theater embodies many questions regarding representation, marginalization, and creative autonomy.

The recollections of Japanese Americans of all generations show that the major emphasis of ethnicity among them has been transformed over time: from fundamentally primordial attachments before World War II, to stigma during and after the war, to a collective sense of suffering upon the reopening of the past, and finally to ethnic pride derived from a positive reinterpretation of the past (Takezawa 198).

With this “ethnic pride” in mind, Philip Kan Gotanda weaves the threads of his play, *Ballad of Yachiyo*. The plot unfolds through a cunning array of dramatic techniques “letters are delivered as monologues, scenes begin, give way to new scenes, and then return, bending and flowing into each other elegantly” (Hannaham 113). The structure of the play, as described by Gotanda in an interview, made use of some filmic elements, like fades, allowing him to move freely from one location to another. “There are moments that dissolve into other moments, and these juxtapositions add to the sense of connection in the play” (Siegel 25), says Gotanda describing the play’s beautiful visual design.

In 1919 when many Japanese lived and worked on Hawaiian islands, seventeen-year-old Yachiyo is taken out of the sugar-cane plantations and sent by her poor family to another island to live with and serve Hiro Takamura, a pottery artist, and his wife, Okusan. Yachiyo’s eyes are opened to the beauty (and the cruelty) of the world as Okusan grooms her for the Japanese society in Hawaii. At the same time Takamura, who does not love his wife, finds inspiration in the youthful Yachiyo and the two are drawn to each other. But the tale ends tragically with “Takamura’s art reaching perfection just as their love affair (and their lives) are cut short by the very society that Yachiyo has been groomed to enter” (Hischak 410).

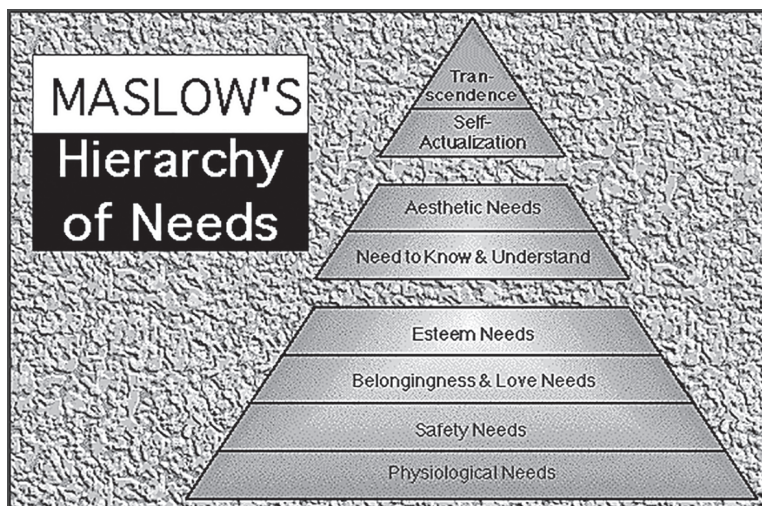
A close examination of the characters, their development and the elements of self-awakening is necessary at this point. Given the hyphenated identity of the characters and

Gotanda's feelings of 'ethnic pride,' this process of self-discovery is best understood against Abraham Maslow's theory of the Hierarchy of Needs.

2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the *Ballad of Yachiyo*:

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), the humanistic psychologist, like all other humanists, does not believe that human beings are pushed and pulled by mechanical forces, either of stimuli and reinforcement (behaviorism) or of unconscious instinctual impulses (psychoanalysis). Rather, he focuses on potential, where he believes that humans strive for a higher level of capabilities. They seek the frontiers of creativity. This leads to a "fully functioning person" or as Maslow calls him/her, a "self-actualizing person". Maslow has set up a hierarchy theory of needs composed of five basic levels. Humans start with a very weak disposition that is then fashioned fully as the person grows. The needs move in an ascending order starting with physiological needs, safety needs, needs of love and belonging, needs for esteem until the last step is reached, that of the need for self-actualization (Maslow). The hierarchic theory is often represented as a pyramid, with the larger, lower levels representing the lower needs, and the higher point representing the need for self-actualization/ transcendence (see diagram below).

The fulfillment in the lives of all characters in the *Ballad of Yachiyo* is seen with Maslow's pyramid as a backdrop. They all reach the top of the pyramid, that of self-actualization/transcendence, but only through utilizing the elements of traditional Japanese art and culture inherent in their personalities despite their duality, or their 'two-



ness,' as W.E.B. Du Bois calls it, that of being American *and* Japanese. The significance of Japanese art in the lives of those characters also honors Gotanda's ethnic roots.

At first, by rebelling against her marginalized existence as well as by aspiring to a better life, Yachiyo's mother emerges as a strong rejectionist figure. Although a victim of dislocation, the mother insists on fighting back as she firmly believes that her dream of dislocation can only be attained through Yachiyo. Therefore, her dream of a better life is channeled into her.

As an eye-opener, she attempts to make Yachiyo perceive the poor, miserable life that will be in store for her, if she surrenders to the dislocation that stigmatizes the Japanese-American life in their newly racist society. Desperate to save her from the plantation life, she questions Yachiyo if she wants to be:

working twelve hours a day in the mills,
come home to a batch of crying babies too
tired to take care of them, let alone take care
of your husband's needs at night (14).

As a descendant of the poor, uneducated family, she has been constantly ridiculed by her husband's parents. She reveals to Yachiyo how she has been looked down upon as well as harassed by her sisters-in-law:

Your papa, his family was so against our
marriage. I did not come from a good family,
wasn't trained in the arts the way young girls
are supposed to be. Papa didn't care. He
married me anyway. I went to live with his
family. They all looked down their noses
at me. Especially the sisters.....(57)

Haunted by the painful memories of the past, Yachiyo's mother is determined to spare her daughter the painful experience she has gone through by teaching her proper Japanese manners. Besides acquiring the skills and manners of a refined lady, Yachiyo will be able to realize her dream of a decent life. "A young girl should learn those things so she can meet a suitable young man" (15), her mother repeatedly informs Yachiyo. Already familiar with Yachiyo's dream of ascending the social ladder, she feels that she must support as well as nourish her ambitions. It is a way of helping Yachiyo climb the ladder representing her own 'hierarchy of needs' in order to reach a satisfactory level of self-actualization.

As the events of the play unfold, Yachiyo becomes totally obsessed with the Gold Mountain¹⁾ dream. Her resentment towards the poverty that colors her entire life is clearly manifested in her cutting up pictures from fashion magazines, believing that one day she will acquire the looks and behavior of a refined lady. It is only to Takamura that she confesses her ambition to fulfill the Gold Mountain dream. "I cut out different pieces of clothes and then paste them together. It's a game I play with myself...and with my friend Osugi. What we'd like to look like one day. Only for me it's not a game" (45). Indeed, it was not a game. And on goes her struggle with the hierarchy of needs.

3. Traditional Japanese Art and Culture:

During the course of events in the play, characters struggle with the hierarchy of needs and achieve them by attaining happiness, satisfaction or some kind of fulfillment only through traditional Japanese cultural and artistic elements. Okusan, the wife, Hiro Takamura, the pottery artist, and Yachiyo, the young seventeen-year-old girl, all reach a level of self-actualization through different Japanese artistic elements. Okusan, for example, has the first two levels of the basic needs fulfilled (the physiological needs and the safety needs) and she only starts to feel threatened when the third need is missing. Despite the threat, she is represented as a non-passive woman who struggles for her life and love. She uses puppetry with the purpose of ascending Maslow's pyramid to reach higher aesthetic needs.

3. 1. *Bunraku* (Puppet Theater):

In dramatizing Okusan's character (the wife), Gotanda manages to defy the negative ethnic notion about Japanese women, for Okusan is neither passive nor submissive. Rather, she is marked by a strong personality even though she suffers tremendously from loneliness and lack of love. Mostly ignored by her husband, she unfolds the tragic story of her life as she speaks to her puppets:

There was once a woman. She was young.
She was beautiful. And she was in love with
a man. She was so lonely. Because though
she loved him, he was not able to return her
love. But she already carried her love within
and could not release it. It grew inside her
soul until she was filled with inconsolable
grief. No one could help her, no one could

save her (36).

This expressed grief is only poured out in the presence of her dolls (puppets)—those intimate and inanimate objects, which share her grievances and emotional suffering. They are the material icons or figures, which serve as the vehicle for some absent or invisible emotion. Her unfulfilled dreams can only be lived while she constantly aspires to comfort herself and tries to find compensation for her husband's neglect. Her Japanese dolls are her saviors, her rescuer, where she constantly eases her loneliness by playing with them:

Sometimes, when I am alone I visit
my dolls. Play with them. Make them
move...And after a while, the doll
becomes me...And I make up stories.
About her. About me (36).

The world of puppets is truly significant to Okusan who "has a large Japanese doll in her lap" (18). To her the doll is humanized in ways through which she can connect to higher levels of self-actualization.

*Okusan holds the doll. She touches it, runs
her hands along the fabric, its face. She then
lifts it up and sets it in her lap. Okusan begins
to manipulate it, the attention shifting from Okusan
to the doll as it comes to life. (18)*

This transformation from inanimate to human represents the complete merge between Okusan and the doll. "It's as if Okusan were imbuing it with her spirit" (18). It is worth noting here that Okusan is neither a puppeteer nor a puppet maker, but just owns the doll. Soon enough the doll is not only humanized but also brings solace to Okusan's life as "it raises its hand to its face, tilts its head, wipes a tear from its face" (18). It's almost a consolation that agony, pain and tears are shared by the doll and thus bring comfort to Okusan and her world.

Theatrically, and in the tradition of Bunraku puppetry, there are moments that dissolve into other moments and thus creating this strong sense of connection in the play. Puppets are deployed to discreetly act out the feelings, which the fleshly characters keep repressed. In his impressive analyses of Japanese culture, *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes, the famous French semiologist, gives a definition of the *Bunraku* (Japanese

puppet theater). In it he says “*Bunraku* separates action from gesture: it shows the gesture, lets the action be seen, exhibits simultaneously the art and the labor, reversing for each its own writing” (54). The aim of *Bunraku* is the unity of elements, from the unified breath of the puppeteers to the coming together of the three components,— text, music and puppets. Donald Keene explains:

“If the three operators of the puppet must ‘breathe’ as a single entity, it is not less essential that the three component parts of *Bunraku*, the narration, the music and the puppets ‘breathe’ as one” (39). And in this “moment of a collectively held breath” (Mansbridge 14) Okusan melts into the world of her puppets and they both become one. Between Barthes’ ‘action’ and ‘gesture’, Okusan transcends to a level of self-actualization that would have possibly never been achieved, had she not resorted to her puppets—her strong reference and connection with tradition.

The second feature of Japanese art that is concretized in Gotanda’s play is that of *Harakiri*.

3. 2. *Seppuku or Harakiri*

Unlike other plays written by Gotanda, *Ballad of Yachiyo* rings an autobiographical note, where he narrates the ordeal of his aunt who kills herself at the age of seventeen following an illicit affair. In a review of the play by Jerry Carroll of the *The San Francisco Chronicle*, he explains the curiosity that prompted the dramatist to probe into the tragedy and the family attitude determined to conceal the shame begot by the suicidal act:

When San Francisco playwright Philip Kan Gotanda learned that he had an aunt nobody had ever mentioned, he was understandably curious. But when he started asking questions, his family stonewalled. Bit by bit, he found out that she had died a teenage suicide in 1919, an object of shame and a pariah in a Japanese American community on Kauai (26).

It is a widely acknowledged fact that in Japan a heroic, romantic, aesthetic and moral aura surrounds death in general, and voluntary death in particular. This may be traced to the Samurai tradition, in which the code of honor, *bushido*, as equated to readiness for death, and it was considered honorable to kill oneself to prevent being killed or captured by the enemy (Lebra 190).

The sanction of voluntary death may also have been reinforced by the legalization,

under the Tokugawa regime (Edo Period)²⁾, of *Seppuku* or *hara-kiri*, a ceremonial and ritual suicide by disembowelment with a sword. The dramatic effect of this ritual form of suicide, with its religious setting and elaborate procedure is indicative of a cultural investment in death.

The legitimation of voluntary death is further based upon the culturally idealized state of self; namely, the clean, pure self. According to Nitobe, a partisan of Japanese culture, a sort of “mental physiology” underlies the custom of *seppuku* in that the person committing suicide is virtually saying: “I will open the seat of my soul and show you how it fares with it. See for yourself whether it is polluted or clean” (Lebra 191).

Yachiyo, as well as Gotanda’s aunt in real life, took the step towards ‘opening the seat of [their] soul’. Yachiyo’s romantic entanglement with Takamura and its consequent adultery causes her downfall. These self-damaging acts shatter her cherished dream for a better life opportunity as Alice Wong explains:

Yachiyo begins to enjoy her stay...
her joy does not come from her friendship
with Okusan but with her encounters
with Hiro. But unfortunately these
forbidden encounters only lead to the
destruction of her heart and soul (33).

Moreover, as a member of a specifically ethnic community, Yachiyo’s adulterous act causes not only disgrace to herself and to her family, but to her entirely traditionally minded and high value upholding people. Thomas Sowell explains that “upholding the honor of the family and the honor of the Japanese people were values constantly taught by the Issei³⁾ to their children” (169).

Although at an early stage of her life, she strongly objects to the act of self-killing when Okusan (Takamura’s wife) related to her a story which in effect portrays a heroic act of self killing. “Why did she have to kill herself?” Yachiyo asks Okusan, “she should have figured something out. Gone on living ” (36). However, in her predicament as an object of shame, she resorts to that suicidal act as her role means to preserve her family’s honor as well as “save face for herself” (36). With Yachiyo’s sacrificial abandonment of a possibly happy future and the courageous termination of her tragic life, she becomes a typical representation of the traditional Japanese Samurai codes. Again, Yachiyo is able to reach a level of self-actualization/ transcendence (by taking her own life) – a high spiritual level that could have otherwise never been achieved, had she continued to live. Despite the seemingly horrific and tragic ending, especially when measured by normal western

standards, Yachiyo's end, again achieved through an honorable Japanese tradition, is highly regarded.

3. 3. Pottery Making:

In the play, Hiro Takamura, the pottery artist, lives a life devoid of promises and denied opportunities of self-achievement. "I feel nothing...Too much nothingness" (20), he always says. He is an escapist figure, as he seeks refuge and finds solace in drinking wine leading him into temporary forgetfulness. His marriage is affected by his inner turmoil and his failure to achieve his target. Haunted by his failure in the past, he is unable to offer Okusan, his wife, the love and care she deeply yearns for. It is only through the artistic medium of pottery making that he is able to reach a significant level of self-actualization. "It's my blood. It is what gets me up each morning, lets me alive," says Takamura.

Takamura's connection with pottery making is strong and is confirmed by his dissatisfaction with his world in the US. He says: "The world is backward here. There is no order. No order. I should have never left" (20). While he is angry with his American world, he praises the craftsmanship of his Japanese fellows and expresses the difficulties that he faces in being established in the world of pottery making. He feels out of place.

I'm having enough trouble getting set up. The clay's
all wrong here., way too sandy. There are no materials
for the right glazes—and I have no idea if this damn
noborigama is even going to fire out. (43)

In his attempt to ridicule the Americans lack of appreciation of aesthetic values, (and while showing Yachiyo the high craftsmanship of Japanese pottery making), Takamura confirms that the people in America would prefer wooden bowls that "they can knock on the floor and not break" (31). He then draws her attention to this fact while sarcastically saying: "See. That's what peasants like. Not finite beauty with the inherent fragility of human nature" (31). The craft of pottery making in Japan is of great importance in cultural history not only because of its inherent artistic worth but also because it is based on some of the most enduring values in the Japanese aesthetic tradition. In aesthetic terms, the veneration of primitive pottery rests on the value of naturalness⁴⁾, or the preference for things in their original, unaltered states (Varley 6). For the craftsman, naturalness means staying close to his materials. And indeed, close to his materials Takamura was and thus close to nature. He did not seek to disguise the clay he uses; and soon the products of his work were admired not only for their natural texture but also for the imperfections that inevitably appear. At the end of the play when Yachiyo is dead and despite the fact

that “surely the Heavens would not reward [him]” (61), he in awe and with considerable pride gazes at his pottery and exclaims: “My God.—They are beautiful—”(61).

4. Conclusion:

Yachiyo went through multiple stages of struggling with Maslow’s whole hierarchy of needs, starting with the basic physiological needs of air, water, food and sleep when she was part of the restless world at the sugar-cane plantation. The safety needs were later achieved where certain levels of stability and consistency appeared in her chaotic world. She achieved that by going to live with Takamura’s family who seemingly promised a better life. Yachiyo was later capable of reaching the third step of the pyramid. The love of Willie brings her to comfortably fit into that category. Having reached that level, she outstepped Okusan who did not gain the love of her husband and resorted to her ‘dolls’ as an outlet.

The esteem needs were divided into two types: self-esteem which results from competence or mastery of a certain task, and the attention and recognition that comes from others. Yachiyo kept a see-sawing imbalance on this step of the pyramid where her mastery of pottery making was still incomplete denying the first type of self-esteem. The second type was occasionally fulfilled by having Okusan as a teacher and confidant but whom she has totally lost after her illegitimate affair with her husband, Takamura.

Despite Yachiyo’s long struggle ascending the pyramid of the hierarchy of needs, she was only a few steps away from the top before she could reach the point of self-actualization. Ironically, she drops down where even the physiological needs are lacking—she commits suicide, but on the other hand, achieves the highest level of self-actualization through the honored tradition of Harakiri.

While Gotanda firmly believes that there is ‘no light at the end of the tunnel’, and that the dream of a better tomorrow is far-fetched, he was able to adopt an optimistic attitude, where the dream of self-actualization is attainable even if it was through committing suicide. For the three characters, it was only achieved through going back to the roots—the adherence to those cultural elements without which their lives could have ceased to ascend Maslow’s diagram. The dolls, the ritual suicide and the pottery making were elements that resulted in having the characters reach the highest top in the pyramid.

Japanese culture in general “escapes from the imprisoning chain of (Western) signifiers...but only as a wholly imaginary form of cultural otherness (Shershow 221). The ability of Japanese Americans to maintain their ethnic community through voluntary associations means that their ethnicity does not solely depend “on continuing more

exclusive strong ties" (Fugita 5) This, in turn, has permitted Japanese Americans to become involved in many aspects of life in the main stream community without having to sacrifice their ethnic ties. In the case of *Ballad of Yachiyo*, the characters not only did they not sacrifice their ethnic ties but also utilized them in ways that led to reaching the highest level of self-actualization.

The play displays the quest for a 'Japanese-American' identity by showing how the characters could only achieve their self actualization when they adhered to their own tradition. At the end of the play Takamura finally shouts: "I should have never left Japan" (31).

Notes:

- 1) The first large scale immigration of Asians into the U.S did not happen until 1848. Around that time, gold was discovered in America. People were thus lured by tales and dreams of making it rich on 'Gold Mountain' (which became the Chinese nickname for California).
- 2) Edo Period is between 1603 and 1868 also known as the Tokugawa period. During that time there was wide economic growth and flourishing of art and culture. This period came to an end by the Meiji restoration on May 3rd 1868.
- 3) Issei are the first generation Japanese immigrants to the US. Second generation is referred to as Nisei, while the third generation is Sansei. They all come from the numbers in the Japanese language "ichi, ni, san". For better understanding of the three generations of Japanese immigrants to the US, read Janice Mirikitani's poem 'Breaking Tradition'.
- 4) Another example of the aesthetic taste of the Japanese for naturalness is to be found in the architecture of *Shinto* shrines, the wood of which is often left unpainted. In this, practicality is clearly sacrificed to aesthetics, since natural wood shrines are much more susceptible than other kinds of structures to the ravages of weathering. The periodical replacement or rebuilding of the shrine is part of the ritual and ensures the naturalness and purity of the wood.

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