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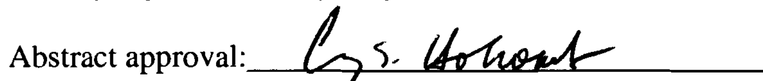
Abstract approval: 

Abstract

Asian American women writers' position in the mainstream literature deserves special attention because it carries cultural, political, and historical connotations. Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* challenge, redefine, and reinvent the phallogocentric perception of notions such as discourse, history, and political power. The construction of gender, political and cultural identity through the use of language as well through its absence occupies a central place in the discussion of the three authors' creations. The three Asian American women writers confront the three folded burden of being "the Other" in terms of race (Asian), socio-political class (minor/Other), and gender (female). By using Trinh T. Minh-ha's text as a theoretical background, I demonstrate that in both *Dictee* and *Obasan* silence is an act of resistance and subversion against the stereotypes of the dominant power, and it is not an act of accepting one's victimization and oppression.

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# VOICING SILENCE IN ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE: TRINH T. MINH-HA, THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA, AND JOY KOGAWA

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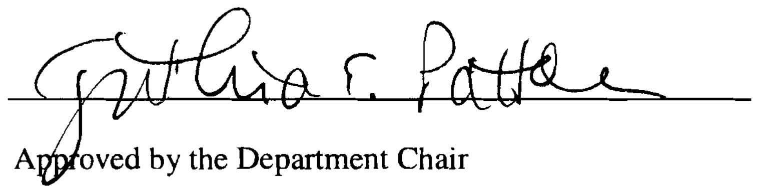

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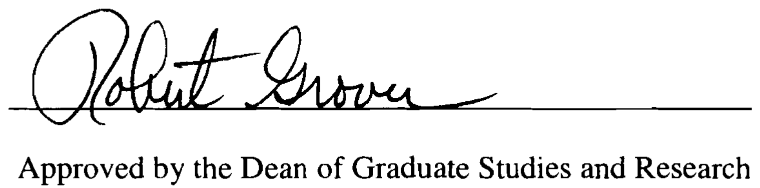

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# Chapter I

## Intertextuality in Asian American Women Authors and Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other*

> In appearance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions of surrounding it soon reveal its links with *desire* and *power.* This should not be very surprising, for psychoanalysis has already shown us that speech is not merely the medium which manifests—or dissembles desire, it is also *the object of desire.* Similarly historians have constantly impressed upon us that speech is no mere verbalization of conflicts and systems of domination, that it is *the very object of man's conflicts.* (Foucault, *Archeology* 216) [emphasis mine]

> In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality. (Foucault, *Archeology* 216)

> I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do.* Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must

> put herself into the text—as into the world and into the history—by her own movement. (Cixous 334)

> Borderline artists may have fragmented narratives, archives that are empty, memories that are potent yet powerless, but their experience of survival gives them a special insight into the constructed, artefactual, strategic nature of those events that are memorialized, by the powerful, as being the 'facts' of life, or the reportage of historical record. (Bhabha 23)

I approach the three Asian American women writers from the perspective of following concepts: speech as a complement for writing, discourse as a paradigm of political power, and gender as a passport to speech. Trinh's text eliminates and redefines the borders of the stabilized domains of the world in between whose borders the society has created and developed classes, hierarchies, groups, and even worlds (the third world, as opposed to the first world/the privileged one) that determine the present conflict. This hierarchization is responsible for the present situation where a text—and by text I mean any authoritative discourse, any form of manifestation of the powerful—is "re-read with the master's voice and with 'woman' in place of 'minority,'" as Trinh explains (85). As it seems, the relationship between men and women causes the power relationships at a higher level (class, groups, societies, nations). It might sound like a cheap speculation, but in this way one may explain the secondary location, the position of the "other" the woman occupies in society, culture, politics, as compared to the privileged position of the man, who already has had the floor, who always has occupied the center. An example of

an Anglo woman writer who was silenced is Tillie Olsen. In her book suggestively called *Silences*, she quotes Virginia Woolf who names the woman with the appellative *The Angel in the House,* the one who "must charm. . . sympathize. . . flatter. . .conciliate. . . be extremely sensitive to the needs and moods and wishes of the others before her own. . . excel in the difficult arts of family life" (34). This has been the place the phallogocentric[1] society has reserved for the woman across the nations. However, Trinh contrasts the present position of the Third World woman in the socio-political space of the Anglocentric culture.

From this positionality comes Trinh's remark, "Hegemony and racism are a pressing feminist issue" (85). As Barbara Smith defines it, "Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women ... Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement" (qtd. in Trinh 86). With the discussion of Trinh's *Woman, Native, Other,* I establish the theoretical background that I am going to use in the analysis of the two "other" Asian American writers, Theresa Cha and Joy Kogawa. To be specific, I will look at how cultural, sexual, and political hegemony informs gender relationships and the ways of expression both in speech and in writing.

From the reading of the three texts, Cha's *Dictee*, Kogawa's *Obasan*, and Trinh's *Woman, Native, Other*, I could say that women re-appropriate the language, both as speech and writing. They no longer accept the submissive position the phallogocentric Anglo-society has exclusively reserved for women. In this environment the woman is looked at as the one who "stole culture" because "Learned women have often been described in terms one might use in describing a thief. Being able to read and write, a

learned woman robs man of his creativity, his activity, his culture, his language. Learning 'unfeminizes'" (Trinh 19). The woman has been deprived of the right to read/write/speak because, as Trinh underlines, "To write is to become. Not to become a writer or (a poet), but to become, intransitively" (18-19), and thus her writing/speech/reading would be a subversive act against the male-dominated society. Trinh's text is vital for the reader who embarks to reading Theresa Cha's *Dictee* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* because it offers the reader the necessary theoretical, practical, and experimental framework that would explain and help decode postmodernist and innovative writings of the two. All three of them are exponents of minority groups both as Asian Americans and as female writers, and they function as "organic intellectuals," who, in Antonio Gramsci's definition,

> rise out of membership in social groups (or classes) that have an antagonistic relationship to established institutions and official power. They articulate those groups' needs and aspirations, which have frequently gone unexpressed. The organic intellectual does not simply parrot preexisting group beliefs or demands but brings to the level of public speech which has not been officially recognized. (1136)

Thus, Trinh, Cha, and Kogawa break the barrier of their enclosed circle and force the audience to listen to their translated/verbalized silences. Their word (either written or spoken) is indeed/becomes subversive, as long as there is someone to oppose, to confront and to resist it. If the male dominated society had been otherwise, then there would not have been any debate about the right of appropriating language by one group or another. Consequently, their word is meant to "undo the *anonymous*, all-male, and predominantly white collective entity named he, and we wish to freeze him once in a while in his

hegemonic variants" (Trinh 48). It seems that conventionally, tradition has restricted the word "writer" to a unique, exclusionary meaning, which includes only the [+male] semantic feature. This being the case, when women appear on the scene of writing, their voicedness is equated with an invasion/intrusion act, which calls for vehement opposition from the part of the old "word/writing" wards. The wave of feminist theories about a woman's right to the word do not justify their "new" position, but they explain their rights and in the only code accessible to man, the spoken/written word, the materialized form of communication.

They fight the hegemony, by which I do not refer exclusively to the its political and territorial meaning, but, as Trinh specifies: "By hegemony, I am referring to the authority of certain states over others, of one sex over the other, and to the form of cultural and sexual ascendancy that once worked through direct domination but now often operates via consent—hence its pernicious, long-lasting, and binding strength" (49). Once they have gained access to language in general, they have become part of the strong ones, even though "language is one of the most complex forms of subjugation, being at the same time the locus of power and unconscious servility. With each sign that gives language its shape lies a stereotype of which I/i am both the manipulator and the manipulated" (Trinh 52).

Trinh's title *Woman, Native, Other* is self-explanatory for the status of Asian American women in general, and Asian American women writers in particular. Asian American women are always under the microscope, because when they do not only have to prove their innate American belongingness, they also have to prove that they are

different from the stereotypic image of the Asian woman, as Mitsuye Yamada underscores:

> An Asian American woman thriving under the smug illusion that I was *not* the stereotypic image of the Asian woman because I had a career teaching English in a community college. I did not think anything assertive was necessary to make my point. ...it was so much my expected role that ultimately rendered me invisible. ... contrary to what I thought, I had actually been contributing to my own stereotyping. ...When the Asian American woman is lulled into believing that people perceive her as being from her other Asian women (the submissive, subservient, ready-to-please, easy-to-get-along-with Asian woman), she is kept comfortably content with the state of things. (qtd. In Trinh 87)

To be part of minority group, to be a woman, and to be a woman writer is a threefold curse that a woman has to dissipate. Woman refuses to accept her traditional role of "Angel Other" or to be seen only as,

> The unclean; taboo. The Devil's Gateway. The three steps behind; the girl babies drowned in the river; the baby strapped on the back; buried alive with the lord, burned alive on the funeral pyre, burned as witch at the stake. Stoned to death for adultery. Beaten, raped. Bartered. Sought and sold. Concubinage, prostitution, white slavery. The hunt, the sexual prey, [. . .] Purdah, the veil of Islam, domestic confinement. Illiterate. Denied vision. *Excluded*, excluded, excluded from council, ritual, activity, learning, language, when there was no biological nor economical reason to

> be excluded. [...] Let the woman learn in *silence* and in all subjection. The Jewish male morning prayer: Thank God I was not born a woman. Silence in holy places, seated apart, or not permitted entrance at all; castration of boys because women too profane to sing in church. (Olsen 26)

In the middle of the twentieth century, women started claiming their rights and wanted to redefine and clarify the use of the personal pronouns in the third person singular, he, as to be more accurate when taking into account its referent. With writings such as *Woman, Native, Other*, and *Dictee*, women have revolutionized the perception of their writings and have created their own discourse:

> If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. (Cixous 342)

Once the women earn their right to write and speak, they gain access to the culture and knowledge in the sense that they will be able to get credit for their thoughts and ideas, without having their agency questioned. In this respect, Edward Said's rejection of the "traditional liberal understanding of the humanities as organized around the pursuit of 'pure' or 'disinterested' knowledge" supports the idea of cultural imperialism in that "knowledge, scholars (and artists) are subject to particular historical, cultural and institutional affiliations which are governed in the last instance by the dominant ideology

and political imperatives of the society in question" (Moore-Gilbert 36). Ultimately, culture, in its turn, "is to be found operating within civil society, where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and of other persons works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent" (Said 7). However, by creating these works, such Asian American women writers do not necessarily consent to the dominant culture, in spite of their "model minority" status. On the contrary, they reinvent, or better say, rediscover their ancestral right to language, to the sacred deep meanings this entails. They are no longer forced to falsify their own name in order to be able to publish or to get full credit for any act of creation besides childbearing. Even more, discourses create discourses. Michael Foucault emphasizes that "a single work of literature can give rise, simultaneously, to several different types of discourse" (*Archeology* 221). This is what happens with the writings belonging to Cha, Kogawa, and Minh-ha. Therefore a woman's writing is a double, if not multiple, act of creation because first she produces the text in an unique form, and secondly, her text produces a multiplicity of other discourses, reaching different readers (a feminist/ne audience—both a Western audience and an audience with Asian background, but mainly an "Other" audience). Hence, once such writers succeed in creating their own discourse and their own audience, they break the unique code of the dominant culture, and reestablish their new place, because, as Foucault suggests in *Discipline and Punish,* "discourse produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (194).

Cha and Minh-ha's writings have the force of a commentary type of text, a script about which Foucault says, "averts the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that

it is the text itself which is uttered and, in some ways, finalized. [. . .]. The novelty lies no longer in what is said, but in its reappearance" (221). These texts themselves seem to be commentaries; they are not writings in the traditional sense of texts; they are comments to other discourses (dominant/majority's discourse, to cultural and political hegemony, to the history as such). These texts are a reflection, on the one hand, of the unwritten traditions and the unwritten history of the women's productive discourses in general (speech and writing, as opposed to receptive skills, listening and reading).

However, paradoxically, one may find much deeper connection between women and language, so it is somehow improper to assert that it is just now in the twentieth century that women have come to full rights over the language. As Trinh underscores, "My story, no doubt, is me, but it is also, no doubt, older than me" (123). In all these works, the three women writers create their own language. Moreover, they do not learn and re-appropriate the habit of speech; they do not only reclaim their right to language (first as a speech act, and secondly as a written/recording process), but also they create their own system of significations, their own poetic language. By doing this they are closer to the primordial language. Especially in Theresa Cha's *Dictee*, but also in Trinh's and in Kogawa's writings, we are witnessing the recreation and the revival of language as a new human habit. Considering the way the women authors and the women characters approach language, it seems that it has never existed before; it has never been used by the writing subjects, and it has the attributes of a new invention. Thus, these three books can be interpreted from the naturalistic perspective on language according to which the meanings of the words/the linguistic symbols or signs are in direct dependence on what is behind them, the signified (Crystal 408). According the African legends Trinh presents in

her book, the origin of language shows a close connection among woman, water, and word. Marcelo Griaule narrates in his book the genesis of the word:

> The process of regeneration which the eight ancestors of Dogon people had to undergo was carried out in the waters of the womb of the female Nummo (the Nummo spirits form a male and female Pair whose essence is divine) while she spoke to herself and to her own sex, accompanied by the male Nummo's voice. The spoken word entered into her and wound itself round her womb in a spiral of eight turns ... the spiral of the Word gave to the womb its regenerative movement.
>
> The first Word had been pronounced [read "scanned"] in front of the genitalia of a woman . . . The word finally came from the ant-hill, that is, from the mouth of the seventh Nummo [the seventh ancestor and master of speech], which is to say from a woman's genitalia. (qtd. in Trinh 127)

Trinh's usage of such a diversity of approaches, and her employment of so many critical theories and theorists (French), make her message even louder and more universal because it addresses itself to a variety of cultures, to a wide range of audience (almost sexless and genderless). She unifies the world and seems to reconstruct and re-create the atmosphere of time when the Platonic androgenic figure could speak the protolanguage in a peaceful manner, without causing any tension.

Feminist semioticist Julia Kristeva explains the agency of the authors in relation to the language and its use: "[. . .] poetic language, through the particularity of its signifying operations, is an unsettling process—when not an outright destruction—on the identity of meaning and speaking subject" (125). Therefore, Cha, Kogawa, and Trinh

create their own language; they actually invent the language and invest it with newer levels of meaning. They reinvent those areas where their access was restricted: historical, linguistic, cultural, and political discourses. When I say newer levels of meaning, I refer to Cha, Kogawa, and Trinh's stages of creating the language as an instrument of communication accessible to women in the first place, and the upper stage of language, which is the poetic language. By means of the poetic language they create, they actually prove the unanimously accepted definition for "'literature,' which is something other than knowledge: the very place where social code is destroyed and renewed" (Kristeva 132), thus providing, as Artaud writes, "A release from the anguish of its time by animating, attracting, lowering onto its shoulders the wandering anger of a particular time for the discharge of its psychological evil being" (qtd. in Kristeva 132). They are closer to the protolanguage, and maybe this is the language of the womb, because, as Trinh declares, "No man claims to speak from the womb, women do" (37).

The intrinsic relationship between word/signifier and signified/its referent is very obvious in these writings at different levels. To be more exact, *Dictee* represents the incipient forms/the genesis of the process of speech and writings, and in *Obasan* the language seems to have reached its maturity in both forms of manifestation (oral and written form), while in *Woman, Native, Other* the language and the women's linguistic code and forms have reached their apogee, because they take the form of a philosophy of the language. Thus, through writings such as these, women's intellectual creations are equally comparable with the phallogocentric discourse creations, and their discourse is no longer "within" the discourse of man. Moreover, as Helen Lee signals in her essay "A Peculiar Sensation: A Personal Genealogy of Korean American Women's Cinema," both

Cha and Trinh "can be at once poetic and interrogative in their unusual forms of address, which are almost oracular" (136). Thus the woman moves from her position of "language stealer" (Trinh 210) who "stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as a bearer, not maker, of meaning" (Mulvey 15) to "holder of speech" (Trinh 6).

Paradoxically, the woman was always given the right to silence. Yet, this is her very strength because the woman had to listen to what she was told because she had to fulfill those tasks. By doing so she was capable of understanding and of decoding the message. This act of silent "submission" made the strong believe that she is incapable of action, of speech, and ultimately of writing: "The writing of women is always translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language" (Duras qtd. in Trinh 43). It is this very "translation from the unknown" that puts the woman in the privileged position of understanding and being closer to the primordial language, I talked about earlier, which now, in its modern form, is refused to her by those who claim to be its exclusive masters, men. Her ability to "translate the unknown," thus to understand it, proves and, in the same time, demands her right to language, to expression, and to other forms of creation (besides procreation): "To listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn, for understanding means creating" (Trinh 121).

In her speech "Death of the Creative Process" in 1962, Tillie Olsen comments on the impact class, color, and sex has had on the act of creation and on creativity. Being a

firm believer in creativity as "an enormous and *universal* human capacity" (261), she points to the relationship between circumstance, opportunity, and creation:

> Our different emergences into literature as circumstances permit. Remember women's silences of centuries, the silences of most of the rest of humanity. Not until several centuries ago do women writers appear. Sons of working people, a little more than a century ago. Then black writers (1950 was the watershed year). The last decades, more and more writer-mothers. Last of all, women writers, including women of color, of working class origin, perhaps one generation removed; rarest of all, the worker-mother-writer.
>
> Born a generation earlier, in the circumstances for their class, and/or race, and/or sex, no Chekhov, Brontë sisters, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Hardy, Maxim Gorki, no D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Sean O'Casey, no Franz Kafka, Albert Camus—the list comes long now: for sampling, no Richard Wright, Philip Roth, Cyntia Ozick, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, etc. etc. etc. etc. (262)

Thus, even though "Literature is no one's private ground," as Virginia Woolf justly observes (qtd. in Olsen 264), it is the very one that loyally reflects the structure and the nature of society at all its levels, because "literature is both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader" (Sartre 1347). Since "Literature is an ideology, it has the most intimate relations to questions of social power" (Eagleton 2243), then its hierarchization as good and bad, major or minor, dominant or marginal/ethnic does support Eagleton's claim.

With this group of Asian American women writers, we are facing a case of a double-minor text in the sense that it is a text written by someone belonging to a minority group from political point if view (Asian immigrants), and on top of it, by someone who is the representative of an unprivileged group such as women. If to be considered part of the major mainstream production means to "transmit national traditions,"[2] then the "transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or the political refugees" need to negotiate a place for themselves, to reterritorialize themselves culturally in the larger context of culture (Bhabha 12). The voice of the minor writers comes from a universal bounderless topos and reinvents a new language, which might be the "written silent voice" of the women writers as opposed to the vocal writing voice of the male writers. As long as "cultural needs are a product of upbringing and education" and "taste functions a marker of class," such literature has been long dismissed exactly for its low quality that did not correspond to the mainstream's aesthetic taste, which is, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, "an acquired cultural competence" (1807). Despite the rigorous norms of the major literature, minor literature emerges and fulfills its goal, that of expressing national consciousness, as Deleuze and Guattari specify in "What Is a Minor Literature?" (167). To explain what minor literature is, I am quoting Deleuze and Guttari's definition: "A minor literature does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (167). By creating from within the major language, hence culture, the minor culture carries the inscription of a subversive act that threatens to questions the dominant culture or at least to make its own presence felt within the mainstream, because, "[M]inor literature no longer designates specific literatures but

specific revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (Deleuze and Guttari 169).

Another influencing factor in the discussion of these novels is the identity of the writers. Bearing the mark of both a socio-political minor group and of a sexually minor group (female) these Asian American (women) writers need to prove continuously their agency both as veritable writers and citizens in the Anglocentric space. Since the authors whose works I address are distinct entities of different ethnicities (Trinh is Vietnamese, Cha is Korean, and Kogawa Japanese), the issue of ethnic/minor literature needs to be further discussed in terms of the generic title of Asian American identity.

During the 1960s civil rights movement, a new field of studies has emerged, which is Asian American studies. Within this field, the Asian American literary studies occupy an important place. According to Cheung, the term Asian American itself was coined in 1960 "to promote political solidarity and cultural nationalism" (2). In time, the interpretations as well as the stress of the term Asian American have changed from putting emphasis on American nativity, to pointing to the dualism the term implies, namely the oscillation between two cultures. One shortcoming of the term that critics have often pointed to would be that "it obscures the variety of generational and ethnic constituencies within Asian American communities" (Cheung 3).[3] Thus, the generality of the term effaces the idiosyncrasies of the ethnic groups and once again we confront the interpellating agency of the dominant culture that homogenizes all the Asians ethnicities. In the Anglocentric space, the "Asian American panethnicity," as Yen Le Espiritu names it, "is undoubtedly crucial to our political visibility" (Cheung 4) because, I would add, it gives the dominant society the illusion that in this way it can control and manipulate

easier a uniform mass. However, limitation of this term can be further clarified by another term, namely ethnic narrative, which "presents an occasion to for a subversive revision of the dominant version of history; it gives voice to a text muted by dominant historical referents; and it makes possible an imaginative invention of a self beyond the limits of the historical representations available to the ethnic subject" (Palumbo 217).

The complexity of the Asian American identity is not restricted only to the interpretation of the term as such, but it is also reflected in its spelling. Initially, the term "Oriental" denominated the people of Asian descent living both on the American continent as well as those living across the Pacific. This appellative did not do justice to those actually living on the American continent, because they felt as "perpetual foreigners in the United States" (Cheung 5). Consequently, the occurrence of a term such as Asian American or Asian-American was necessary. However, the presence or the absence of the hyphen carries meaning about the identity of those in question, and indicated the degree in which the subject belongs to the affiliative culture. According to Kingston, "the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight," while "without the hyphen" the first element in the compound is an "adjective and 'American' is a noun; and a Chinese American is a type of American" (qtd. in Cheung 6). Lately, the non-hyphenated compound seems to be preferred to the other one because "the presence of the hyphen emphasizes the inadequacy of either term; furthermore, as the hyphen strains to hold the terms together and apart, it denies the creation of a third stable third term in the space between the two" (Feng 190).

On the other hand, once the term Asian American started being used in the 1960, this group of population has become more powerful as a minority, demanding for the

right to represent themselves through their own means of expression. Even though for a Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, or Chinese American "to identify himself or herself as an Asian American is to accept an externally imposed label that is meant to define us by distinguishing us from other Americans primarily on the basis of race rather than culture," according to Kim (qtd. in Feng 190). However, this political interpellation, in spite of its ethnic ambiguity, benefits the ethnic group as well, as Kim specifically notes "Our racial unity has been contributing to our strength, to our efforts to build community, and to the maintenance and development of a vital Asian American culture" (qtd. in Feng 190). This paradoxical status of the hyphenated identity of the Asian Americans "is to both accept and critique the externally imposed label that denies the specificity of one's cultural heritage and defines one's otherness in racial terms. As such, adopting a hyphenate identity is a means both of purveying and challenging ideology" (Feng 190). In the larger context of literary creation, Asian American writers, and specifically women writers demand for a qualified and informed approach. Their writings do not represent a simple creation exercise, but they do carry a complex cultural, historical, and political message. This is why such texts put great emphasis on the reader's role, who, for an authoritative reading, must actively participate in the decoding of the text.

Notes to Chapter I:

[1] "Phallogocentrism" is Jacque Derrida's term for the masculine power at the origin of the Law. See Jacque Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. ix-xxix.

[2] Here, by national literature I refer to the strictly defined geographical boundaries of any political state.

[3]For example the Asian American of Japanese descent is rigorously classified in relation to generation. Thus, the first generation of Japanese immigrants in the North America is known as issei, the second generation of Japanese Americans nisei, and the third generation is called sansei. Each generation carries its idiosyncratic peculiarities that are decisive in the understanding of the concept of identity.

Furthermore, there is the aspect concerning the ethnicity of those who are grouped within the inclusive term of Asian American. The term accommodates Asians of Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Hawaiian, Indian, Indonesian, Laotian, Nepali, Pakistani, Pacific Islands, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Vietnamese descent.

# Chapter II

## Theresa Cha's *Dictée*: Silence As an Act of Resistance

> Finding a voice, searching for words and sentences: say some thing, one thing, or no thing, tie/untie, read/unread, discard their forms; scrutinize the grammatical habits of your writing and decide for yourself whether they free or repress. (Trinh 20)

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha is an Asian American writer of Korean descent whose national identity needs to be further classified within the terms of belongingness to one political and cultural identity or another. The writer deconstructs and exposes the condition of "the Other" in the assimilating Anglocentric society. In her book, the ordering force that constructs, (re)-defines, defies, or is defied, is *the word* or its absence—*silence*. In this context, the word can be seen as a parable for the manifestations of power, whose direct consequences are the characters' confusion about their cultural, political, geographical, linguistic, physical, and psychological identity. The way the writer manipulates the verbal and the nonverbal emphasizes the distance (especially the cultural one) between the components of the "contact zone" (Pratt 6). A major role in the overall meaning of this work is played by the structure and the form of the text itself. The fragmentation and discontinuity of the narrative are illustrative of the struggle of "the Other" to find and define her discourse. In spite of the fragmentation of the narrative, the linking element between the chapters is silence, which functions as a coordinator force of the other senses. My intention is to prove that *silence*, that is the absence of speech, is an

act of resistance, not an act of accepting one's victimization, one's oppression from a colonial and feminist perspective.

Theresa Cha's *Dictee* represents a kind of writing that demands total attention and awareness from the reader, putting her in charge with the deconstruction and translation of the text; this is why the way of perceiving the message of this text can take various forms. I understand the text as an expression of women's affliction that has a variety of shapes and origins. The unconventionally expressed affliction comes from all the geographical points (Asia, America, Africa). As well as coming from the roots of history, it belongs to the existence both of simple women (those who may be called just "wives") and of martyrs, revolutionary or rootless/homeless women. Approaching the book as a metaphor for the women's voice, I intend to point out the meanings that silence has for women in general, and for Asian women in particular, and also to look at the way the verbal is echoed by the nonverbal.

Prefacing the book with a motto from the Greek lyric poet Sappho (612-580 BC), Cha establishes the verbal/vocal feminine authority that will dominate the entire writing. Moreover, the choice of an antique feminine voice is highly adroit because the author therefore has the opportunity to underscore women's evolution or regression in the modern society. The author creates a gallery of outstanding feminine figures, describing suggestive instances from the lives of women like the Virgin Mary, Joan d'Arc, the Korean young revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, Cha's mother, Demeter and Persephone, Hyung Soon Huo (a Korean Born in Manchuria to first generation Korean exiles), other Asian feminine characters whose names are not even specifically mentioned, and Cha herself. By voicing, writing, and inscribing their stories, the author traces the history of

women's muted voices or "silences," insisting on the process of sound/speech creation. The fact that the book starts with a fragment written in French constitutes a challenge and an obstacle for the receptor, who is mainly a reader in an English speaking community. Still, the first word is the adjective "open," which explains the message of the book, namely to give women the opportunity to freely express their stories. The lack of punctuation on the very first page explicitly shows the author's reluctance to interrupting the flow of thoughts or the liberty of expression (irrespective of its form, written or spoken). Furthermore, the punctuation signs are completely omitted at a formal level, but in order to add more meaning to the text, they are named, which distinctively suggests the woman-author's liberty of speech, and the authority she has obtained by naming things:

> Open paragraph It was the first day period She had come from a far period tonight at dinner comma the families would ask comma open quotation marks How was the first day interrogation mark close quotation marks at least to say the least of it possible comma the answer would be open quotation marks there is but one thing period There is someone period from a far period close quotation marks. (Cha 1)

By inventing or reshaping the old rules of the language into a new system of expression, she challenges both the linguistic norms of the Anglocentric discourse and indirectly the political authority of the dominant culture, because the most immediate method of colonization is to "require the colonized to abandon their current language and adopt that of the invading nation" (Spahr 31). Cha, born in Pusan Korea, because of the Korean War had to move along with her family to several places in Korea, then to Hawaii, and later to the United States, in Northern California. Korea was under Japanese rule from 1910-

1945. During this time Japan imposed Draconian regulations on Korea, among which forbiddance of the Korean language and also the change of the Korean family names to Japanese ones. Also, as an Asian immigrant in the United States Cha had to comply with the rules of the "dominant country," which is an expression of the imperialism (cultural, political, social). The authorities, either Japanese or American, have imposed their supremacy on the people/subjects—in the sense of *being subjected*—as long as they could not manifest their will freely, which lead to the loss of the right to use the mother tongue: "Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary" (32).

To explain the superficiality of the political games and rules that infringed upon the common people, Cha switches from concrete to abstract terms:

> The "enemy." One's enemy. Enemy nation. Entire nation against the other entire nation. One people exulting the suffering institutionalized on another. The enemy becomes abstract. The relationship becomes abstract. The nation the enemy the name becomes larger than its own identity. Larger than its own measure. Larger than its properties. Larger than its own signification. (32)

Once Cha states her intention of opening the paragraph, she delineates the process of speaking, paying acute attention to the position of the organs of speech: "The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing. (One thing, just one)" (3). As with any other process, the beginning is slow and even painful, demanding the participation of the whole body, provoking agonizing contortions:

> But the breath falls away. With a slight tilting of her head backwards, she would gather the strength in her shoulders and remain in this position. [. . .] Now the weight begins from the uppermost back of her head, pressing downward. It stretches evenly, the entire skull expanding tightly all sides toward the front of her head. She gasps from its pressure, its contracting motion. (4).

The details and difficulty of the sound production bare similarities to the act of birth, which emphasizes its importance and greatness. Her desire and need for speech is congenital, and therefore it imperatively demands its performance, otherwise it becomes pathologically metastatic:

> She mimics the speaking. That might resemble speech. Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. [. . .] It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festers inside. The wound, the liquid, dust. Must break. Must void. (3)

Paradoxically, the birth of speech is paralleled with the beginning of the act of writing, which might be looked at as a pre-manifestation of speaking or an incipient form of speaking. Writing, at this point, is more than a simple act of transferring a message from one channel (oral) into another (paper); it is an attempt of "transcribing incommunicable sound and silence into words" (Lee 37): "You write you speak voices hidden masked you plant words to the moon you send word through the wind" (Cha 48). In spite of its conceptual image, which is supposed to be a faithful reproduction of the original text, "dictation" (hence *dictée*) turns into a resistant discourse because "Cha translates the

dictation into English unfaithfully," as Lee points out (40). Dictation can be seen as a complex exercise of the senses, since it involves production (speaking and writing) and the use of the sense of hearing and sight for reception.

The sense of hearing, which is the one responsible for the correct reproduction of the dictated text, is also directly controlled by the will of the recording subject, and therefore becomes a form of resistant manifestation as well. By refusing to hear, thus to transcribe accurately the French text, the recording subject transforms the message in accordance to her will, feelings: "I heard the swans / in the rain I heard / I listened to the spoken true / or not true / not possible to say" (Cha 67). In Asian culture, white is the color that is worn as a sign of respect for the dead, as a sign of mourning. Consequently, the image of the swans, which is recurrent in the text, alludes to the absence of the language, which the colonizers refuse to the oppressed: "The signs in the rain I listened / the speaking no more than rain having become snow / true or not / true / no longer possible to say" (71). In the chapter "Urania Astronomy," the author seems to dissect thee body with the purpose of reshaping it in a new identity. Cha chooses to "decimate" the tongue because this act carries with it the hope for rebirth: "To bite the tongue. / Swallow. Deep. Deeper. / Swallow. Again even more. / Just until there would be no more of organ. / Organ no more" (69).

One of the main functions of language is that of conferring identity to the speaking subject. The multitude of discourses (epistolary, religious, social, political) and the different foreign languages Cha engages in her narrative (French, Korean, English) advocate for the state of confusion the characters go through. Thus, the translation exercises (from French into English, and the other way round) that appear in the

beginning throughout the text allude to the cultural displacement of the translator/recording subject. Also, the content of the translated texts is illustrative for the state of the "etnikos" who has to gain her right to speech or to write, but has all the rights for hard work:

> Traduire en francais:
>
> 4. Are you afraid he will speak?
>
> 5. Were you afraid they would speak?
>
> 6. Was it necessary for you to write?
>
> Ecrivez en francais:
>
> 9. Be industrious: the more one works, the better one succeeds.
>
> 10. The harder the task, the more honorable the labor. (Cha 8)

Later on, although the translated text becomes more and more complex semantically, the syntax and the morphology of the target language still represent an impediment for the speaking/writing subject, which suggests the character's state of becoming:

> She call she believe she calling to she has calling because there no response she believe she calling and the other end must hear. The other end must see the other end feel she accept pages sent care of never to be seen never to be read never to be known if name only seen heard spoken read cannot be never she hide all essential words link subject verb she writes hidden the essential words must be pretended invented she try on different images essential invisible. (15)

A new characteristic of the word is brought into discussion, which is the importance of the word as an instrument of communicating and liberating the spirit. In

this instance, the word comes to have curative powers: "[. . .] like sins say them they are forgiven forgotten and they are forgotten" (15-16). Moreover, the lack of speaking, namely the absence of the word, is no longer a virtue as in traditional Asian perception, but conversely it is a sin: "Bless me father, for I have sinned, my last confession was . . . cannot remember. Name how many; one. two. three. weeks months years" (16). In religious perception, the Virgin Mary is portrayed as sinless, pure, chaste, and all these epithets are contained by her silence. She almost never speaks, she just does. Here her silence is no longer a merit; on the contrary, it is berated: "She would be silent. Often. Most of the time. Most often than not. Far too often" (14).

Exploring other dimensions of the *word* as a parable for the political, cultural, and administrative power, we can consider hegemony, cultural imperialism, political identity, and connubial institution as direct consequences of its performative power, because, as Henry Louis Gates argues, "Speech is a species of action. Yes, there are some acts that only speech can perform" (qtd. in Butler 127). Hence, in the chapter "Clio History," where the heroine Guan Soon organizes a revolutionary revolt against the Japanese occupation of the Korean space in spite of her young age, the way hegemony is implemented on the colonized land is clearly explained: "The Japanese advisers instituted a number of sumptuary laws that stirred the country to its depths, relating to the length of pipes, style of dress, and the attiring of the hair of the people" (29). Cultural imperialism reaches its apogee when the Japanese officials give "an edict altering the official language" (29), or even more when "Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary" (32). However, in spite of the loss of their primordial rights to the use of the national language in the geopolitical space of their own country, these people refuse to be

assimilated into the dominant culture even though they are aware of the consequences: "Everyone knows to carry inside themselves, the national flag. Everyone knows equally the punishment that follows this gesture" (37). Ultimately, in order to preserve their national identity, they appeal to the main symbol of the country, the one that is widely known worldwide—the flag. In this story the characters have the paradoxical status of refugees in their own country, which is the very place where their national identity is denied.

In "Calliope Epic Poetry," the emphasis falls on the linguistic dislocation which leads to identity loss that may be called multicultural identity. Hyung Soon Huo has to live as a refugee or immigrant in what Mary Louis Pratt calls a *contact zone*, a region that represents the "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (6). Under these circumstances, the *word* becomes oppressive because its power is used against the individual. It is not only that the character cannot freely speak her *mother* tongue because of the political oppression, but also that she is denied even the right of hearing the essential sound of a nation: "They take from you your tongue. They take from you the choral hymn" (Cha 46). In this context, this segment of population is situated out of the privilege of having an identity politics. Thus language is invested with a multilateral force because it not only constitutes a cultural, political, or administrative instrument of the dominant society, but also an essential psychological forming factor. Suggestively, *language* becomes a perfect synonym with *home*: "Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home" (45-46). However, the language one speaks is not necessarily the language one feels in or dreams in, it might simply be the "language of the civilized nation," as

Franz Fanon puts it (qtd. in Pratt 128). In this case, the Anglo-American assumption that "Voice is tantamount to power and truth" (Cheung 12) needs to be redefined.

This story also addresses the issue of assimilation in a sarcastic tone. The immigrant's manufactured consent to the affiliative identity underscores the imperfection and the superficiality of the process of assimilation: "I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American. They give you an American Pass port. The United States of America" (56). The author, under the guise of a second language speaker, takes the advantage of playing with the language of the colonialists and creates new meanings that constitute the resistant discourse of the immigrant. If "they give you an American Pass" does not necessarily mean that you are an American, but you may just pass as one, just *pass*. This is an illustrative example of Althussers's concept of the interpellated identity where, "Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with *their* photograph" (56) [emphasis mine]. The dominant power's pretense of being the generous agent who wants to create political unity, to homogenize, and to annihilate the ethnographic differences between the diverse component elements turns against itself when it is the very one that questions your identity: "They ask you identity. They comment your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about you nationality" (56). More than that, they cannot help using the stereotypes against their own people, because the Asian Americans are the ones who are "caught between worlds," as Amy Ling notes, "Their facial features proclaim one fact—their Asian ethnicity—but by education, choice or birth they are American" (qtd. in Cheung 2). Cha illustrates this identity game by pointing out its deleterious effect on the human psyche: "They say you look other than

you say. As if you did not know who you were. You *say* who you are but you begin to doubt" (57) [emphasis mine]. Cha goes further in exposing the superficiality and the arbitrariness of the social, political, and cultural borders by saying, "They have the right, no matter what rank, however low their function they have the authority. Their authority sewn into the stitches of their costume" (57).

As an exponent of womanhood, Cha also analyzes woman's position in the connubial institution. In "Erato Love Poetry," the relationship between man and woman is cinematographically followed, which gives the reader, in fact the viewer, the chance to freeze, to objectify, and to deconstruct even the most trivial, rapid, intimate, and obscure moments in a couple's life. In the middle of the scene this time is the woman who represents the decisive factor who takes action: "She opens the two doors, brass bars that open *towards* her" and this time "the doors close behind her" (94) [emphasis mine].

These scenes in the beginning contrast with the scenes where the stereotyped image of the submissive woman is evoked: "She cannot disturb the atmosphere. The space where she might sit. *When she might* [. . .] She yields space and in her speech, the same. Hardly speaks. Hardly at all. The slowness of her speech when she does. Her tears her speech" (104) [emphasis mine]. Cha assumes the responsibility of uttering, of naming the unnamed annoying truths that may disturb and reverse the course of history. Cha's equation of God's destiny in the world with the destiny of woman questions, reorders, and reinvents new ways of looking and construing woman's position in relation to man on one hand and God (or religion) on the other. Woman and God are connected by the misunderstanding that surrounds them: "He allows misunderstanding to be their lot on earth since, He chose it for Himself" (105). By explicitly declaring that "He will show

that His thoughts are not men's thoughts, for then the last will be first" (105), Cha places the woman either on the same level with God or immediately after Him, which may encourage the perception of God as a feminist. The time of the perfect victims has passed because "To satisfy Divine Justice, perfect victims were necessary, but the Law of Love has succeeded to the law of fear, and Love has chosen me as a holocaust, me, a weak and imperfect creature" (111).

The way Cha masters the language augments the symbolism of the words or linguistic images, revitalizing the force of expression of the old overused structures. Another aspect suggestive of the whole meaning of the book is connected to the names of the chapters. One explanation for the choice of the names of the Greek Muses might be that Cha means to universalize the women's struggle for free expression. She opts for the Greek Muses because the western public, whom she mainly addresses, is more familiar with them than they would have been with Asian mythology. On the other hand, if we look at the etymology of the names, we can trace a certain gradation in the intensity of the voice, because the name Clio that comes from the Greek name "kleio," that is "to tell," "to praise," is translated as "the teller." Calliope means "beautiful voice." Clio is the one who reveals the past, and Urania carries the responsibility for the stories of the future, because she is "the heavenly one." Melpomene's name is translated as "the singing one," Terpsichore is "the dancing one," while Thalia is "the blooming one." This gradation from simple narration suggested by the name Clio ("the teller") to elevated forms of art insinuated by the other muses' names such as Calliope ("the beautiful voice") and Melpomene ("the singing one"), to the complicated science suggested by Urania ("the heavenly one"), as well as the allusion to women's biological feature of

giving life suggested by Thalia ("the blooming one") seem to be pleading for the women's liberation under any possible form. It is to be noted that this book puts great emphasis on the senses in general, and on sight and hearing in particular, because their manifestation cannot be controlled by any authority; thus they become the most efficient weapons of the resistant discourse.

The amalgam of the languages and forms of expression Cha involves in her book, as well as her choice of naming the chapters after the Greek Muses, in spite of her Asian background, carries a deeper meaning. As mentioned earlier, women's act of writing and of speaking is synonymous with the genesis of language. Thus women become the keepers and masters of the proto-language, which, in fact, is suggested by Cha's very choice of variety of languages, forms of expression, mythologies, and symbols in the book. The passing from one language to another, and, even more, the passing from Indo-European languages to Altaic languages (Korean and Japanese) advocate for the existence of a pre-Babylonian language, whose masters were women. This is illustrated by the multilingual passages; part of the text is written in French:

> Qu'est ce qu'on a vu
>
> Cette vue qu'est ce qu'on a vu
>
> Enfin. Vu e. Qu'est ce que c'est enfin.
>
> Enfin. Vu. Tout vu, finalement. Encore.
>
> Immediat. Vu, tout. Tout ce temps. (125)

Other times there is a simultaneous translation from French into English with the French text mirroring the English one, which suggests the common Indo-European root of the

languages. The passage is imbued with cognate words that are easily distinguishable from the text:

> Impossible de distingues les paroles
> Exclameés. Affirmeés en exhalation
> Exclameés en inhalation
> Ne plus distinguer la pluie des rêves
> Ou des soufflés. (66)
> Not possible to distinguish the speech
> Exhaled. Affirmed in exhalation.
> Exclaimed in inhalation.
> To distinguish no more the rain from dreams
> Or from breaths. (67)

In this work, Cha uses clear linguistic evidence to prove Noam Chomsky's generative theory about the universal properties of languages. In this respect, the case of the Korean language is highly suggestive both for political hegemony and for the existence of common language/proto-language.[4] Women are closer to the proto-language because they are the ones who create life, and consequently they are closer to the origin, since they are the owners of the alchemical secrets/elements. Simply thinking of the place where life commences, the womb, which, willy-nilly, is the same forum for both male and female fetuses, we can contend, "The keeping-alive and life-giving water," as Trinh aptly names the amniotic liquid, "exists simultaneously as the writer's ink, the mother's milk, the woman's blood and menstruation" (38).

Kristeva emphasizes that "Language is always one system, perhaps even one 'structure,' always *one meaning* [author's emphasis], and therefore, it necessarily implies a subject (collective or individual) to bear witness to its history" (126). In *Dictee* the subject is obviously *the woman* in a generic sense, which is supported by the diversity of the characters parading in the novel, starting with the Korean revolutionary young woman Yu Guan Soon, continuing with the French figure Joan of Arc, Cha's mother, Demeter and Persephone, Hyung Soon Huo (a Korean born in Manchuria to first-generation Koran exiles), and Cha herself, in this way militating for the women's right to speech and for their right of making their silence heard and explicit for all the others. The multi-ethnic chain of characters Cha evokes and the diversity of the situations they are involved in, pleads for the universality of women's imperious need to express their word because, as Cixous posits,

> In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. As a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations. She must be farsighted, not limited to blow-by-blow liberation. She foresees that her liberation will do more than modify power relations or toss the ball over to the other camp; she will bring about a mutation in human relations, in thought, in all praxis: hers is not simply a class struggle, which she carries forward into a much vaster movement. (340)

After all, Cha's use of the language advocates for a new approach of women's expression in both speaking and writing, but also for a new position of the ethnic minorities. Her use of the variety of languages (French, English, Korean, hieroglyphic signs) makes the

Anglophone audience aware of the vitality of the right to language, which is the main means towards achieving one's identity as cultural, political, biological/sexual, and spiritual human being. Thus, her choice to write predominantly in English (as opposed to her mother tongue, Korean) can be perceived as her attempt to come to a new identity: "You have the feeling that the new language is a resurrection: new skin, new sex," as Kristeva posits in *Strangers To Ourselves* (15).

Notes on Chapter II:

[1]The Korean language was initially written in Chinese characters (the first years of the common era), but subsequent development of the language made impossible the accurate representation of the Korean suffixes by the Chinese writing. Consequently, in the late fifteenth century, King Sejong commissioned a new alphabetic script, **hangul,** which is predominantly used today. However, more than half of the vocabulary of the contemporary Korean is of Chinese origin, and many words of this type are written with Chinese characters. (O'Grady 609-10)

## Chapter III

## Joy Kogawa's *Obasan:* Silence As an Act of Subversion

> Cultural difference emerges at points of social crisis, and the questions it raises are agonistic; identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining the center: in both cases eccentric. (Bhabha 177)

> The colonized are both challenging the boundaries of discourse and subtly changing its terms by setting up another specifically colonial space of the negotiations of cultural authority. And they do this under the eye of power, through the production of 'partial' knowledges and positionalities. (Bhabha 119)

> People keep asking me where I come from
> 
> says my son.
> 
> Trouble is I'm american on the inside
> 
> and oriental on the outside
>
> No Doug
> 
> Turn that outside in
> 
> THIS is what American looks like. (Yamada)

The Japanese Canadian writer Joy Kogawa explores in *Obasan* the cultural and political valences of verbal and nonverbal manifestations of three generations of Japanese Americans during the internment and post-internment periods in Canada. In this historical context, her characters go through different psychological stages when they have to negotiate between the dominant culture's values and their inner cultural identity, and also between their political identities. This continuous negotiation confuses the characters, which leads to the main characters' minute analysis of the channels of communication. Thus, sight, speech/silence (which are used interchangeably), and touch take on overwhelming proportions for the reflecting character, Nomi, who is situated on the border between the two cultures. The clash between the two worlds is very suggestively represented by the culinary tastes of the two children in the novel, Nomi and Stephen. Stephen, Nomi's brother prefers "peanut-butter sandwiches," while Nomi prefers "tow moist and sticky rice balls" (Kogawa 153). By presenting the characters' struggle between or even among identities, Kogawa, in fact, enters the circle of Japanese American writers, whose work can be interpreted as an "ongoing construction of identity at numerous levels: individual, collective, political, cultural, and generational" (Yogi 125).

Being at the crossroads of generations, Nomi renegotiates, reflects, and expresses identity struggles both for herself and for those who have impacted her life: her uncle Isamu, her aunts Obasan and Emily, her mother and father, and the indirect presence of her grandparents. As a Sansei[5], she is still entrapped in a world of contradictions, because she inherits the Issei's and the Nissei's anxiety and alienation feeling regarding their identity. According to Stan Yogi's description,

> The wholesale internment of over 110,000 nikkei without trial or hearing raised serious questions about Japanese Americans, especially nisei. For some, it resulted in a fierce embracing of a thoroughly "American" identity. For some, it led to bitter disillusionment over what were perceived to be the empty rhetorical promises of American equality and justice. Others fell between these two extremes, as Japanese Americans attempted to cope with the traumas of forced removal from their homes and internment in desolate camps scattered throughout the United States. (132)

These antagonistic sentiments regarding the characters' identities have repercussions at multiple levels. The sensual level (sight, touch) directly affects the characters and their social, cultural, and political integration into a particular geo-political space. In this undefined, hostile space, the paradoxical element that establishes common ground among the characters but also deterritorializes them is silence, or its counterpart, word: "Silence is a corollary to word and word to silence. Each requires the presence of the other to define itself. Such symbiosis makes this relationship a powerful paradigm for an inscription of the colonial experience" (McAlpine 133).

From this perspective, Nomi's character illustrates vividly the process of becoming towards identity that begins with the very act of looking. As a child, she starts perceiving the difference between silence and speech, between different ways of looking at people and being looked at. Next, she is able to understand the meaning of silence as opposed to speech, as well as the significance of glances. Thus, the natural ways of manifestation of human spirit (speech and sight) are no longer simple, meaningless, or

universally common expressions or tools, but they are invested with sophisticated cultural dimensions. The body language as well as verbal communication produces confusions and miscommunication: "I could hardly think of anything to ask him [the widower]. Did he assume I wasn't interested? Can people not tell the difference between *nervousness* and *lack of interest*?" [6] (Kogawa 9) [emphasis mine]. Hence, what is perceived in one culture as respectability may carry exactly the opposite meaning in the other culture, and it can be even synonymous with physical aggression:

> I see a man sitting hunched forward, his elbow on his knees. He is looking around quizzically, one dark eyebrow higher than the other. When our eyes meet, he grins and winks. I turn away instantly, startled into discomfort again *by eyes*. My mother's eyes look obliquely to the floor, declaring that on the streets, at all times, in all public places, even a glance can be indiscreet. But a stare? Such lack of decorum, it is clear, is as unthinkable as nudity in the street. (58)

This visual and verbal bilingualism makes Nomi react drastically so that not to be hurt: "I turn my face from everyone. [. . .] Only the sidewalk is safe to look at. It does not have *eyes*" (57) [emphasis mine].

Moreover, as a hybrid of the Canadian and Asian (Japanese) cultures, she becomes the battlefield for tradition and modernity, because what her Nissei parents teach her contradicts what she, as an exponent of the dominant culture, perceives: "Who is it who teaches me that in the language of the eyes a stare is an invasion and a reproach?" (Kogawa 58). Even though Nomi is aware of and understands the significance of the Western society's "body language," she feels more confident and at ease with her

inner Japanese identity. When describing her mother, Nomi remembers, "Her eyes are steady and matter-of-fact—the eyes of Japanese motherhood. They do not invade and betray. They are eyes that protect, shielding what is hidden most deeply in the heart of the child" (71). In contrast with the protective Japanese eyes, the western glances intimidate her: "Mrs. Sugimito's eyes search my face. Her glance is too long. She notes my fear, invades my knowing" (71). The intensity of western eyes that threaten to destroy the balance, the integrity, and the purity of her Japaneseness is very suggestively stated when she describes Mr. Gower: "I am Snow White in the forest, unable to run. He is the forest full of eyes and arms" (76).

Besides the visual dilemma the protagonist experiences, the verbal materialization of thoughts or their repression plays a key role in defining the oppressed ethnic minorities' position in the dominant culture, especially that of the woman. Silence, which is a means of expression in Asian culture, has different connotations in Western culture. As Asian American theorists say, silence, for many Asian cultures, is a language in itself that has its own codes that require discipline to be understood; it is the acme of speech, because, as Kogawa very pertinently specifies, "The speech that frees comes forth from the amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence" ("Preface"). When translated into Anglocentric discourse, silence should be interpreted as a form of resistant discourse, but unfortunately it is understood as a form of submission of the "ethnikos" to the dominant culture (Saldivar 42). This happens because it is easier to accuse and "punish" than to explore and understand the oppressed, as Saldivar goes on to show: "There is no strength is seeing all sides unless you can act where real

measurable injustice exists. A lot of academic talk just immobilizes the oppressed and maintains the oppressors in their position of power" (42).

On other hand, this dearth of speech is the clear mark of the "model minority," which, in fact, is preferred by the dominant culture. According to the dominant culture's stereotypes, the silence of the women in particular is taken as a sign of submission, and approval. This is what happens with Mr. Gower, Nomi's neighbor, who takes advantage of her silence. Unfortunately, Mr. Grover interprets Nomi's silence according to the Western stereotypes about East, when, in fact, her silence is a sign of fear and disgust: "Speech hides within me, watchful and afraid" (69), and also of protest: "He asks me questions, but I do not answer" (73).

Silence, in this case, is not an oppression of the senses, but on the contrary, it is their expression. Silence, in this context, demands an acute sense of hearing and listening, so that to be de-codified accordingly, otherwise, its performers run the risk to be victimized. As Cheryl Glenn puts it, "Our listening is every bit as important as any spoken or, for that matter, unspoken word" because, "listening must be done consciously and purposefully" (178). Obasan, who is the tradition-keeper, performs silence in all its valences. Often, her silence expresses truths and thoughts that become an obstacle even between her and those who are supposed to understand her, which make Nomi exclaim: "The greater my urgency to know, the thicker her silences have always been" (55). However, Nomi, for example, has the capacity of understanding the nature of her aunt's silence: "She opens her mouth to say more, but there is no further sound from her dry lips. The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful" (17).

Nevertheless, Nomi cannot read beyond it all the time, which becomes a source of alienation and frustration for the multicultural exponent: "Today is not, I repeat, reprimanding myself—today is not the day for unnecessary questions" (55). Nomi is caught between the two worlds distinctly represented by her aunts, Emily and Obasan. The former "lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior" (39). This is why for Nomi, "People who talk a lot about their victimization make me uncomfortable. It's as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind" (41). Even though she understands the connotations of silence, she remains an exponent of the new culture, because she cannot resist the impulse of asking questions, but once she utters them, she realizes that "loud talking feels obscene" (14). In spite of her Canadian "belongingness," Nomi has internalized her Japanese inheritance, which makes her able to listen to the silence: "Something is happening, but I do not know what it is. I *listen* [my emphasis] intently, all my senses alert" (199). Paradoxically, silence remains the common unifying language both between generations (Issei, Nisei, Sansei), but also between the same generation.

Even more interesting is the significance the *words* carry, because for the Asian, *the word* is not just an overused trivial instrument, but a bridge between generations, the vehicle towards the roots: "Each night from the very beginning, before I could talk, there were the same stories, the voices of my mother or my father or Obasan or Grandma Kato, soft through the filter of my sleepiness, carrying me away to a shadowy ancestry" (66). For them, tradition is their reason of being that needs to be carried ahead: "the word is stone" ("Preface"). It is the very word/stone that builds, that creates and on which it is

created; consequently its use and its form become sacred. Paradoxically, this very ethnicity whose right to speech is denied identifies itself with the essence of word, because, "We are the silences that speak from stones. We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera, and every means of communication, a trainload of eyes covered with mud and spittle. We are sent to the sending, that we may bring sight" (132). The "sending" may be seen as the voice of the ancestors with whose help the present goes ahead and can exist, their voice directing the present and influencing the future: "We disappear into the future undemanding as dew" (132). The disappearance into the future sounds like a sentence for the Japanese Canadians whose cultural identity is threatened. In this respect, there seem to be differences between the ways women and men fight for and retain their cultural, even political identity, the latter being more open to assimilation. Thus, tradition is deeply scripted *in* and *on* woman's body. Analyzing the etymology of alternative pairs of words denoting the differentiation between man and woman, namely *lord* and *lady*, one can see that the word *lady* comes from the Old English *hlæfdige* where *hlæf* means bread, loaf, and *dige* means work, need, kneader, while *lord* comes from *hlafweard*, the one that keeps, guards the loaf. The women's need for being part of something and belonging to something stable is an organic need, because the one that crates/kneads the loaf devotes, offers herself in the act of creation, thus the woman carries on her body the origins of creation, of tradition, while the man only tries to have a physical possession of it. The materiality is perishable, so it may be replaceable, and this is why the men are more open to exposing themselves and to assimilating themselves into the dominant culture without too much effort.

An illustrative example of this situation is Nomi's behavior in contrast with her brother, Stephen's. When their mother leaves for Japan, Nomi is the one who "never talks or smiles. [. . .] Stephen spends his time reading war comics" (119). Moreover, as an adult, Stephen seems to have lost his filial cultural identity and to have utterly submitted to the authority's interpellation, because he himself acknowledges, "I am a minstrel. [. . .] I'll put the story to music if you want. Don't expect anything else from me" (308). Another example of complete assimilation is Obasan's husband. After his death, Obasan keeps in her palm his ID card, which seems to be an aggressive image in contrast with the confusion of the women.

The communication among the members of this multicultural community is not necessarily mediated by speech but possibly by the sense of touching. Because very often "speech often hides like an animal in a storm," (4) when Nomi is with her uncle, they communicate mostly tactilely: "He seems about to say something, his mouth open as he stares straight ahead, his eyes wide. [ . . . ] Finally, I touch his arm" (4). One of the most "touching" moments of the novel is Nomi's reunion with her father. The happiness and the intensity of their meeting are not marked by words; their emotions are not expressed verbally, but by means of tactile sense and sight: "We do not talk. His hands cup my face. I wrap my arms around his neck. The button of his pajama top presses into my cheek. I can feel his heart's steady thump, thump, thump" (202). As an exponent of the new world, Nomi has the impulse of asking questions, but her inner cultural voice defeats the modern one: "When I move my head finally, the words rush around stumbling to form questions, but there are no questions" (203). One explanation for Nomi's ambivalence as a "speaking" as opposed to a "silent" exponent is that "at the age of questioning" her

mother disappeared (274). Thus, what her mother could have communicated to her by means of glances, touch, and silence had to be replaced by sound. Nomi's early separation from her mother caused her need for physical touch as well: "My skin feels hungry for warmth, for flesh" (287), which in a way could become synonymous with the need for words. Therefore, when she finally finds out the truth about her mother's absence, she feels united with her by means of silence and touch: "The sound of Sensei's voice grows as indistinct as the hum of distant traffic. Gradually the room grows still and it is as if I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life" (288). The physical dimension of the word seems to be annihilated so that to amplify the meaning of the silence, which was the connecting element between her and her uncle. Between the two, silence was synonymous with touch as well.

In a multicultural space where the dominant power tries to homogenize its components' differences, there are everlasting values that cannot be easily leveled in spite of all the efforts and physical constraints. Senses constitute a supreme resistant power that cannot be controlled in any way by any authority. They fervently plead for the uniqueness and liberty of the individual. Both in Cha's *Dictee* and in Kogawa's Obasan, silence should be viewed as an ultimate power that coordinates all the other senses, thus becoming an active discourse of resistance, and not, as it is generally accepted, a submissive consent of the model minorities to the dominant culture's rules. Silence takes the form of the Japanese community's narrative about which, Bhabha claims, "substantiates cultural difference, and constitutes a 'split-and-double' form of group identification. The colonized refuse to accept membership in the civil society of subjects;

consequently they create a cultural domain 'marked by the distinctions of the material and the spiritual, the outer and the inner'" (230-31).

Notes on Chapter III:

[1] Initially, the tern "Nikkei" was used to refer to people of Japanese ancestry living in North and South America. Later, Japanese Americans have developed more specific terms for each generation. Thus, the immigrants who arrived in Hawaii and the U. S. between 1885 and 1924 are referred to as "Issei," the second generation is called "Nisei," and the third generation "Sansei." (Yogi 125)

[2] Nomi, who is a thirty six year-old single woman, does not relate easily with the pure dominant society men. Thus, when she dates an exponent of the dominant culture, the widower, she discovers that the communication between them is hindered by the difficulty of deciphering each other's behavior and statements.

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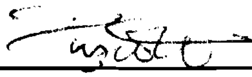

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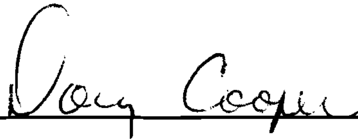

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