

**MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN JAPANESE
IMMIGRANT FAMILIES: MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN
SEVENTEEN SYLLABLES
AND
*AND THE SOUL SHALL DANCE***

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***Abstract:** The focus of this study is the mother-daughter relationships depicted in Japanese American literature in the mid- to late 20th century. I analyse the short stories of Hisaye Yamamoto (1921-2011) and Wakako Yamauchi (1924-2018), to illustrate how the mother-daughter relationships are closely connected to different ethnic and cultural identities in the Japanese immigrant families.*

***Keywords:** Japanese-American literature, mother-daughter relationship, Hisaye Yamamoto, Wakako Yamauchi*

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to analyse how *issei* (first-generation) Japanese mothers, are presented in stories written by *nisei* (second-generation) Japanese American authors. The introduction of *Memory and Cultural Politics (MCP)* (Singh et al. 1996) began with a hypothesis by Marcus Lee Hansen, who was a historian researching the history of immigration to the United States. Hansen's Law, which argues that "what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" (idem: 3), indicates that "Hansen's exemplary 'son', the second-generation immigrant, forgets the cultural past in the process of becoming an American, whereas the third-generation grandson, in the quest of a new identity shaped partly by disillusionment with the promises of American democracy, attempts to recover the ethnic past" (ibid.). As this hypothesis shows, each generation has different feelings and thoughts about their old countries and their current country, the United States. Moreover, it indicates that the second-generation immigrants, who were born and raised in the US, were not American from the beginning, but they 'become' American. Thus, the gap between each generation is also a matter of how American society perceives and treats them. Further, the nature of their connections or relations with their new country's society and the majority also differs within each ethnic group, along with how they are treated by the majority of the new country.

Japanese American literary stories also show a gap between generations. Elaine Kim (1982: 156) points out that one of the themes in Japanese American literature is the conflicts between *issei*, who moved from Japan, and *nisei*, who were born in the United States. Especially for those who were born before World War II and survived during the war and in the relocation centres, living in America

with the label ‘enemy alien’ was inconceivable. Many *issei* kept their connections to Japan while they were ‘Aliens Ineligible to Citizenship’ and experienced discrimination and rejection (Takezawa 2017: 8-9). On the other hand, *nisei* grew up in the American society, but maintained the Japanese tradition at home. Thus, especially during and after the war, they tried and needed to prove to the American society that they were ‘Americans’. As Yasuko Takezawa (2017: 132) comments, it was often said that *nisei* tried to be ‘120% American’ to be accepted by American society. However, at the same time, this meant that they had to deny their Japanese roots. Therefore, focusing on *issei* and *nisei* in stories gives readers a clue to understanding how they live between their old and new countries and how they are viewed by the majority groups. How one minority group is treated and what is happening in the group are often ignored by the majority in the new country, as well as by other minority ethnic groups.

Each immigrant group has its own cultural and historical background, which makes its members distinctive. For some distinctive groups, Hansen’s law is not easily applicable. In *MCP*, it is also mentioned that “serious complications arise, however, when Hansen’s Law is applied to the experience of such diverse groups as immigrant women from Europe, Native Americans, African Americans, Japanese Americans, and new immigrants of colour” (Singh et al. 1996: 4). As women and Japanese Americans are specifically pointed out in the quote, this intersection is worth examining, because Japanese American women are one of the minorities who have experienced being ignored, betrayed, and oppressed by their own culture as well as by the American society. Thus, my focus here is on *issei* mothers and *nisei* daughters.

According to Naoko Sugiyama (2007: 15-20), the literary portrayal of mother-daughter relationships has long been studied. In the 1970s, when many minority women authors, such as Toni Morrison, made their debut in the literary world, the identities of mothers and daughters began to be included in the themes of those studies. Since the 1980s, it has been argued that researching mothers only through the eyes of a child or daughter effectively silences the mother (idem: 20). Marianne Hirsch is one of the important figures highlighting mothers’ silence and the absence of mothers’ voices. Specifically, she focused on how silence was imposed on mothers. According to Mizuho Terasawa (1992: 447), Hirsch’s theory explains that the independence of daughters is connected to the absence or death of their mothers or mother-daughter cohesiveness. In studying mothers in the Western patriarchy, Hirsch (1989: 29) argued that it would not fully apply to another culture. She argues that in African American society, mothers have different characteristics, based on their cultural and historical backgrounds (ibid.). Just as African Americans had a different mother-daughter relationship than White Americans because of their unique cultural background and the historical background of slavery, Japanese Americans are a minority with a unique historical and cultural background. By referring to the pattern of Hirsch’s mother-daughter narratives, a unique mother-daughter relationship and mother image that is different from that of mainstream White America will be revealed. How are mothers portrayed in Japanese American literature and how do daughters grow up beside their mothers? I will look at how Japanese American mothers are presented in two short stories written by *nisei* Japanese writers, *Seventeen Syllables* by Hisaye Yamamoto and *And the Soul Shall Dance* (from now on *ASSD*) by Wakako Yamauchi.

Hisaye Yamamoto was born in California in 1921. Her parents had emigrated from Japan; thus, she was a second-generation (*nisei*) Japanese. Based

on her real-life experiences, she wrote about Japanese Americans. Kim (1982: 157) states that “Hisaye Yamamoto has chronicled Japanese American social history in her short stories”. Yamamoto met her life-long friend Wakako Yamauchi at the Poston Internment Camp (Cheung 1994: 10–11). Yamauchi was also a *Japanese Nisei*, born in California in 1924. Yamauchi (1994: vii) said, “My stories are about immigrants” and “my resources are only myself”. Yamamoto and Yamauchi both lived in the same era, shared experiences as *nisei* Japanese in America, and wrote stories about mothers and daughters on California farms. *Seventeen Syllables* by Yamamoto and *ASSD* by Yamauchi are examples of such stories. As the two short stories have different plots and atmospheres, it is worth comparing them in order to examine the mother-daughter relationships of Japanese Americans and their psychological portrayal.

As Mie Hihara (2001: 244) remarks, there are many stories about *issei* stories that were told through the voice or points of view of the *nisei* daughters. In addition, *issei* mothers are often repressed by both the traditions of the Japanese community and racial discrimination (Kim 1982: 208). *Seventeen Syllables* and *ASSD* are also told from the viewpoint of *nisei* daughters and readers can see that *issei* mothers have been oppressed. These stories can be read in various ways. As Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong (1993: 167) states, they can be read as “a woman’s domestic tragedy, as an account of female initiation into adult sexuality and suffering, as a matrilineal story of mother-daughter bonds and secrets, as an immigrant tale of shattered dreams and intergenerational estrangement”. However, in this paper, I would like to read *Seventeen Syllables* and *ASSD* with a focus on the mothers’ silence and on how daughters understand their mothers. This is relevant because *issei* mothers are not just silent and voiceless.

2. Mothers as narrated figures and their silence

Hihara (2001: 244) points out that, in Japanese American literature, there are many *issei* mothers’ stories that were told in the *nisei* daughters’ voice or from their point of view. *Seventeen Syllables* and *ASSD* are also told from the *nisei* daughters’ viewpoint.

ASSD starts as follows:

It’s all right to talk about it now. Most of the principals are dead, except, of course, me and my younger brother, and possibly Kiyoko Oka, who might be near forty-five now because, yes, I’m sure of it, she was fourteen then. I was nine, and my brother about four, so he hardly counts. (Yamauchi 1994: 19)

This beginning shows that the story is narrated by Masako, the protagonist, and is told from her perspective. Throughout the story, Masako, now 40 years old, recalls her childhood and her neighbours, The Okas. On the other hand, *Seventeen Syllables* is narrated in the third person. It begins as follows: “The first Rosie knew that her mother had taken to writing poems was one evening when she finished one and read it aloud for her daughter’s approval” (Yamamoto 2001: 8). It is evident that the protagonist, the *nisei* daughter Rosie, is not the narrator. However, the things happening around Rosie are written in detail, so the story is close to Rosie’s perspective. Researchers of *Seventeen Syllables*, including Fukuko Kobayashi (2006: 166), and Elaine Kim (1982: 160) agree that this is a story told from the *nisei* daughter’s point of view. Thus, both stories are told through the daughters’ eyes, and the mothers are “narrated” by their daughters.

When the mothers' lives are told by their daughters' voice or from their point of view, the mothers are silenced and their voices are removed. One of the reasons for this silence is the language barrier. Many *issei* mothers could not speak, read, or write English well, and generally, *nisei* Japanese Americans could only speak conversational Japanese; therefore, they could not share complicated and delicate feelings and thoughts (Takezawa 2017: 76).

At the beginning of *Seventeen Syllables*, Tome Hayashi, an *issei* mother and the wife of an *issei* Japanese American farmer, writes haiku poems for a Japanese-language newspaper. One day, Tome shows her haiku to her *nisei* daughter, Rosie, and she reads it out loud to her. Rosie grasps only that "it was about cats" (Yamamoto 2001: 8); she could not fully understand it, but she "pretended to understand it" (ibid.). For Rosie, "Japanese had to be searched for and examined, and even then, put forth tentatively" (ibid.), and, therefore, it was much easier to just say "Yes, yes, I understand" (ibid.). At the same time, Rosie wants to share with Tome an English haiku she read, because she knows that Tome is intrigued by haiku. However, Rosie is unable to do so. The language barriers between mother and daughter make it impossible for the mother to express her inner feelings. This is a limitation of the *nisei* daughters; they do not try to ignore their mothers - indeed, Rosie wants to talk about haiku with Tome. Similarly, other *nisei* daughters are simply unable to fully understand their mothers, given their limited knowledge of Japanese and their mothers' limited English.

In addition to the lack of language abilities, *issei* mothers conceal and do not talk about their inner self and problems to their daughters. Miki Shinoda (2011: 54–55) points out that, because *Seventeen Syllables* is told from Rosie's viewpoint, and she is just a high school girl, things that she does not notice are left out and not explained, and readers can only notice them in the background. However, what Rosie did not notice were things that her mother did not tell her or explain to her. For instance, when Rosie's father hurried home from the Hayanos, because he could not stand his wife talking about haikus with Mr. Hayano, his excuse for leaving was "work tomorrow" (Yamamoto 2001: 11). Tome surely knew what displeased her husband, but she just said, "I'm sorry" and "You must be tired" (ibid.). By watching them, Rosie "felt a rush of hate for them - for her mother for begging, for her father for denying her mother" (idem: 12). Her hate made her wish that the old Ford they were in would crash; she imagined "the three contorted, bleeding bodies" (ibid.).

In *ASSD*, the protagonist, the *nisei* daughter Masako, asks her mother whether another *issei* woman, Mrs. Oka, who lived near her house, was insane, because Mrs. Oka was different (Yamauchi 1994: 20). Mrs. Oka was shy, loved cigarettes, and liquor. She sometimes appeared with bruises on her face, and "some nights she disappeared altogether" (ibid.). Knowing and seeing Mrs. Oka's unusual behaviour, Masako's mother "shook her head and smiled with her mouth drawn down and said that Mrs. Oka loved to drink" (ibid.). It was obvious that something was wrong, something caused by more than just enjoying a drink, but Masako's mother did not explain why Mrs. Oka had bruises.

Separated by a language barrier and an inability to communicate much about their lives to their mothers, daughters understand that their mothers are different from them and are like other people whom they do not know well. *Seventeen Syllables* is told from Rosie's point of view, but is narrated by a third person. When Rosie saw Tome's pen name, Ume Hanazono, she regarded her as just another woman: "Rosie and her father lived with two women" (Yamamoto 2001: 9). From

Rosie's point of view, her mother (as Ume Hanazono) seemed to be a 'stranger'. Masako in *ASSD* is the narrator, but she does not talk much about her mother, and thus the mother is silenced by her own daughter. Instead of talking about her own mother, Masako describes Mrs. Oka, who was the *issei* mother figure for her. However, when she sees Mrs. Oka from outside, she seems "insane", an "unusual woman" (Yamauchi 1994: 20), and "strange" (idem: 21).

Kobayashi (2006: 160) compares Japanese American mothers and daughters to Chinese American mothers and daughters. According to her, women in the Japanese American family are generally silent and submissive, and therefore, conflicts and relations between mothers and daughters are often ambiguous. When mothers do not talk much about themselves and things around them, and keep silent, their daughters lose the chance to understand them.

3. Patriarchy and silenced mothers

The mothers also have their voices taken and silenced by the patriarchy of Japan and Japanese American society. Hihara (2001: 246) points out that mothers described by their daughters were oppressed by their husbands in their home, which was dominated by Japanese values like obedience, and were depicted as women who pursued their freedom. *Seventeen Syllables* and *ASSD* are the stories that Hihara mentions as examples; Tome in *Seventeen Syllables* and Mrs. Oka in *ASSD* are both repressed under Japanese patriarchy. When they pursue freedom and liberation, the shadow of death is always behind them.

Tome Hayashi in *Seventeen Syllables* writes haiku under the pen name Ume Hanazono. Ume refers to Japanese apricots and the flowers on Japanese apricot trees. Hanazono is a flower garden in Japan. Thus, the name is blossoming, cheerful, and bright. When Tome explains the haiku to Rosie as "a poem in which she must pack all her meaning into seventeen syllables" (Yamamoto 2001: 8), it is Tome's other, better self who is guided by her own inner voice. However, flowers do not bloom forever, and nor does Ume Hanazono. Ume's life seems to end suddenly when her haiku wins the first prize. It was a hot day, and everyone in the Hayashi family had to pick and sort tomatoes at their farms, before they went bad. Just then, the haiku editor of the Japanese newspaper visits Tome and gives her a Hiroshige artwork as a gift. She does not return quickly to the farm to help her husband. Instead, she welcomes and talks to the editor. That makes her husband so mad that he burns the picture. With that violent act, Ume's life ends suddenly, and so does Tome's other self, as if Rosie's wish for a car crash had come true. Ume loses her voice and her free soul. Her body is unable to escape her husband. As Rosie saw, her mother "kept house, cooked, washed, and along with her husband [...] did her ample share of picking tomatoes out in the sweltering fields and boxing them in tidy strata" (idem: 9). There was a great deal of work to do, and all of it was her responsibility, as the wife of an *issei* farmer. According to Masako Iino (2000: 47), *issei* on farms had to work 13 to 16 hours per day to support themselves. Thus, Tome had too much work to do.

On the other hand, just as the bruises on her body tell, Mrs. Oka was abused by her husband. Even though her husband used to beat her, she could not escape. Iino (2000: 48) argues that *issei* wives could not escape their husbands and return to Japan; first, they could not speak English well and did not have enough money to make it on their own. Second, those who fled to Japan were called "demodori" (Iino 2000: 48). The word, meaning "boomerang woman" in Japanese, is often

used pejoratively for women who return home because they have divorced or lost their husbands. Under the Japanese patriarchy, a woman had to obey her husband or her family, so divorce left a bad impression. For these reasons, Mrs. Oka had no choice but to stay with her abusive husband.

Both Tome and Mrs. Oka are silenced under the pressure of patriarchal society. And as described, mothers are doubly silenced, both by their daughters' stories and the Japanese patriarchy.

4. Voices of mothers

The mothers' silence, however, reveals their isolation. Shinoda (2011: 54-55) mentions that readers can notice the background stories; the more the mothers were silenced, the more things needed to be told. When Tome apologises demurely about being into haiku by saying "I forgot what time it is" (Yamamoto 2001: 12) and calmly watches her prize being burned, she is deeply isolated because she has not been understood or allowed to pursue her happiness. When Mrs. Oka "would wait out our visit with enormous forbearance, quietly pushing wisps of stray hair behind her ears and waving gnats away from her great moist eyes" (Yamauchi 1994: 20), she says nothing. However, her appearance suggests that she was enduring something by herself, in isolation. When the mothers' voices are almost heard at the end of both stories, they are extremely powerful. But these voices are actually heard only from the daughters' points of view.

In *Seventeen Syllables*, when Tome's prize is burnt by her husband, Tome opens up and shares her secret with Rosie. Her secret is followed by Tome's urgent request to Rosie, "Promise me you will never marry!" (Yamamoto 2001: 19), and this is her own voice. Therefore, even though Tome was doubly silenced, she tries to use her voice. In *ASSD*, Mrs. Oka seems not to have a voice until the end. When Masako sees Mrs. Oka in the desert one night, she was singing songs in Japanese. Masako hides from her, so Mrs. Oka does not notice her at first. She sings, "Red lips / Press against a glass / Drink the green wine / And the soul shall dance" (Yamauchi 1994: 24). The red lips could be the blood or lip colour of young women. Western liquors are called 'green wine' in Japan, and they were popular among young people in the 1920s and the 1930s (Takita 2002: 37); thus, this song evokes images of her youth. However, Mrs. Oka's situation is far removed from that of this song. She was physically and mentally abused by her husband, and she never had a moment when her soul danced. She was also sent away from Japan, because when she was young, she "had foolishly become involved with a man of poor reputation" (Yamauchi 1994: 21). That was the last time Masako saw Mrs. Oka; thus, her singing was important to Masako and it could have been her own voice.

Both stories are told from the daughters' perspective and in recollection of their childhood days. Kobayashi (2006: 156-157) compares Japanese American women to Chinese American women and concludes that Chinese American daughters stand on their own and thrive on the strong Chinese women in the old Chinese stories told by their mothers. Their roots, China, and their Chinese mothers are the anchors in their own lives. In contrast, what Japanese daughters get from their mothers is a warning that they might inherit the world of their mothers, stifled and circumscribed, might be condemned to lives of drudgery, devoid of romance or beauty, with only their strength and quiet endurance to keep their spirits alive (Kim 1982: 162). While hearing their silenced mothers' voices, Japanese daughters

become witnesses of their mothers' lives and of the way the society they live in treats them.

5. Conclusion

As described before, Japanese mothers are doubly silenced - by their daughters and by the Japanese patriarchy, which is strongly tied to *issei*. Mrs. Oka's death at the end of *ASSD* and those silenced mothers are in line with Hirsch's theory of 'mother's early death' (Hirsch 1989: 21). However, when a daughter becomes a witness to the process of her mother's death, the daughter earns a chance to learn what was happening to her mother. That makes the daughter able to 'tell her mother's story.' By telling the story of her mother, of her silence and oppression, the daughter shows others that such a mother existed. By re-telling her mother's story the daughter seems to revive her mother. Masako in *ASSD* can finally talk about her story when she is 40 years old; the time difference shows that it takes time to finally understand what happened to Mrs. Oka under the pressure of the society and the times. In Japanese American mother-daughter relationships, to be able to tell a mother's story from the daughter's viewpoint, what the mother was like or what was happening to her is not easy and sometimes takes time, because of the mother's silence. However, by telling the mother's story, the daughter finally understands her mother and the society they have been in.

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