
Collective Memory, Living History: We-Narrative in Julia Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*

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ABSTRACT: *The last two decades have witnessed increasing interest in social minds and collective narrative. The first person plural form is frequently employed by women writers and African-America writers to endow the marginalized groups with voices. This article approaches Julie Otsuka's historical novel The Buddha in the Attic(2011) in this context. One of the most striking features of The Buddha in the Attic is its we-narrative. Yet its power is undervalued in the earlier reviews. This article argues that we-narrative in The Buddha in the Attic is an especially effective narrative technique to express the collective minds of the marginalized and muted Japanese "picture brides" and gives them long overdue voices to articulate their hidden and forgotten life stories.*

KEY WORDS: collective, we-narrative, picture brides, voice, Julia Otsuka

INTRODUCTION

Julie Otsuka's historical novel *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) was published with both critical and popular acclaim. It was one of the five finalists for the National Book Award in fiction 2011 and was awarded the Pen/Faulkner Award for Fiction 2012. It was also listed as one of The New York Times Bestsellers. *The Buddha in the Attic* is to some extent Otsuka's prequel of her first fiction *When the Emperor Was Divine* which was about a Japanese American family's nightmare experience in the internment camps in Utah after the Pearl Harbor. *The Buddha in the Attic* traces the lives of a group of Japanese "picture-brides" from their journey to the United States in 1917 to their departure for the internment camps of World War II. The novel consists of eight chapters which focus on important moments of the women's lives, for instance, their journey to America, their sexual and domestic life, their labor, and the exploitation from the whites.

One of the most striking features of *The Buddha in the Attic* is its we-narrative. Yet in the earlier days of its publication, the critical views of its we-narrative are not without division. Ron Charles, although admitting that the novel's communal voice "becomes more appropriate to the paranoia and confusion these women feel. Their voices mingle, and isolated images, so precisely captured by Otsuka, deliver an explosion far beyond their size", claims that he is "troubled by the friction between this novel's theme and its style". Charles complains about the plural voice being "necessarily blurring and distancing", reducing the women to lists in the same way as they were cruelly stripped of individuality during the war. He states that "had we known them as full individuals — as real and diverse and distinct — we couldn't have whisked them away to concentration camps in the desert" (8 Nov. 2011). Ursula LeGuin acknowledges that writing a long narrative in the first-person plural is a risky business. She complains that "the book has neither a novel's immediacy of individual experience, nor the broad overview of history" (27 Jan. 2012). LeGuin also finds the radical change of the narrative mode in the last chapter inadequate and thinks the novel should have followed the group of women to the internment camp. Alida Becker does not think highly of the novel's ending either, complaining that the shift to a different collective voice at the end of the novel signals a "disappointing" loss of connection to the novel's issei women (26 Aug. 2011). To sum up the main complaints of the three reviewers: First, the collective voice in the novel, powerful as it is, falls short of individuality. Second, the switch of narrative mode from the Japanese women "we" to the white "we" is not coherent.

Otsuka has stated that "using the first-person plural allowed me to tell a much larger story than I could have told otherwise" and "the voice I chose for *Buddha* was the voice that seemed right for the material". She has also justified her use of first-person plural by claiming that "since Japan is a very group-oriented culture... it made sense to speak of the picture brides as a collective entity" (Ryan). As for the sudden shift of perspective to a different collective voice in the last chapter, Otsuka has explained that it is intended as "the perfect, unexpected ending" and an answer to the collective amnesia on the part of the "Californians who'd been alive during WWII who told me that they had 'no idea' about the camps"(Yuhua June 13 2012). This essay intends to argue that the we-narrative in *The Buddha in the Attic* is appropriate and effective ideologically and narratologically in light of the recent narratological theories of first-person plural narrative.

Collective in Fiction

As western literature tradition values individuality rather than collective, the first-person singular narrative is usually counted as a norm, while the collective voice has long been ignored and under-researched. According to Fludernick, "the most

under-researched aspect of collective narrative is that of the communal voice in storytelling”(143). One of the earliest narratologists to focus on a “communal voice” is Susan Lanser, who does not only note the communal characteristics of “I” narration in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Marguerite Audoux ‘s *L’ Atelier de Marie-Clare*, but also explores two types of first-person-plural form: “simultaneous, first-person-plural narration in a literal ‘we’ that allows voices to speak in unison, and sequential narration in which each voice speaks in turn so that the ‘we’ is produced from a series of collaborating I’s.”(Lanser, 256) Lanser states, “a plural voice that narrates collective perceptions transgresses Western fiction’s conventionally singular notions of consciousness. While this singularity may seem to be a natural extension of the properties of spoken discourse, I want to locate it at least provisionally as the product of individualist cultures which presume consciousness to be unique and literature the ‘original’ product of single authorship”(Lanser 256). Nevertheless, the collective voice is actually not rare in oral convention and in more collective-oriented eastern culture. After Susan Lanser’s ground-making study of “communal voice,” Uri Margolin, in one of the most extensive studies of collective narrative, defines collective narrative as follows:

A narrative is a collective narrative if a collective narrative agent occupies the protagonist role. The difference between standard and collective narratives resides therefore in the reversal of the usual proportion between individual and collective agents. Not every collection of individuals (e.g., Zola’s crowds) qualifies as a collective agent. To qualify, the collection must act as a plural subject or we-group, capable of forming shared group intentions and acting on them jointly. (591)

In recent years, narratologists have shown steady interest in collective in narrative, whether they are collective mind, collective action or collective narrative. As Fludernick states, “collective minds have recently received a boost not only in the wake of Alan Palmer’s essays and book (to which *Style* devoted a special issue in 2011), but also through the publication of a special issue of *Narrative* in 2015, edited by Maximilian Alders and Eva von Contzen, examining the diachrony of collective minds.” (141) Fludernick also writes series of important essays on collectives, aiming to establish a poetics of collective, both factual and fictional. Brian Richardson explores the unnatural nature of we-narrative both in fiction and non-fiction. He states that Conrad’s *The Nigger of “Narcissus”* is one of the earliest we-narrative, and another case in point is Faulkner’s *A Rose for Emily*. *Narrative* and *Style* devoted a special issue to collective narrative in 2017 and 2020 respectively.

Besides the increasing popularity of research into collectives in fiction, the theoretical

attention to we-narratives is also due to a growing interest in this form among writers themselves. Take American fictions as an example, while William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* is often cited as a forerunner of we-narrative, there are also many other American writers who employ we-narrative, including Joan Chase, Kate Walbert, Karen Joy Fowler, Joshua Ferris, Ed Park, Justin Torres, and Julie Otsuka. The following section will explore why writers, Julie Otsuka in particular, choose to employ we-narrative.

The Ideological Function of We-Narrative

Adrienne Rich writes, "And so even ordinary pronouns become a political problem." (224) Adalaide Morris states, "pronouns, like all narrative strategies, carry out the tasks Jane Tompkins has termed 'cultural work.' The pronouns we select to stand in for us both respond to and shape our position in the social order: they react to specific historical pressures; they articulate problems and propose solutions; they summon others toward us or shove them away" (11-29). Richardson also notes "the intensely political uses" of technique of we-narrative (43). Many African and the African diaspora writers would choose we-narrative to endow the marginalized and otherwise silenced group with a voice. In Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, "we" are black Africans, and the pronoun is a tool of resistance; it is routinely opposed to the discourse of a colonizing "they", whether Arab or European (Richardson 206). Other African writers who utilize this mode of narration include Richard Wright's non-fiction *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Zakes Mda in *Ways of Dying* (1995). More and more women writers also resort to we-narrative. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a "we" of two sisters that comes to include other black adolescents and ultimately a larger community. Joan Chase's *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* (1983) goes even further with no "I" narrator at all, but only with a "we" narrator that becomes the only constituent of narrating as if the protagonists experienced growing-up years through a single mind. Richardson is right to state that:

"In both fiction and nonfiction it seems to encourage a literary playfulness and creativity as authors represent the collective thoughts and sensibilities of marginalized groups that have formed close bonds: seamen on a ship, boys emerging from adolescence, enslaved and mistreated African Americans, and disempowered wives. The 'we' voice is particularly able to tell these otherwise neglected or silenced narratives. It is the very ambiguity and fluctuations of the precise identity of the 'we' that are among its most interesting, dramatic, and appealing features." (210)

When Julia Osaka conducted research for her first novel *When the Emperor Was Divine* in California, she was surprised to find few people knew the history of "picture

bride”, or the disappearance of Japanese American from their neighborhood. In an interview, she also mentioned the experience of her mother, who as a girl had to leave her school for the interment camp for three years during the war, returned to find nobody asked her why she had left or where she had been. It seemed as if nothing had happened. That period of turbulent life for Japanese women and diaspora community seemed to have been entirely effaced and forgotten. Osaka states, “I was also struck by how little we hear about the lives of women in the official historical accounts. Most history is written by men, and about men. So I wanted to give a voice to these invisible unsung women—the ones who didn’t make it into the pages of the history books—because their lives are just as heroic and dramatic (if not more so) as the lives of the men who ‘officially’ make history.”(Yuhas June 13 2012).

We-narrative came to Otsuka’s mind right at the beginning of her writing. She said during the research of “picture bride”, she had “run across so many fascinating stories”, and thought that “tell them all—using the ‘we’ voice” allowed her to “weave them all in.” (Yuhas June 13 2012) There is no unity of place or character in the novel. All of the women’s stories are being told simultaneously in cities and towns and labor camps throughout California. Otsuka calls this “we” voice “choral narrator”. She admits that to create the parallel worlds and bring them to life simultaneously on the page is one of the biggest challenges in her writing. It reminds us of Susan Lancer’s “simultaneous, first-person-plural narration,”(256) which Lancer defines as “a narrative situation in which both voice and focalization are represented as communal, so that the ‘we’ who perceives is also the ‘we’ who speaks”(257).

Otsuka begins her novel with a group of Japanese “picture brides”—some of them as young as 12 or 13, sailing to San Francisco, anticipating to marry rich and handsome men. Each of them carries a photo she thinks to be her arranged would-be husband, though most of the photos are either false or taken many years ago.

On the boat we were mostly virgins. We had long black hair and flat wide feet and we were not very tall. **Some of us** had eaten nothing but rice gruel as young girls and had slightly bowed legs, and **some of us** were only fourteen years old and were still young girls ourselves. **Some of us** came from the city, and wore stylish city clothes, but **many more of us** came from the country and on the boat we wore the same old kimonos we’d been wearing for years—faded hand-me-downs from our sisters that had been patched and redyed many times. **Some of us** came from the mountains, and had never before seen the sea, except for in pictures, and **some of us** were the daughter of fishermen who had been around the sea all our lives. Perhaps we had lost a brother or father to the sea, or a fiance, or perhaps someone we loved had jumped into the water one unhappy morning and simply swum away, and now it was time for

us, too, to move on. (Otsuka 3 emphasis added)

According to Palmer, the size of communal groups may vary from small units of marriage, friends, families to larger units such as battalions, town folk, citizens of a state, or members of a specific class or gender(67). In the above excerpt, “we” represent the group of Japanese “picture brides”. Otsuka provides readers with a panoramic view of the background of “picture brides,” emphasizing their collective features such as “we had long black hair and flat wide feet and we were not very tall” as well as their diversity. Here, we see a move from the more general to more particular. The group is divided into sub-groups by using “some of us,” “many more of us.” In this way, Otsuka tells parallel stories and addresses the different backgrounds among the women, as exemplified above, they are different in age, class, and culture. Their differences can also lie in religion: “some of us were from Nara, and prayed to our ancestors three times a day, and swore we could still hear the temple bells ringing”(Otsuka 7), while “one of us, who was Christian and ate meat, and prayed to a different and long-haired god, carried hers [husband’s photo] between the pages of a King James Bible,”(Otsuka 11) or in sexuality, “[a] few of us on the boat never did get used to being with a man, and if there has been a way of going to America without marrying one, we would have figured it out”(Otsuka 18).

Otsuka’s “we” is often general; from time to time it is particularized as we get depictions of especially wide ranging and specific features of the picture brides that include numerous differences. Otsuka’s depiction of the women’s diversity seems to echo the present feminist theory: “[t]he central task for many feminists today is to articulate the extraordinary complex and simultaneous interaction of gender, class, race, and sexuality [...] that create differences between women.” (Blunt 6)

Fludernick astutely points out, “Otsuka’s text is particularly notable for its evocation of concrete individual experiences that serve to bolster, rather than detract from, the collective story of Japanese women immigrants (issei) and their sad fate. Otsuka achieves a paradoxical merging between the disparate details of personal circumstances and the overarching similarity of lived experience in the group.”(151) Otsuka keeps a balance between painting a collective picture and adding some fine touches of specific individual experiences. In this way, Otsuka is very careful not to let her portrayal of the women fall into essentialism. This technique is more keenly felt as Otsuka skillfully intersperses the parallel sentences with some direct speech without quotation marks. The following paragraph will suffice to expound this technique:

The youngest of us was twelve, and from the eastern shore of Lake Biwa, and had not

yet begun to bleed. *My parents married me off for the betrothal money.* The oldest of us was thirty-seven, and from Niigata, and had spent her entire life taking care of her invalid father, whose recent death made her both happy and sad. I knew I could marry only if he died. One of us was from Kumamoto, where there were no more eligible men—all of the eligible men had left the year before to find work in Manchuria—and felt fortunate to have found any kind of husband at all. *I took one look at his photograph and told the matchmaker, “He’ll do.”* One of us was from a silk-weaving village in Fukushima, and had lost her first husband to the flu, and her second to a younger and prettier woman who lived on the other side of the hill, and now she was sailing to America to marry her third. *He’s healthy, he doesn’t drink, he doesn’t gamble, that’s all I needed to know.* (Otsuka 9 italicized original)

Unlike the beginning paragraph which talks more about the women’s collective features, this paragraph focuses on individual experiences. Each of the stories is followed by a direct speech italicized, revealing each woman’s specific tragic experience. Simple as these sentences are, the impact of the narrative is profound. To modify Tolstoy’s words at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, “every miserable woman is miserable in her own way.”

In the chapter of “Babies,” Otsuka depicts a specifically individual experience in plural form. The same sentence pattern “we gave birth” runs throughout the whole chapter. The simple and seemingly monotonous sentences demonstrate that giving birth to babies has become the routine life of the migrant Japanese women.

We gave birth under oak trees, in summer, in 113-degree heat. We gave birth beside wood stoves in one-room shacks on the coldest nights of the year. We gave birth on windy islands in the Delta, six months after we arrived, and the babies were tiny, and translucent, and after three days they died. We gave birth nine months after we arrived to perfect babies with full heads of black hair. We gave birth in dusty vineyard camps in Elk Grove and Florin. We gave birth on remote farms in the Imperial Valley with the help of only our husbands, who had learned from *The Housewife’s Companion* what to do. (Otsuka 55)

By delineating each migrant Japanese woman’s particular experience of giving birth to a baby in different dire situations all year around, Otsuka implies that the women are reduced to non-stop baby-producing machines.

Flávia Rodrigues Monteiro states that the novel can be divided into “song of innocence” and “song of experience”, with the first four chapters devoting to the Japanese women’s ignorance of their destiny and the last four chapters portraying

their confrontation of the harsh reality(1-10). I also find there is a pattern of parallel structure among the chapters. For example, in the first chapter, “Come, Japanese!” the picture brides are full of dreams, expectations and illusions of their would-be husband and future life in America, while the last chapter, “A Disappearance,” ends with their being sent to interment camps and their disillusionment of American dream.

The dramatic irony gets laid on thick in the anxious opening section, “Come, Japanese!” when these naive immigrants reassure themselves that “it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village”. But the book’s plural voice is particularly effective at capturing their long, giddy conversations on the ship as they wonder if American men really grow hair on their chests, put pianos in their front parlors and dance “cheek to cheek all night long” with their lucky wives. The picture brides’ naive speculation of their future husband and life forms a sharp contrast with their miserable life looming ahead and renders their disillusionment even more acute.

The first seven chapters are told in the we-narrative of the picture brides and we followed the collectively presented life of the issei women from their journey to America, their disappointing marriage, their child-raising, routine work in the farm and at the white employer’s home, confrontation with their rebellious children, to the Pearl Harbor. When the immigrant Japanese women and their families had to be sent to the interment camp, the narrative perspective has suddenly shifted to that of the white folks in the town. Although the white folks began to feel the loss of the disappearing Japanese immigrants and settled for downgrading service from other ethnic group, they soon forget about their former Japanese friends. Some reviewers think the shifting perspective from immigrant Japanese women “we” to white “we” abrupt and incoherent. Fludernick counts “shifting narratorial perspective at the end of the novel” as “Otsuka’s most exciting trick”. Fludernick is astute to state that “it is this stroke of ingenuity which makes Otsuka’s novel so memorable and disquieting”(152). The shifting perspective offers a third party perspective to the Japanese immigrant women, revealing their merits of hard-working, obedience and resilience. Simultaneously, the readers can also get a glimpse of the indifference of the white town folks who repress or whitewash the disappearance of their Japanese neighbors and soon forget them.

Otsuka admitted that in writing *The Buddha in the Attic*, “the voice did pose certain grammatical challenges, and it was a very different way of composing than I was used to” (Yuhas June 13 2012). Challenging as it is, by resorting to we-narrative, Otsuka manages to depict a collective image of the Japanese picture brides and bring them to life simultaneously on the page. Despite the complaint that Otsuka’s “Buddha” falls

short of a novel's immediacy of individual experience and the broad overview of history, Ursula K Le Guin admits that the picture brides “would be ‘we’ only to one another, we the Japanese in America, we the Nisei. To white Americans they would always be ‘Them’”. That is Otsuka's justification for telling the story in an unusual and difficult way, and it is a powerful one. Also effective: it makes the point without stating the point.”(27 Jan 2012) As Richardson states that “in both fiction and nonfiction it seems to encourage a literary playfulness and creativity as authors represent the collective thoughts and sensibilities of marginalized groups that have formed close bonds: seamen on a ship, boys emerging from adolescence, enslaved and mistreated African Americans, and disempowered wives.”(210) In *The Buddha in the Attic*, the marginalized groups are “picture brides,” who are oppressed and exploited by their husbands of the same ethnic group as well as their white employers. Richardson continues, “The ‘we’ voice is particularly able to tell these otherwise neglected or silenced narratives. It is the very ambiguity and fluctuations of the precise identity of the ‘we’ that are among its most interesting, dramatic, and appealing features.”(210)

The Narratological Function of We-Narrative

According to Fludernick, “the group in fiction can be analyzed in reference to three aspects: (1) the fluctuation between communal agency of a whole group and that of several subgroups accompanied by the foregrounding of individual agency of a person within the overall collective; (2) inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the we (is the addressee included in the “we”?”); and (3) an alternation between collective-we and individual agency (often paired with naming the individuals selected from within the group).”(147) The following analysis of the narratological function of “we” narrative in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* will mainly follow Fludernick's model.

If we consider the picture brides as a whole group and women from diverse background as subgroups, we can clearly see Otsuka's strategy of handling both communal agency of a whole group and that of several subgroups. *The Buddha in the Attic* articulates varied voices, conveying the importance of each one of them. The women are not only “picture brides” as a whole group who come to America seeking a husband, the “we” represents subgroups from diverse backgrounds:

Some of us on the boat were from Kyoto, and were delicate and fair, and had lived our entire lives in darkened rooms at the back of the house. Some of us were from Nara, and prayed to our ancestors three times a day, and swore we could still hear the temple bells ringing. Some of us were farmers' daughters from Yamaguchi with thick wrists and broad shoulders who had never gone to bed after nine. Some of us were from a small mountain hamlet in Yamanashi and had only recently seen our first train.

Some of us were from Tokyo, and had seen everything, and spoke beautiful Japanese, and did not mix much with any of the others.(Otsuka 8)

A previous quote from the novel can also be cited here to illustrate Otsuka's skillful shifting from "we" narrative of a whole group to subgroups accompanied by foregrounding of individual agency of a person within the overall collective:

The youngest of us was twelve, and from the eastern shore of Lake Biwa, and had not yet begun to bleed. *My parents married me off for the betrothal money.* The oldest of us was thirty-seven, and from Niigata, and had spent her entire life taking care of her invalid father, whose recent death made her both happy and sad. I knew I could marry only if he died. One of us was from Kumamoto, where there were no more eligible men-all of the eligible men had left the year before to find work in Manchuria-and felt fortunate to have found any kind of husband at all. *I took one look at his photograph and told the matchmaker, "He'll do."*(Otsuka 9 italicized original)

The interspersed italicized sentences indicate they might be direct speech from one of the Japanese "picture brides," throwing light on individual experience besides depicting the women as a whole group or as subgroups. Yet, the italicized direct speech can also be interpreted as some typical quotes from the Japanese picture brides. As Uri Margolin states, "The specific words employed are supposed to echo what most or all group members may have thought on a given occasion, but rather than being a verbatim quotation, they are in fact a condensation of numerous expressions, an image of collective inner speech, projected or invented by the narrator."(605-6)

According to Fludernick, exclusive we-narrative "are addressed to strangers or do not thematize their audience"(150). Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* belongs to this type, in which the we-protagonists are not necessarily conceived as sharing a reference world with the reader. Yet, although telling a story unfamiliar and remote to the readers, Otsuka succeeds in involving her readers by accumulating small sparks of individual experience into a movingly sad story.

When talking about the features of second-person narrative, Fludernik has noted, "second-person fiction destroys the easy assumption of the traditional dichotomous structures which the standard narratological models have proposed, especially the distinction between homo- and heterodiegetic narrative (Genette) or that of the identity or nonidentity of the realms of existence between narrator and characters (Stanzel)."(226) The same is true of we-narrative which always threatens to enact the similar transgression. Richardson states, "many specimens of 'we' narration also conflate the boundary between homo- and heterodiegetic narration when they violate

normal possibilities of what one individual can safely predicate of other minds.” (390) Richardson quotes Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* as a good case in point:

On the boat we were mostly virgins [. . .] At night we dreamed of our husbands. We dreamed of new wooden sandals and endless bolts of indigo silk and of living, one day, in a house with a chimney. We dreamed we were lovely and tall [. . .] On the boat we had no idea we would dream of our daughter every night until the day we died, and that in our dreams she would always be three as she was when we last saw her. (Otsuka 3, 4–5, 12)

How can “we” as homodiegetic protagonists know each other’s dreams in the telling and even predict “we would dream of our daughter every night until the day we died”? Here is a very notable blurring of homo- and heterodiegetic narration.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude that we-narrative in *The Buddha in the Attic* is an especially effective narrative technique to express the marginalized and mute social minds of the Japanese women and give them long overdue voices to articulate their hidden and forgotten life stories. The story of “picture brides” is given greater political and rhetorical power through we-narrative. Simultaneously, Otsuka’s intentional choosing of we-narrative to disclose the hidden history of “picture brides” also highlights her individual style and innovative technique. The we-narrative can be so powerful that it “induce author(s) to move beyond the merely mimetic and forge new connections—psychological, narratological, and aesthetic—which far transcend conventional practices of fiction and the imitation of standard nonfictional discourse” (Richardson 211).

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