

*Asian American Mother-Daughter Literature and Representations of Families of the Japanese Diaspora in Canada*

Lyle De Souza, University of London (Birkbeck), United Kingdom

The Asian Conference on Asian Studies 2014  
Official Conference Proceedings  
0089

**Abstract**

This paper details representations of Canadian Nikkei families by Canadian Nikkei authors in the periods just before and after Redress (1988) and The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988). It examines relationships amongst matrilineal generations in novels within the critical context of the mother-daughter dyad in Asian American literature. People of Japanese descent in Canada have complex cultural identities relating to their sense of belonging (or not) in Canada, their imaginings of Japan as homeland, and the growth of Nikkei identifying themselves transnationally.

The paper considers Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* in which the protagonist Naomi's relationships with her (absent) mother and her two aunts frame her understanding of her own cultural identity. It also uses Hiromi Goto's novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* which has a family that problematises Canadian identity and asks questions of Canada's multicultural mosaic (and the place of minorities such as Canadian Nikkei within it). Canadian Nikkei—who were called 'the yellow peril' when they first arrived in Canada but are now seen as a 'model minority'—offer a window for exploring many of the most important issues around identity in Canada today.

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

This paper details representations of the matrilineal Canadian Nikkei family in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (Kogawa, 1994b), first published in 1981, and Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* (Goto, 1997), first published in 1994. It shows within the critical context of Asian American mother-daughter literature ambiguities in how Canadian Nikkei may both belong (or not) to the nation-state Canada, as well as the possibilities this then leads to in terms of transnational Nikkei cultural identities.

Canadian Nikkei novels sometimes follow the mother-daughter dyad prevalent in Asian American literature, although they can also appropriate it to better represent how they see the cultural identity of Canadian Nikkei. The novels I analyse here are not always strictly matrilineal in the sense of proceeding through the generations from grandmother through to granddaughter. *Obasan* has as its protagonist the young child Naomi (interspersed with her adult self) whose mother and grandmothers are all missing from her life. In their place are Naomi's two very different aunts—the eponymous obasan, and Aunt Emily. By negotiating her relationships with these maternal proxies, Naomi comes to understand her place of belonging (or otherwise) in Canada and the possibilities for a cultural identity extending beyond nation-states. *Chorus of Mushrooms* at first glance follows a more traditional matrilineal model with grandmother Naoe, her daughter Keiko, and Keiko's daughter Murasaki. It also at first glance appears to fit into the Asian American mother-daughter dyad with both sets of mother-daughter at odds with each other due to cultural differences. However, these differences are not resolved in a predictable fashion according to the Asian American mother-daughter dyad since Goto shows that cultural identity is more complicated than simply moving from point A to point B.

Both novels at their start appear to stereotype their old women Canadian immigrants as racialised and underpowered. Yet, alternative readings of these novels particularly as their narratives develop suggest that assumptions about these women and their memories need to be questioned. Their storytelling brings to the fore the issue of difference in Canada, showing how power and politics work around cultural identity.

A general theme in Asian American literature stretching back to the post-war period is mother-daughter novels. Such novels place the relationship of the mother and the daughter as a central tenet of the novel. They place emphasis on conflict between mother and daughter which may or may not be resolved by the novel's end. Critical literature on such novels has grown in the last two decades with attention paid not only to gender but also to race, ethnicity, and social class (see Chodorow, 1999; Grice, 2002; Ho, 1999; Simpson, 2001). Novels by Canadian Nikkei writers both fit into this general field of Asian American literature and its more specific sub-field of mother-daughter literature, as well do not fit (sometimes by consciously attempting not to). Matrilineage, whilst important to bring out the key aforementioned issues such as gender and ethnicity, has a tendency to overshadow historically and culturally specific Canadian Nikkei issues by bringing them instead under this broader rubric of Asian American.

There are several novels that appear time and again in literary analysis pertaining to mother-daughter relationships and immigrant generations to North America. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (Wong, 1950) is a coming of age story of a young Chinese American girl's attempts to balance adapting to America with the expectations of her family. *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan, 2006), first published in 1989 and later made into a

film (Wang, 1993), tells the story of four Chinese immigrant mothers in San Francisco and each mother's relationship with their own daughter. *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (Ng, 1998) shows heroine Ruby Lee's complicated relationship with her mother and the rest of her family, as well as her struggle to understand her identity. *The Woman Warrior* (Kingston, 1989), first published in 1975, blends autobiography with Chinese folktales to portray Chinese-American life in the United States. Unlike many mother-daughter novels which tend to take the perspective of either the mother or the daughter (more usually the latter), *The Woman Warrior* offers the points of view of both mother and daughter. *The Woman Warrior*, like *Obasan*, is widely taught throughout North American universities. It "serves as a mother-text that paved the way for later depictions of an transnational matrilineage between mothers and daughters" (Schultermandl, 2009: 29). Kingston's novel acted almost as a blueprint for many subsequent novels on mother-daughter conflict and the difficulties of reconciling place in society and place in family.

Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* also has mother-daughter conflict at its heart. There is conflict between Naoe and her daughter Keiko, as well as Keiko and her daughter Murasaki. Since grandmother Naoe and granddaughter Murasaki get on very well it would be simple to surmise that the central problem (quite literally) is Keiko. Goto appears aware of the Asian American mother-daughter literary context when she writes: "parent/child conflict. Add a layer of cultural displacement and the tragedy is complete." (Goto, 1997: 98). *Chorus of Mushrooms* appears to introduce stereotypes of Asian American women to later deconstruct them. Goto does this to avoid generalisations of what it means to be, variously, a woman, an Asian American woman, and a Canadian Nikkei woman. Mother-daughter writing affords her the ideal avenue to do this, as Wendy Ho explains:

*Many women writers of color sought ways to articulate their specific concerns and contradictions in the telling of their mother-daughter experiences in ways that did not replicate or depend upon white mainstream feminist models and narratives. As much as there were intense conflicts with mothers, they emphasized the mothers' powerful social and emotional presence in nurturing their creativity and in establishing the homeplace as a political space for their subordinated racial-ethnic families.*

(Ho, 1999: 37)

The tension in the relationship between mother and daughter in *Chorus of Mushrooms* is based upon their different needs. The mother (Naoe) has been uprooted from her homeland, a place she was familiar with and knew. She finds herself in a new place where her past experience counts for little and may even be seen negatively. Her offspring (particularly her daughter, Keiko), whom she would previously had expected to follow her ways and customs have ideas of their own. These daughters have their own issues of trying to fit into a society where individuality is valued whilst still somehow meeting the expectations of their mothers. Although many Asian American mother-daughter novels fit the *bildungsroman* model, some are left more open-ended since there is no easy narrative for successful resolution of these issues. Exploration of selfhood and cultural identity seems to necessitate the need for storytelling:

*While some of the works portray in equal measures the mother's quest for identity, such as through narratives of the mother's lives in Asia or their experiences of immigration and diaspora, what foregrounds the daughter's perspective is the explicitly transnational negotiation of matrilineage they perform through the daughter's appropriation of her matrilineage. In reflecting on and reassessing their own childhoods, the daughters in the texts by these Asian American women writers recreate memories and thus attempt self-creation via the narrative process of storytelling.*

(Schultermandl, 2009: 25)

The term 'Asian American' is problematic in terms of its application to the Canadian Nikkei writers such as Goto and Kogawa for two main reasons. First, it is difficult to define. Second, it appears to make the term 'Asian Canadian' a subset of 'Asian American' rather than a term with meaning in its own right. The meaning of the term Asian American is reflected in changes in (Asian American) literature over time. Asian American has moved away from being based on a vague notion of Asia (or specific nation-states within Asia) and an essentialised notion of Canada and the United States (combined into a monolithic 'American'). Appadurai shows the inadequacy of the term to cope with the huge variation it contains:

*The formula of hyphenation (as in Italian-Americans, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans) is reaching the point of saturation, and the right side of the hyphen can barely contain the unruliness of the left side... The politics of ethnic identity in the United States is inseparably linked to the global spread of originally local national identities. For every nation-state that has exported significant numbers of its population to the United States as refugees, tourists, or students, there is now a decolonized transnation, which retains a special ideological link to a putative place or origin but is otherwise a thoroughly diasporic collectivity. No existing conception of Americanness can contain this large variety of transnations.*

(Appadurai, 1996: 172)

Notwithstanding the problems of defining 'Asian' and 'American' separately, the term also places apparent equal emphasis on both. However, the reality is that writers are often located in these cultures unequally. By writing of Japan as belonging to their past heritage and Canada as their present reality, there is a danger of Orientalising Japan and not representing its transcultural influences appropriately. The transnational, translingual, and transcultural nature of the term Asian American has come to be increasingly appreciated in more recent times after Appadurai. Literary novels are often of help in this understanding. Yet, this appreciation of new meanings for Asian American is not universal. In other words, the term Asian American may mean different things to different people.

This leads to ask what is the precise purpose of the term Asian American? On one level, it can be seen as ideological, something that can be used by different bodies for different purposes. For example, minorities such as Canadian Nikkei can use the term as a preferable alternative to Japanese-Canadian since it avoids the problems of essentialising cultural identity based on nation-states. It also brings together different

cultural groups not only within nation-states such as Canada but also transnationally across North America. The term Asian American also serves a political purpose for Canadian Nikkei cultural producers. For example, since people of Japanese descent are one of the smallest visible minorities in Canada, labelling oneself as Asian Canadian allows a degree of leverage. This can be useful in applying for funding, grants, or even for advertising and promoting their works.

Kogawa's *Obasan* moves from the specificity of Canada to the more general realm of the Asian American. Like *Chorus of Mushrooms*, *Obasan* is characterised by an absence of male characters particularly positively influential father-figures. Emphasis is almost entirely transferred to the female characters and it is the two aunts who have the greatest influence on the subjectivity and construction of Naomi's cultural identity. From *obasan* she learns how to speak with silence, how to endure, how to cope with the everyday racism directed at Canadian Nikkei even after the war and to young children such as her brother Stephen and herself. From her Aunt Emily—and this is developed much more in the sequel to *Obasan* titled *Itsuka* (Kogawa, 1994a) then later rewritten as *Emily Kato* (Kogawa, 2005)—she learns how to argue, how to speak, how to fight against the racism directed against Canadian Nikkei even at the highest levels of government and media.

As a result of her interactions with these two very different aunts, one ostensibly representing Japan and the other the West, Naomi finds herself with a hybridised cultural identity. The hybridised cultural identity is not a simple Japanese-Canadian one, but one which mixes elements of the already hybridised identities of her aunts along with all the other influences Naomi has as a young child growing up in Canada. Yet, this hybridised identity is not something that Naomi feels completes her. Her missing mother is the key to understanding Naomi's need to keep searching and asking questions related to who she is and where she (and Canadian Nikkei) come from. It leads her in *Emily Kato* to research on Nikkei in the United States and whilst doing this and beginning to see the parallels with Canadian Nikkei in their historical treatment during the Second World War she begins to conceptualise a transnational cultural identity which can move beyond the nation-states of Canada and Japan.

The terms 'Asian American' and 'Asian Canadian' are sometimes used as an alternative to Canadian Nikkei but I would argue that they are more effective as political terms rather than for using to help understand cultural identities. Yet both terms raise some important questions relevant to discussions of cultural identity. For the term Asian American, I wonder why a canon of so-called 'Asian American literature' has developed. This seems incongruous in the current age of postnationalism, postethnicity, and, to a lesser extent, transnationalism. Chin argues that the category of Asian American literature is dominated by the ventriloquist autobiography which solidifies racial ideologies:

*We began another year angry! Another decade, another Chinese American ventriloquizing the same old white Christian fantasy of little Chinese victims of 'the original sin of being born to a brutish, sadomasochistic culture of cruelty and victimization' fleeing to America in search of freedom from everything Chinese and seeking white acceptance, and of being victimized by stupid white racists and then being reborn in acculturation and honorary whiteness. Every Chinese American book*

*ever published in the United States of America by a major publisher has been a Christian autobiography or autobiographical novel.*

(Chin et al., 1991: xi–xii)

Chin's critique is exaggerated and overly laden with notions of conspiracy, but there is an element of truth to it. Perhaps the case is different between Asian American literature from the United States and that from Canada, but in the case of the latter there is plenty of what Lisa Lowe terms 'heterogeneity' in the cultural identity of Asian Americans. In Lowe's highly influential *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Lowe, 1996) she argues that even the most prescribed novels "reveal heterogeneity rather than reproducing regulating ideas of cultural identity or integration" (Lowe, 1996: 43). A problem with Lowe's position in the context of my research is that even if we are to accept that Canadian Nikkei authors are able to create a particular notion of (Canadian Nikkei) cultural identity how is it that they still seem to fit within the category of the Asian-American literary canon? The answer to this might be that—even if they have no intention of doing so—Canadian Nikkei authors are automatically drawn into the Asian-American literary canon by default. The authors are perhaps more affected by discourse around this canon and its ideological influences than they realise. In this sense, Chin is right since there is more to compare than there is to contrast between Asian American writers such as Kogawa, Kingston, Tan, Jen, Mukherjee, Lai, and so on.

The Asian American literary canon hints at transnationalism and globalism yet one that stops at the Americas. The literary canon—as with Canadian Nikkei cultural identity—of course, does not do this. It exists both within and outside these borderlands. Cultural production and the creative industries is also not just something originating in the Americas but increasingly influenced by and a collaboration between Japan and colonised Nikkei. When seen in these terms cultural identity and issues of representation move away from Canadian Nikkei, Japanese Canadian, and Asian American, towards Nikkei and its worldwide diaspora. Hence, terms such as Asian American might be more useful for bringing together different groups of people of Asian origin in the United States and Canada, as for example is the case with some of the taiko groups in Canada.

## References

- Appadurai A (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Chodorow N (1999) *The reproduction of mothering: psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender : with a new preface*. University of California Press.
- Goto H (1997) *Chorus of mushrooms*. Edmonton: NeWest Press.
- Grice H (2002) *Negotiating identities: an introduction to Asian American women's writing*. Manchester University Press.
- Ho W (1999) *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-daughter Writing*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kingston MH (1989) *The woman warrior: memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts*. Vintage Books.
- Kogawa J (1994a) *Itsuka*. Toronto: Anchor Books.
- Kogawa J (1994b) *Obasan*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Kogawa J (2005) *Emily Kato*. Penguin Group (Canada).
- Ng M (1998) *Eating Chinese food naked: a novel*. New York: Scribner.
- Schultermandl S (2009) *Transnational Matrilineage: Mother Daughter Conflicts in Asian American Literature*. LIT Verlag Münster.
- Simpson CC (2001) In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing (review). *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 4(3), 291–293.
- Tan A (2006) *The Joy Luck Club*. Penguin.
- Wang W (1993) *The Joy Luck Club*. Drama.
- Wong JS (1950) *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Harper.