

Identity and Belonging in Hiromi Goto's
Chorus of Mushrooms
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Abstract

Because immigration and movement are woven into the histories of so many countries, and are such extended and present day phenomena, this paper aims at analysing, through the study of Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, the specific problematics of identity and belonging of racialized minorities in the presupposedly multicultural background of twentieth-century Canada, focusing on the different ways of adapting (or not) to this 'new reality' that the characters in the narrative exemplify.

1. Constructing Identity

“Choices made remain unchanged and useless to wish it otherwise. Choose now! I shout, choose now!” (Goto, 1994: 25). One's choices in the past mark the future in an unpredictable way, and Hiromi Goto's character's decisions prove exactly how a moment's choice can make all the difference. Through the experience of the Tonkatsu family as an immigrant Japanese family in Nanton, Canada, Goto tries to present us with the problematics of identity and belonging, of growing up in the space between their Japanese roots and their Canadian present.

The narrative presents us with the conflicting situation existing between three different generations of women from the same family separated from one another not only by their incapacity to communicate with each other but also by their different ways of adapting to their new Canadian reality. The origin of their growing alienation within the family lies on their different ideas about how life in Canada (as an immigrant and as the daughter of an immigrant) should be faced.

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On the one hand we have the character of Keiko, who chooses assimilation. To her, adapting to mainstream Canadian culture, that is, the white Canadian way of life, seems to be the easiest means to carry on with a 'normal' life. She leaves aside all that seems to signal her as a Japanese woman, refuses to speak the Japanese her mother Naoe is constantly muttering and chooses to raise her only daughter with a Canadian name, Muriel, and no knowledge whatever of Japanese language. She chooses to submit her personal and familial history in order to fit in. She seems to be a true believer in assimilation as her personal salvation. Still, she cannot deny that which is already hers. All throughout the narration she seems to be at odds with herself. Her compulsive cleaning of the house, her trying to look whiter and more Canadian-like, as well as her constant and even repetitive cooking of typically Canadian food (or rather American food), reveal her inner desire to feel ultimately safe where she is now. Therefore, Keiko's denial of her mother's presence in the house, her constant sarcasm towards her, and her ignoring the Japanese comments she constantly makes, denotes a necessity to reassure her new Canadian identity as opposite to her old Japanese one. In fact, Naoe herself describes her as:

My daughter who has forsaken identity. Forsaken! So biblical, but it suits her, my little convert. Converted from rice and daikon to weiners and beans. Endless evenings of tedious roast chicken and honey smoked ham and overdone rump roast. (Goto, 1994: 13)

In a way, Keiko's new cooking is the outer sign that reflects her attempts at changing her inside. Keiko shows us how the concept of difference is structured in Canadian society, the ideas of the centre and the margins. Assimilating is relevant to Keiko because it is her means to erase difference, to hide it and make it less visible, and she not only tries to hide her difference but also that of others surrounding her that may signal her as part of a racialized minority. And so she completely panics when she realises that her daughter, Muriel, is "turning yellow" (Goto, 1994: 92) after eating so many mandarin oranges, or likewise, looks for more Canadian-like names for her Vietnamese farm workers. She is aware that the idea of difference comes from the comparison with an image considered as a norm or

standard that is the one to determine who is at the centre and who constitutes the margins. In the case of Canada, and in spite of the policies of Multiculturalism, the 'ideal' (more often than not) associated to Canadian is that of white and male. Everything that steps out of this model constitutes the 'Other'. And Keiko is part of that 'otherness' which the political discourses of Canada have adopted so as to keep these racialized minorities tamed and controlled, alien but close at the same time. In a way, they remain much as "outsider-insiders of the nation which offer a proudly multicultural profile to the international community" (Bannerji, 2000: 91). However, the fact that Keiko overreacts in such a way when her daughter turns momentarily yellow, with her constant repetition of "Yellow... Yellow, she's turningyellow she'sturningyellow she's –" (Goto, 194: 92), only works so as to show Keiko's awareness of the fragility of her identity as what she thinks to be a 'normal' Canadian.

In fact, there are many examples that illustrate Keiko's struggle against her difference; all along the narrative she expresses her awareness of the necessity for those like her to try to accommodate to mainstream Canadian life as smoothly as possible. Even Murasaki herself is aware that "oriental people in single doses were well enough, but any hint of a group it was all over" (qtd. in Sasano, 1998: 5). Nonetheless, it is symbolic that it is only thanks to Murasaki and the Japanese food she starts cooking for her mother that Keiko gets over her mum's leaving after a process of inner healing. She feeds on the food which had nourished her soul; she feeds on her culture, restoring the part of her being that had been 'excised.'

Still, in spite of Keiko's willingness of assimilation, her mother does not. Naoe Kiyokawa does not let go from her origins though placed in the same context as her daughter. Naoe seems to work as the Japanese conscience of the narrative. She is presented at the beginning of the novel as the overwhelming presence that is able to watch all the house inhabitants' 'every-second-movements' from her chair in the hallway. She is introduced as some sort of powerful, wise and almost mythical entity that, knowing more than what one could tell, conveys her wisdom to those surrounding her even when language is but a barrier (such is the case with Murasaki). She makes Keiko listen to her Japanese words however the latter may pretend not to notice her, and even when she suddenly shuts up (as in the episode of the oranges) her

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silence conveys a great amount of meaning. It is her constant mutterings of Japanese words what erects her as the living memory of their Japanese origins. All along the narrative we are able to see the author's play with the notions of story-telling and truth-telling, and their possible boundaries within fiction. And, in that sense, Naoe seems to account for the Tonkatsu history as well as for the history of Japan. She goes back to tell Murasaki of ancient folk tales and legends, that connect them to their Japanese roots; but at the same time, she subverts these stories altering the contents and transforming them into organic elements that change parallel to the process of story-telling. All along the narration we can read once and again the words 'mukashi, mukashi, omukashi...' which are the typical beginning of Japanese fairy tales; thus, Goto achieves a new re-shaping of the present narration of Murasaki, interrupting it, and playing with the different genres and boundaries available to construct Murasaki's story. It is through language, through Japanese, that Naoe states her identity within Canada and Japan, and her differences with Keiko.

Naoe has been living in Nanton for more than eighty years, still she has to fight with her Japanese the constant roaring of the prairies wind in her door. She even refuses to refer to her granddaughter as Muriel and instead calls her by her Japanese name, Murasaki:

Muriel does not suit her, Keiko. I call her Murasaki. Purple. She cannot understand the words I speak, but she can read the lines on my brow, the creases beside my mouth. I could speak the other to her, but my lips refuse and my tongue swells in revolt. (Goto, 1994: 15)

In fact, she recovers Murasaki's name later on, in translation, calling herself in the eyes of Tengu 'Purple,' showing how continuity works not only in terms of family but also in the relation between languages:

- so, who is Murasaki and who is Purple?
- The words are different, but in translation they come together.

- So you are a translation of Murasaki and Murasaki of you? (Goto, 1994: 174)

Even the choice of Purple as the name that defines both grandmother and granddaughter is relevant, particularly if we take into account that purple is the colour to represent feminist thinking (black feminism specially). Muriel in this way will be finally reconciled with her Japanese origins becoming an independent Murasaki who will seek on her own her new hybrid identity, rejecting the expected happy marriage with her bed-lover; whereas on the other hand, Naoe becomes the Purple Mask, the Canadian version of a Japanese woman who, unlike women of her time, chose not to submit to preconceived ideas about women, divorcing, and finally engaging herself on a trip towards self-exploration on her own, (a clear subversion of the 'male quest' theme, in which the prototypical Ulysses-like hero is here an old Japanese woman invisible due to reasons of gender, age and race). Both mother and daughter are disrupted by language and by their inability to communicate with the other, because when coming to Canada they have become alienated from one another: "I mutter and mutter and no one to listen. I speak my words in Japanese and my daughter will not hear them. The words that come from our ears, our mouths, they collide in the space between us" (Goto, 1994: 4). "Daughter from my body, but not from my mouth" (Goto, 1994: 25).

Naoe pretends not to understand English as much as her daughter pretends not to be Japanese. Still, Naoe is able to understand her daughter's situation, though her ways of coming to terms with their reality differ drastically. Naoe exploits all the nuances of her 'Japaneseness'. If it erects her as 'the other' in reference to mainstream, as different, it also allows her a field of interaction not available to mainstream Canadians which is her Japanese. Only someone who knows Japanese can understand the constant commentaries that Naoe makes throughout the novel, exactly as Mari Sasano points out in her article: "Goto's strategy of not facilitating easy translation marks her refusal always to cater to those who are the majority" (Sasano, 1998: 6). Naoe accepts her cultural background and difference and exploits it in her favour.

Apart from the obvious subversive use of her mother's language, Naoe also can be said to have a special connection with the

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sensorial, with the perceptive. We see this with food or with the way in which she expresses her sexuality. Even though Keiko has been cooking ‘mainstream food’ for the last twenty years, Naoe has managed to enjoy privately the Japanese food her brother and sister-in-law have been sending her all the time. And what is more important is that she has made Murasaki acquainted with the magic of this secret ritual that connects both grandmother and granddaughter against the knowledge of Keiko. The fact that they also live on food, that is, they live thanks to the work in the farm with the mushrooms, is also peculiar¹. Her connection to the sensorial therefore, transforms her into an ‘unusually free’ old woman that doesn’t only represent her freedom by means of these hidden raptures for Japanese food, but also by means of an open and explicit acceptance of sex (either with Tengu or on her own at the mushroom farm), and with a wild spirit that leads her to her ultimate voyage on her own.

In between both Keiko and Naoe exists Muriel/Murasaki. She is the ultimate narrator of the work, who recounts her family’s history ten years away from her grandmother’s leaving, in the way of an oral tale told to her boyfriend in bed. In this way, she recovers her grandmother’s legacy of story telling and goes on to perpetuate a family tradition already begun by Naoe’s own Otosan back in Japan. Murasaki is somehow midway between Keiko’s desire for assimilation and Naoe’s muttering remembrance of Japan: “Mum knew from the start [...] but all she chose to do was hide beneath a fluffy woolly skin of a white sheep. [...] She chose the old Canadian melting pot and I had to live with what she ladled” (Goto, 1994: 175). And though at first she tries to live up to her mum’s expectations, or rather to mainstream Canadian’s ones, she is ultimately incapable of submitting her identity in favour of assimilation; in this way, her rejection of her mum’s desire to have her hair dyed in blonde for a simple *Alive in Wonderland* school play, becomes the perfect metaphor for her rejection of assimilation altogether. Even the fact of her being first addressed as Muriel and then turned by her Granny into Murasaki is really revealing and symbolic of Murasaki’s own blossoming to her Japanese roots. She

¹ The important role of food in this narrative may also be connected to the poetry of Haruko Okano and Fred Wah in *High-Tea*. We see that food becomes the perfect vehicle to represent culture and identity. In fact, Murasaki’s family name is *Tonkatsu*, which is a misspelling of a Japanese dish name.

finally decides to carry her own trip towards self-discovery, much like her grandmother had done. The narrative becomes for Murasaki a trip to her own origins, to her family, her past, and her memories as pieces that construct her identity. All the narration is her passing on to her boyfriend the story of who she was, who she is, and who those around her helped her finally to become.

Both Naoe and Murasaki very much reflect on the relevance of memory and imagination when reconstructing one's history, and all the narration seems to blur the boundaries between both, between what may exist of truth in Murasaki's story and what may actually constitute the proper bed-tale. The narrative finally fulfils that which Naoe had already signalled in one of the many telepathic conversations with Murasaki:

Murasaki-chan, we have only come part way in the telling and the listening. We must both be able to tell. We must both be able to listen. If the positions become static, there can never be stories. Stories grow out of stories grow out of stories. Listening becomes telling, telling listening. (Goto, 1994: 172)

Murasaki becomes a new storyteller parallel to her arriving at Japanese-Canadian identity; "I've finally arrived and now I can go." (Goto, 1994: 198) And we know ten years later, when telling her story, she lives in west Calgary, volunteering for the Committee Against Racism. In a way, she will still fight the roar of the wind in the prairies but in her now Japanese-Canadian way. Murasaki's and Naoe's limits as characters also play with the blurring of boundaries, with the parallel, not only in their names, but also in the way the one perpetuates the other, in the special connection (telepathic) between Murasaki and Naoe, in their understanding in spite of the lack of a language to communicate in, so that in the end, if Murasaki means Purple and vice versa, what we have is a continuous "Obachan here. Obachan now. Obachan then and always" (Goto, 1994: 187), a female-centred narration that passes from grandmother to mother to granddaughter changing each time; an experiment on fluidity.

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