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## EXISTENTIAL CRISIS OF THE JAPANESE AMERICAN WOMAN: A STUDY OF POST WAR JAPANESE AMERICAN FICTION

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### Abstract:

The Japanese American women, during the Second World War, suffered from subjugation at different levels of their existence. They had been subjected to marginalization based on their sexual identity within their native community. They were further made to experience discrimination on the basis of their racial status while living as a member of the Japanese diaspora in the United States during the War. The objectification and marginalization of the women had led them to the realization of their existence as a non -entity within and outside their community. However, the internment of Japanese Americans followed by the declaration of Executive Order 9066 by President Roosevelt and the consequent experience of living behind the barbed wire fences left them to struggle with questions raised on their claim to existence and their identity within a space where race and gender contested each other. In my research paper, I have made a humble attempt at studying the existential crisis of the Japanese American women in America during the War.

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“It is generally for characterizing subjectivity that the word existence is employed; but we must not forget that, as Sartre says, "consciousness is born supported by a being that is not itself" and which exists also.” (Duffrenne, 1965, p.52).

A woman’s subjectivity which is characterized by the word ‘existence’ has always been subjected to the patriarchal consciousness. The man/patriarchal society is the being that “is not itself and which exists also” that tends to define the identity of the woman. The woman’s consciousness of herself is invariably “born supported by” this being which contributes towards/leads to the ‘othering’ of the woman. According to the phenomenological thinkers like Husserl ‘consciousness’ is always a consciousness of something. Just as ‘consciousness’ in itself is rendered meaningless in the absence of a phenomenon or an object; similarly, the existence of the phenomenon or the object depends on the consciousness of the being that exists outside the phenomenon and by being conscious of it, it makes it aware of its existence. (Eagleton, 2008, p. 116) The woman has always been existing as that phenomenon whose existence is validated by the patriarchal consciousness and the Japanese American women are no exception. The plight of the Japanese women who were

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brought in as picture brides in America had already proved the fact that they were doubly marginalized --- firstly, as a woman by the Japanese patriarchal social system and secondly, as a Japanese American in America. Years before the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese men like the other fellow Asians (like the Chinese) had been lured by the temptations of prospering in America, 'the land of opportunities.' On the other hand, America was in need of man- power or rather an efficient and hard -working labour force and the Japanese men proved to be one. The Japanese men were made to work on the sugar and beetroot plantations in Hawaii initially and later they were brought to other regions. In an interview, a Japanese American internment camp survivor mentioned that the sturdy, hard-working and extremely efficient Japanese men had been known to have turned the most unproductive plots into fertile and productive ones (1). Although they were made to work amidst the most inhuman conditions and exploited insensibly, yet they decided to stay back and chase their dreams of attaining unprecedented prosperity by dint of their efficiency. These growing aspirations of the men gradually made them feel the need to bring the women along. The presence of the Japanese women in the American socio -cultural scene was purely based on the need of the Japanese men. They needed them for both physical and economic reasons. The women were needed to keep their sexual urges calmed and to support them in their economic endeavours. The women were lured away to America with promises of a contented and comfortable life which would inevitably turn into an illusion.<sup>1</sup>

Down the ages, across caste, creed, religion and geographical boundaries, it has always been observed that a woman has always been considered as a secondary citizen. Her existence had a meaning only as long as it served the needs of the men and fulfilled the expectations of the patriarchy. They have been mystified and stereotyped as beings who cannot have a perspective of their own or an opinion to share. If they are forced into untoward circumstances, the women are expected to suffer without the slightest urge to make anyone aware of her pain. The Japanese women get proxy wedded<sup>2</sup>. and brought in herds like cattle to America only to get disillusioned and thereby disheartened to see how they had been deceived into believing in the promises that were never meant to be true. But nonetheless these women diligently delivered their duties and helped the Japanese men settle and transform themselves into the Japanese American community. After the Pearl Harbor attack when the Executive Order 9066 was passed by President Roosevelt and the entire Japanese American community, irrespective of age, sex, physical condition were ruthlessly evacuated and thrown into the internment camps, the women still continued to smile and stand as steadfast supporters of the men in trying to prove their loyalty to America. They were taught to believe in the truth that patriarchy had held up to them and they did so with utmost sincerity. In the novel, *When the Emperor was Divine* written by Julie Otsuka and *The Legend of the Firehorse Woman* by Jeanne Houston, we find a fictional representation of the existential crisis of the Japanese woman whose sense of identity was stifled by the dichotomy of the subjugation that she experienced as a woman within her community and as a Japanese woman in America. The internment camps behind the barbed wire fences had created a space where the idea of a woman's existence was being explored. We find women who tried to validate their existence through other's consciousness and women who tried to validate their existence through their own consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Wokusch, Heather. "Internment of Americans of Japanese Descent during World War II: Interviewed by Heather Wokusch: for Manhattan Neighborhood Networks Series on the Broader Implications of the War." Youtube, 26 Nov. 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WM5y9lcsOCQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WM5y9lcsOCQ). Accessed 6 Jan 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Proxy wedding was a custom of convenience for the Japanese men intending to settle in the United States. A native Japanese man would marry the bride on behalf of the actual groom who would be physically absent from the marriage. Later the bride would be handed with a picture of the groom and sent to America. Such brides were called 'picture brides.'

“According to Kierkegaard, the very thinking process or speculative philosophy depends on human existence. Thoughts are transmitted by an existent human being to another existent human being. He cannot forget that he is primarily existent, not a mere instance of general humanity, as there is no such thing at all.” (Akhilananda, 1949, p.236)

A study of this existential crisis shows how it turns out to be very difficult to make a woman understand the fact that she is ‘primarily existent, not a mere instance of general humanity’. Her primary existence remains a fact that tends to get very conveniently obviated by the predominant patriarchal force that inevitably superimposes itself on a woman’s consciousness. The existence of a phenomenon gets validated by the consciousness of the other that exists outside the phenomenon. In case of a woman, that ‘other’ has always been represented by the patriarchy. The Japanese women were entrusted with the responsibility of serving the men (in whatever position and/or circumstances they might be in) and bearing their legitimate heirs. They were especially responsible for imparting the cultural values on the progenies so that the idea of a distant homeland can be kept concretized in their minds. The Japanese woman’s existence was validated by her ability to stand up to the norms set by the ‘other’ (the Japanese patriarchal system) by fulfilling the aforementioned demands. We are inevitably tempted to hold the American authorities responsible for ruthlessly uprooting the Japanese women and children, getting them separated from their spouses (quite often) and making them live amidst inhumane conditions in the so-called internment camps. While doing so, we tend to forget that a more denigrating attitude towards the women had already been shown by their own community when they were brought in herds to America.

“Sartre says: “That which appears does not exist only insofar as it appears ... it is in itself.” The phenomenon of being requires a being of the phenomenon.” (Dufrenne, 1965, p.53)

Reconsidering Sartre’s view on existentialism, we find that a Japanese woman’s existence is determined in terms of her appearance. Her calm, composed, patient and hard -working persona that appears to the world outside seems to make it believe that ‘she exists only in so far as she appears. However, the ‘other’ along with the subject (the Japanese woman) herself tend to get oblivious of the fact that there is something within herself as well that might define her existence, and which is beyond her appearance. When Hana tries to raise her voice in support of a rebel and give an opinion in the internment camp (*The Legend of the Firehorse Woman*), the men get to see that which had been ‘in herself’ and not what had been appearing to them so far. When the mother in the novel *When the Emperor was Divine*, decides not to join the other women of the camp and get herself a job that were being offered to every other woman of the camp, we find her acknowledging the ‘self’ that is within her. By raising her voice regarding a presumably a male oriented issue, Hana defies the patriarchal constructions and unravels the truth about her existence. By doing what she does, the mother in the novel *When the Emperor was Divine*, proves that it is not necessary to do what every other woman was doing to prove their loyalty to the authorities. Her individuality gets voiced out through her action. She dared to defy. Hana and the mother represented the kind of ‘perpetual revolt of subjectivity’ as pointed out by Duffrenne.

“Existentialism represents the perpetual revolt of subjectivity against systems, any system which objectifies and enslaves it. Such already was Kierkegaard’s

protest against the status ascribed by Hegel to man, man as a pawn for history or a tool for logos." (Dufrenne, 1965, p.53)

The body of the Japanese woman was an object for the 'others' which needed to be used, abused or exploited. Her body was symbolic of fertility and hence she was brought in to reproduce. Her body was symbolic of sacrifice and hence she was made to do so by toiling hard, living happily amidst direst of circumstances, put in untiring efforts and stand by the picture husband to whom she had lured with some false promises to get proxy wedded. Later, when the Roosevelt led American government decided to pass Order 9066 (3) and evacuate the Japanese Americans and put them in the barracks or the so-called internment camps, once again, the life and dignity of the Japanese/ Japanese American woman was jeopardized. The needs of the woman's body were completely undermined and obviated. As Dufrenne puts it, "Doubtless the experience I have of my body is not the same that others have; for myself, as Sartre says, "I exist my body." For others, I am a body, and this body is an object;..." (Dufrenne, 1965, p.54–55). For the Japanese men, her body objectifies their needs and desires while for the Americans, her body objectifies their hatred for a community. The fact that she 'exists her body' as a woman is completely obviated.<sup>3</sup>

"To exist" was "to stand out" from the crowd... "To exist" one must "choose oneself" or "choose to choose." ...He (man) must make some kind of choice as to how he shall live his life. His easiest course, for there is always a powerful pressure on him to follow it, is that of conformity to established usages and opinions, of being assimilated to the general forms of human existence. By this means he becomes "one among many," he achieves anonymity, he becomes buried in the impersonal Das Man. Life becomes easy, but at the expense of a flight from personal responsibility, the escape into inauthenticity." (Coates, 1953, p.230--232)

When we try to analyse womanhood (Japanese/Japanese American) from Kierkegaard's perspective, we find that the Japanese woman neither 'chooses herself' nor does she 'choose to choose' lest she turns into a social outcast. In the novel, *The Legend of the Firehorse Woman*, Sayo, Hana's mother gets proxy wedded to an unknown man and eventually lands up in America along with numerous other picture brides. like herself. Her daughter Hana too grows up amidst an orthodox, conventional cultural set up and hence begins to believe that they have no right to choose themselves as an individual. However, in the internment camp Hana begins to explore the meaning of her existence as an individual. When she raises her voice in favor of a man who spoke for justice, she pulled herself out of 'inauthenticity' and began to exist for herself. Sayo (by the merit of being wedded to a Japanese man) and Hana (by the merit of being born to Japanese parents in America) had to bear the brunt of being discriminated, humiliated and subjected to violation of their rights as a woman. Sayo had been proxy wedded by her father in law on behalf of his son and sent to America with the promise of a contented life. However, to her utter dismay, she came to find only the unbearably miserable conditions of humiliation and exploitation amidst which her husband had been living so far and now would be joined by her. A woman was not expected to express her disappointment with anything that had been decided by the patriarchy for her. Every woman did so and thereby pushed herself to 'inauthenticity'. However, Hana's

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<sup>3</sup> Executive Order 9066 was passed post Pearl Harbor attack made by Japan. The Order was passed by the American President Roosevelt in the wake of the deteriorating political relations between the two nations. As per the Order, the Japanese migrants as well as Americans of Japanese descent were evacuated and put in the internment camps. It is believed that such a step had been taken by the American government considering these security concerns of the nation.

brave step of standing out and speaking amidst the men (something which had left the men stupefied) was a move towards 'authentic existence'.

Similarly, in the novel, *When the Emperor was Divine*, the mother (who doesn't have a name in the novel) realizes the significance of an 'authentic existence' during and after the internment. Like every other Japanese woman, she too had been brought to this land with promises of dreams being materialized and wishes fulfilled. Conforming to the norms of an 'inauthentic existence', she too had been solely dependent on the husband---economically, emotionally and in every other way. However, the declaration of the Executive Order 9066 and the subsequent separation from her husband and her movement to the internment barracks along with two young children made her ponder over the deeper significance of her existence as an individual. As Coates puts it,

"Subjectivity is truth" declared Kierkegaard; he poured ridicule on the idea that truth could be handed by one person to another as a body of results; it must spring from experience "individually appropriated." (Coates, 1935, p.231)

The truth of subjectivity for many a Japanese woman did spring from 'experience individually appropriated' during and after the internment of the Japanese Americans in America. A soft spoken, benign lady passionately in love with her husband and incapable of envisioning a life without him had been compelled by the turn of events to take the reins in her hands and she did it well. She must bear the pain of separation all by herself and yet keep calm so that the children are taken care of. The night when the cops arrived at their house without any prior notice and took away her man without even allowing to change his clothes, the mother knew that it was time for her to don a persona she had never donned before. It dawned on her spontaneously that the life they had been living so far was only a dream and that which she was confronting now was her reality. During the initial days of internment, the mother had almost seemed to have begun to lose her sanity pondering over a bleak future. There was this unknown existential crisis within her--- a tussle between her identity as a stereotypical woman who is vulnerable and dependent on the one hand and an individual who is responsible and capable on the other. The absence of her husband did have a traumatizing impact on her mind. Although she had been continually struggling with it, she never allowed it to overpower her spirit of resilience. After their release from the internment camp, most of the Japanese Americans realized that life behind/within the fences was better than life outside. Everywhere around they would find themselves being greeted with discrimination, humiliation and absolute hatred. Amidst such adverse circumstances, it was difficult for a Japanese American woman to survive along with her children. With a constant threat to life and in the absence of the spouse, remaining alive and ensuring the safety of the children was indeed a task beyond the capability of a woman if we try to define her in terms of the conventional patriarchal norms. There were people all around telling them to leave, move on to some other place. Nobody was there to sympathize with them, to lend an ear to their tales of misery, or to embrace them and refamiliarize them with the world they had left behind. Back from the camp, the mother is received by a neighbour telling her, "Nice to see you again, neighbour. How long do you plan on staying in town? There aren't any jobs here. I'd think about moving on if I were you." (Otsuka, 2003, p.112) There is an impending threat to life. There is a looming fear of death. However, she persists. She covered the demeaning words inscribed by the native Americans on their walls with pictures of flowers, hid the window broken by them with a rice sack, and taught her children to walk with their heads held high. She thus embarked on a new journey of life. She thus proved the authenticity of her existence when she realized that her survival as an independent individual was indeed possible.

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