Assimilation and a Japanese American Woman in Hisaye Yamamoto's "Epithalamium"

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"Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake," the stories by Japanese American Nisei writer Hisaye Yamamoto, have been recognized as mother-daughter narratives. Many stories of Asian American literature represent family imbroglios between Issei parents and American born Nisei sons and daughters. However, the main theme of Yamamoto's stories is the relationship not only among Japanese but also of Japanese with Chinese, Koreans, other Asians, and even with whites. In addition, the theme is intertwined with Buddhism and Christianity. The setting of "Epithalamium" (1960) is a Christian community called Catholic Worker, and there are many quotations from the Bible and the missal in the story. Four poems are embedded in the story and they play an important role in the story's development. In this paper, the assimilation issue of a main character in "Epithalamium" will be analyzed by interpreting the Bible, the missal and the poems.

1. Hisaye Yamamoto and Catholic Worker

Catholic Worker was founded by Dorothy Day (1897-1980) and Peter Maurin (1877-1949) in 1933, when the U.S. was at the bottom of the depression. Catholic Worker aimed at social justice, relief of the poor, and anti-war activities. Day, who is the model of Madame Marie in "Epithalamium," dropped out of a university and began a social reform movement. She had a belief that some kind of action was required for a reform movement, so she often participated in demonstrations. Simultaneously, she, as a journalist, sought to appeal social reform to the public. As a Catholic, Day emphasized the importance of the religion for social reform, explaining that Catholic churches were for the people who suffered from discrimination and poverty. In 1932, Day met Maurin who later became her co-founder. Maurin is the model for René Zualet in the story. Maurin, being a Basque and living in France, began working for Christian Democratic movement. He went to Canada and the U.S., and in
1932 he got a job as a handyman in a camp. After meeting Day there, Maurin encouraged her to publish a newspaper aiming at social reform based on Catholic teachings. A monthly newspaper, the *Catholic Worker* was first published in May, 1933. Then she started programs to help people suffering from discrimination, poverty and other problems. One Catholic Worker commune based on Christian teachings after another has been founded since then. And their movement has continued even to today (cf. Ellisberg xxvii).

Dorothy Day wrote that Yamamoto was the best model of the Catholic Worker. Yamamoto worked quietly, efficiently, washing up the kitchen, dining room, hall, and corridors. Their house was spotless, thanks to her job, and yet she always had time to type articles, to read both to herself and to her small child (“Peter Maurin Farm-April 1954”). Yamamoto was ever willing to teach others or lend a hand to others (“On Pilgrimage-September 1954”). Yamamoto even read *Aspects of Buddhism* in the Catholic Worker (“On Pilgrimage-May 1954”).

Yamamoto talked about her religious view in the joint interview with Wakako Yamauchi by King-Kok Cheung.

> I was brought up Buddhist . . . I was already in my thirties when I accepted the idea that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. That automatically makes me a Christian, right? But I don’t reject any of that Buddhism. It’s like taking Catholicism down to Mexico and coming up with Our Lady of Guadalupe. You can synthesize. *(Words Matter* 350)

In addition, Yamamoto said in another interview with Cheung that she was a Catholic Worker but she is not a Catholic (“Interview” 81). The *Catholic Worker* newspaper was one of the *Los Angeles Tribune* exchanges, and Yamamoto’s job was to cull items from the exchanges. The *Catholic Worker* fascinated her, so she began taking the copies home and re-reading them. After she left the *Los Angeles Tribune*, she subscribed to the *Catholic Worker* for seven years, and the more she read it, the more she wanted to be part of the movement (“Interview” 81).

Yamamoto explains that the Catholic Worker aims at “non-violence, voluntary poverty, love for the land, and attempt to put into practice the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount” (“Writing” 67). In the Sermon on the Mount is
"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:3-10)"

Yamamoto exchanged letters with Day, and later Yamamoto met her. After careful consideration Yamamoto came to New York from the West Coast to be a Catholic Worker with a view to attempting to put into practice the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount (Words Matter 364-65). Such experiences of her in the Catholic Worker became the background of the story "Epithalamium."

2. "Epithalamium"

The story starts with the Japanese American central character Yuki Tsumagari's retrospection on the day before she leaves the Catholic community in New York to go back home in the West Coast. That day she marries an Italian American, Marco Cimarusti, who is undergoing rehabilitation in the community to recover from alcoholism. She recollects the places where she has made love with Marco such as a cranny in the community and the seashore or woods belonging to a seminary. Yuki's pregnancy has ended in miscarriage and she continues to bleed and has confined herself to her room. The narrative explains that Yuki "had become a physical, moral, and spiritual ruin" (62).

Yuki's sexual experience is always accompanied by the fear of exposure to others: "... Some instinct, so positive that she [Yuki] blushed with shame, informed her that they [Yuki and Marco] had been watched, in shocked silence, by some young seminarian who had come to pray by the ocean in solitude... they had either been nearly discovered or discovered by a couple of kids racing their horses" (62). The feeling of having been watched is strangely gained by her "instinct," not by her conviction or conjecture. "Epithalamium" is
set in New York after World War II. In those days, Japanese Americans suffered extreme racial discrimination, hostility and anti-Japanese sentiment. Nisei suffered the trauma of internment camps consciously or unconsciously. Yamamoto said that she had come across with a realization that her "choice [to be a Catholic Worker] was a natural outcome of the internment" ("Interview" 81). Japanese Americans were discriminated against by laws such as the Gentlemen's Agreement (1908—) (Daniels, Asian 125), California Alien Land Law (1913—) (Daniels, Asian 138-44), Immigration Act of 1924 (Daniels, Prisoners 15), and the Anti-miscegenation Law (Nakano 195). During World War II, Japanese Americans including Nisei who had American citizenship were interned and guarded as enemy aliens by the U.S. government. Yuki's habit of worrying extremely about what other people think of her might have naturally been born in her mind due to the racial discrimination and the internment.

Yamamoto explained that Nisei's inferiority complex was due to a belief that their personal appearance and physical constitution were inferior to those of the whites which were stereotypically recognized as the norm of beauty. She said, "I am sure we [Nisei] were brainwashed by the movies we saw, to wish for blond hair, tall stature, etc . . . Perhaps, unconsciously, we still compare ourselves to the white stereotypes of beauty, the movie stars" ("Interview" 79). In addition to this, Japan's defeat in the war heightened the Nisei's sense of inferiority. To sum up, it can be said that a guilt complex of being Japanese has inhered in Yuki.

On the morning of Yuki's wedding, Hopkins' poem "God's Grandeur" suddenly arises in her mind. "The World is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; / It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed . . ." (60). In this part of the poem, the world is praised because it is filled with the grandeur of God. And the next passage follows: "As bookish as she [Yuki] had been all her life, she had never come to consciousness before with poetry singing in her head. Perhaps this was to be the first and last time" (60). This passage seems to foreshadow Yuki's future and have readers expect the Revelation of God's grace as well as some fateful events in Yuki's future.

"Epithalamium" has a lot of references to the Bible and the missal and quotes from four religious poems. Stephen Prickett discusses the effect of poetry by quoting John Dennis:
In 1704 John Dennis . . . cited the authority of Longinus to show "that the greatest sublimity is to be deriv'd from Religious Ideas" (Hooker 358). "Poetry," he concludes, "is the natural Language of Religion" (Hooker 364). It is the form through which the most profound human passion finds expression, and at the same time it makes plain by its own "regularity" — that is, its expression of order by fulfilling the rules and laws of its being — "the works of God", which like poetry, "tho" infinitely various, are extremely regular" (Hooker 335). (Prickett 40)

The Bible has a number of poems. Religion needs to depict the subtlety of human nature. Poetry allows religious texts to function effectively on this level. This might be the reason why all religions need poetic expressions. The four poems in "Epithalamium" have made the story poetic, which effectively expresses Yuki's subtle feelings.

In the story, young seminarians sing "Tenebrae of a Passion" on the beach belonging to the monastery: "The thief from the cross cried out: 'Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.' . . . How art thou turned to bitterness, that thou shouldst crucify me, and release Barabbas?"(61). It is on the same beach that Yuki, who is moved to tears by the beauty of the music and the religious solemnity, has sex for the first time. Yuki feels that this sexual experience is miserable for her. The place Marco and Yuki sit down after having sex is "on the huge damp rocks at low tide" (62). Compared with the picturesque scene of the sacred beautiful music of a Passion, the scene of Yuki's first sex is bleak and pitiful.

However, there is a song which praises love and the body of a woman in the Bible:

How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your delights! / Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. / I said, "I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, / and your mouth like the best wine. (Song of Solomon 7:6-9)

The Song of Solomon is filled with the great joy of life which derives naturally
from the religious belief. Yuki is described as having a "plain brown face" (67) and she tells of the size of her breasts: "I bought a couple [of brassiere], the smallest I could find, and they just kept hiking up on me" (62). Compared with the Song of Solomon, the rendering of Yuki's body and her sexual experience sounds pitiful and gloomy. This gloominess of "Epithalamium" stands in sharp contrast to the brightness or beauty of the Song of Solomon. This contrast shows that Yuki holds no such optimistic view of her own life as in the Song of Solomon.

Marco is depicted as having "all the courage, moral and physical, which she [Yuki] had always felt she lacked (she was afraid of elevators; she had never had the nerve to learn how to drive a car)" (66). Yuki of small stature with flat chest loves poems. She is mentally and physically quite different from Marco. Yuki wants to marry a man who expresses his love in poems, but in fact Marco does not have any poetic sense at all. Instead he says, "It's like you've got a rope tied around my neck that won't let go" or "If I had a million dollars, I'd just sit here all day long and just look at you!" (67). Hence, eventually for Yuki, "there was no need for poetry; the mere thought of Marco was enough to make her bowels as molten wax" (66).

Marco is "the type of man who should have been driving a Cadillac convertible, that expensive wristwatch glinting in the sunlight as he impatiently drummed his left hand on the outside of the door, waiting for the light to change — with yes, some golden-haired goddess by his side" (67). He is also a man who "retained an enormous vitality . . . he has a gift for work that not many are given . . . he spades the ground out there, with such ease, such grace . . . he is wonderfully made" (66). But he was an alcoholic. In addition, he approaches to Yuki forcefully or almost threateningly. He "phoned and threatened, still drunk, to go away forever if she did not marry him that very day" (60).

The difference of Marco and Yuki is reflected in the racial discrimination against Asian Americans in the U.S. at that time, and gender discrimination against Japanese American women in the Japanese American society. As Stan Yogi claims:

After being the targets of intense racism and hostility, many nikkei were eager to blend in and not be noticed. In an effort to rebuild their lives [after the internment], many sought to merge into the American mainstream, to forget about the traumas of internment, and in some
If Yuki seeks to "merge into the American mainstream," that is, to assimilate into the white mainstream America, it is understandable that for her "there was no need for poetry; the mere thought of Marco was enough to make her bowels as molten wax" (66). Marco makes Yuki's love for him stronger and more passionate. This could be because of her wish to escape from Nisei's difficult situation and belong to the white society. Yuki's course of life of moving to New York from San Francisco and marrying a white man, corresponds to Japanese American Nisei's desire of assimilation into the white mainstream. Although Marco is an Italian and alcoholic, to marry him is the best first step to take for Yuki, a racially marginalized Japanese American Nisei woman. Marco has been "wounded three times in the recent war, he wore a good-sized crater just below his left rib" (66). Similarly in the Bible, Jesus Christ is betrayed by Judas three times (Luke.22:54-62) and has spear wounds on the right side (John.19:34). Here is suggested an ironical contrast between Jesus Christ leading Christians to heaven and Marco making Yuki an outsider of Japanese community.

The reason Yuki has become a Catholic Worker is not explained clearly in the story. But Madame Marie says that Catholic Workers are "idealistic young and not-so-young women who, like Yuki, had been drawn there ostensibly by God but probably more because of their own ambiguous reasons" (63). There must have been some precedents who had come to the Catholic Worker and married alcoholic men. The words of Madame Marie are harsh on Yuki, "who had been such a serious and devout member of the Community for two years" (65). Yuki cannot talk back to Madame Marie because she has had an affair with the alcoholic Marco in the Community. Madame Marie has received the Revelation of God "over and above her earthly contentment" (64) and has become a Catholic Worker. Madame Marie is a precedent of Yuki despite the fact that Madame Marie is from the white society.

Yuki cannot help thinking that her cleanliness contains impurities: "Near the creek, where she had been so delighted to find earlier that spring (it had been St. Joseph's Day) those first curious shells, striated maroon and pale green, of skunk cabbage, the back of her dress had been streaked with mud" (62). Soon after that, Yuki's anxiety is to continue: "always there had been the anxiety of being suddenly come upon, of scandalizing the whole Community, and most of all, of giving grief to saintly, gentle Madame Marie" (62). Madame
Marie says that "there was the wise virgin who, immediately upon realizing that she was coming to regard an alcoholic with unseemly tenderness, had decided to leave the Zualet Community. Now she was leading a happy and useful life with a group of Catholic laywomen" (63). In contrast, according to Madame Marie, there is a woman ("the foolish virgin") who married an alcoholic and is leading an unhappy, impoverished life, suffering from domestic violence. Madame Marie's words evoke "the wise and the foolish Virgins" (Matt. 25:1-13) and seem to foretell that Yuki's marriage to the alcoholic Marco will end in disaster.

Madame Marie is white, so, however deep her insight is, she does not understand the plight of a Japanese American Nisei and her desire for assimilation into the white mainstream by escaping from the Japanese American community. And also Yuki's mother, an Issei, cannot understand her Nisei daughter's struggle. The mother had tried to persuade Yuki to marry a Japanese American man and settle down to a peaceful family life when she just passed thirty years old. However, Yuki had left for New York to become a Catholic Worker. She imagines her mother's astonishment and disappointment in learning her marriage to a "hakujin" (68) alcoholic. Yuki worries about her parents as well as her own life with an alcoholic husband. In her despair, "Suddenly, Yuki could not see ahead at all" (68). One day she goes out of the community with Marco who is looking for a job. Yuki, Marco, and his African American friend, Manuel, witness a crime and an accident on a street happen one after the other. Such a scene is just a part of an everyday life in the American society.

Even during the simple legalization of marriage in the registry office, Marco is drunk, and drinking more, he can barely walk. His friend explains that "when he's drinking, you can't trust him [Marco] with a quarter to go across the street and come back with a loaf of bread" (65). At a bus stop, Yuki mutters in her mind that "O bright unhappiness. O shining sorrow" (65), holding the head of Marco on her lap. Yuki foresees the brightness of the white society where she wishes to belong and the unhappy life with an alcoholic husband, and the shining of love and the sorrow of isolation from the Japanese American community. Yuki's words of oxymoron are an outcry of the struggling Japanese American Nisei woman seeking to assimilate into the white mainstream. Yuki does not seem to be aware of her own desire, and questions herself "Why this man?" (65-66).

Yuki keeps remembering Hopkins' poem on the way back to the community with heavily drunken Marco.
The World is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed . . .
. . . And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (68-69)

Yuki worries about her future with an alcoholic husband and about her isolation from the Japanese American community. And she is deeply concerned about her Issei parents’ disappointment. Suddenly she feels that her marriage might be without hope. But at once, she clings to the hope that the marriage could be the revelation of God. She interprets Hopkins’ poem as a message that the world is full of God’s dignity, love, and good intention. However, the narrator adds that “it is a wicked and unfaithful generation that asks for a sign” (68), implying that Yuki Tsumagari’s future life is uncertain or rather dubious of its success in assimilation.

Yuki marries on the Feast Day of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, which suggests that she feels St. John the Baptist would condemn her for defiling holy places by having sex there. Furthermore, on the morning of her wedding, while listening to the priest at mass, Yuki remembers the last part of Gustave Flaubert’s Herodias, where Iaokanan’s head is severed: “As it was very heavy, they carried it alternately” (69). Yuki might be superimposing the heaviness of Iaokanan’s severed head on her obscure future. That day is also the memorial day of St. Sabina, who was converted by a maidservant and beheaded under the Emperor Hadrian. However, the story closes with a sentence about St. Sabina: “it was not certain whether such a woman had existed at all” (69), implying that although Yuki is desperately trying to assimilate into the white society in leaving Catholic Community and Japanese community, her converted life has no solid foundation and her future will be uncertain.

Assimilation is an important issue for both immigrants themselves and their host countries. Asian American writers tend to take two ways in terms of assimilation. One is to assimilate into American culture as a “model minority” (Kim 18). Those in this category are regarded as in the position of the
“permanent inferior,” being “good” Asians who never become primary citizens. All that is required in this case is the cheerful acceptance of the assigned status and the rejection of their own racial and cultural background which might prove offensive to the dominant white society (Kim 19). “And of course he must never speak for himself” (Kim 18-19). For that reason, in reading stories by the “model minority,” it is not easy to see the author’s intention. The second case is of “less obliging minorities” (Kim 18) who protest against inequality or take a serious attitude.

According to Teruyo Ueki, Japanese American Nisei writers questioned the injustice of internment by depicting the relation between Issei’s life and the historical experience of the ethnic group (xviii). Traise Yamamoto has discussed Monica Sone’s Nisei Daughter (1953), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s Farewell to Manzanar (1973) and Yoshiko Uchida’s Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family (1982) as representative Nisei women autobiographies (115-16). These autobiographies depict Japanese American family’s assimilation to “Americaness” in the time before, during and after the war.

Nisei Daughter is categorized as “abjection” story by Traise Yamamoto. What before the war had been an awareness of participation in two cultures became during and after the war a split self. “I felt,” writes Monica Sone, “like a despised, pathetic two-headed freak, a Japanese and an American” (113-14). Julia Kristeva in The Powers of Horror claims that abjection is the process of forming one’s identity by discarding one’s offensive parts. In his Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent, David Leiwei Li differentiates “alienation” and “abjection” by saying that “... the discourse of ‘alienation’ typically constructs Asians as unamalgamatable, and the discourse of abjection casts them as essentially assimilable ...”(9). The main character in Nisei Daughter declares a sense of belonging to the mainstream through her assimilation in spite of her experiences of internment and racial discrimination. Compared with Nisei Daughter, “Epithalamium” is quite different in this matter. In her discussion about assimilation and identity of immigrants, Yuki Kusuhara argues that the more immigrants lose their original culture, the more they assimilate into the society of the new country (99); immigrants are forced to lose something in compensation for assimilation, which would leave them in agony over the cultural conflict and therefore make them anxious about their identity (106). Although the narrator of
“Epithalamium” sympathizes with Yuki who tries to escape from the harsh memories of racial discrimination and internment and marries to a white, the text raises a doubt about Yuki’s future.

Notes
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