

CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF POWER IN CYNTHIA KADOHATA'S *THE THING ABOUT LUCK AND KIRA-KIRA*

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Abstract

*This study explores the ways in which Japanese cultural and artistic traditions together with the narrative rhetoric of talk-stories are appropriated and transformed in Cynthia Kadohata's *The Thing about Luck and Kira-Kira*. The focus on culture and ethnicity requires knowledge of Japanese worldviews, without which one cannot hope to achieve full understanding of Asian American literature. Intended to elucidate Kadohata's unique interpretation of Japanese and American ways of life, this study also highlights the relationships between the Japanese (grand)parents and the Japanese American (grand)children, a central issue in Kadohata's work. This paper suggests that, although in society race plays a crucial part in discussions regarding culture, family structure, friend relationships and also social activities are closely tied within the two cultures that are embraced in Kadohata's work. The paper is intended to bring to the fore aspects related to the power of the Japanese cultural practice of storytelling, the influence of Japanese food in the American space and the ways in which representatives of both cultures deal with certain customs, thus proving that through their narration the characters succeed in identifying and dealing with different power centers that limit and at the same time contribute to the formation of Japanese Americans.*

Keywords: power, culture /vs/ society, new historicism, ethnicity

Introduction

This research is concerned with power relations that function in the Japanese American society as seen in Cynthia Kadohata's *The Thing about Luck and Kira-Kira*, while analyzing aspects related to the culture reflected in the selected novels. The present paper aims at connecting ideas related to the opposition between culture and society on the one hand, while on the other the similarities between them, thus proving that power can be encountered in both culture and society. Thus, the main purpose of the present research is to reflect on and work with new historicist elements that can be encountered in the already mentioned novels. It should be added that through the Japanese practice of storytelling the reader gets acquainted with cultural aspects related to traditional food and marriages as well as certain Japanese customs that are still practiced in the American space, all of these constructing the Japanese American context.

The paper will prove what Raymond Williams observed in his work, *The Long Revolution* i.e. "the traditional culture of a society will always tend to correspond to its contemporary system of interests and values" (1961, p. 68). Thus, together with the analysis of the selected novels, one should try to look into the ways in which the stories of the narrators reflect the contemporary values of the time. Furthermore, because the present research is concerned with representations of power through culture, one should note what Jeff Browitt (2002) acknowledges about the approach of new historicism. He regards that "new historicist analyses typically bring both literary and non-literary discourses into creative juxtaposition, so as to show how social power and historical conflict permeate the textuality of a society's literature" (p. 44). He further claims that new historicism is preoccupied with "historicizing texts and with the workings of power through culture, but focusing on issues of individual subjectivity construction, gender and the workings of patriarchy" (2002, p. 45). Therefore, the paper will also analyze the manner in which individuals of Japanese descent deal with representatives of a major society, namely the American one.

A Short Overview of the Selected Novels

The informed reader knows that Kadohata's selected novels offer an insight into the American culture seen from the perspective of Japanese American teenagers. Both novels present various representations of power that function against the Japanese community. *The Thing about Luck* tells the story of two Japanese siblings, the narrator Summer, her little brother Jaz and their grandparents, Obaachan and Jiichan, who during the summer vacation are supposed to work the wheat fields in order to help the family. The novel mainly revolves around Summer's understanding of the world as it is and around the hardships that haunt her family; she has a troubled brother who cannot make any friends, she develops an obsession for mosquitoes due to her previous experience with an infected one that gave her malaria, she cannot cope with the requirements imposed by her teachers and, more importantly, because she is still a child she cannot understand the true value of money and the difficulties encountered by her family. When thinking about her family's financial problems, Summer sincerely claims that "I didn't quite understand what 'paying the mortgage' meant, but apparently it was a constant struggle"¹. She is beginning to see that apart from catching malaria that year, the family's bad luck is also linked to financial problems.

Kira-Kira revolves around the daily lives of two sisters Katie and Lynn and later on, their younger brother Sam, while at the same time presenting the lives of their mother and father, who are diligent workers and devoted parents. The narrator, Katie, tells a beautiful and, at the same time, a tragic story because Lynn dies despite the parents' efforts to make her happy and healthy. The very essence of the novel is that one can find beauty in the world even if he/she values small and insignificant things that at first sight seem to lack magic of all kind. In fact, the first page of the novel explains that 'kira-kira' is the Japanese word for 'glittering', a word that the two sisters used to describe everything they liked. Katie mentions that their mother "was dismayed over how un-Japanese we were and vowed to send us to Japan one day"². Clearly, the sisters loved using Japanese words, but they were not accustomed with their cultural background. Hence, the mother's decision to make them understand the way in which Japanese people use certain phrases goes hand in hand with Katie and Lynn's inability to fully understand some parts of the Japanese culture.

Culture and Society as Equally Powerful

In order to prove that there are elements connected to both Japanese and American cultures in Kadohata's novels, one must first think about the way in which culture is perceived in a society. For instance, one should briefly refer to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1960) which thoroughly discussed the role of the state as being a union of classes in which different interests led to anarchy. It should be added that for Arnold the state is in a close connection to culture even if culture stands in opposition to civilization. If we accept his remark that "without order there can be no society, and without society there can be no human perfection" (p. 203), then we should agree that the concepts of order and disorder are integrated into both culture and state. It is just a matter of perception whether order, and implicitly its counterpart i.e. disorder, are perceived differently in an ethnic community. If a representative of a minority acknowledges order and associates it to the community he/she is part of, when looking at the exterior society the person in question sees it as a perfect example of disorder. In a similar way, if we assume that a society is associated with order, then the ethnic minorities are part of the disorder of things. These being said, which assumptions are true? The society which sees communities as functioning on the basis of disorder or the ethnic minorities which label the more powerful society as being disorderly? A sensible answer would be that it all depends on how one looks at the matter. One cannot claim that society is in a continual order or disorder, just like one cannot say that a minority functions on order and disorder patterns. The main point is that a society has the chance of exercising power over individuals who are often considered weak, and above all, odd. Thus, the main concern of power is order, and at the same time, it tries to deal with disorder by gaining control over it.

¹ Cynthia Kadohata (2013), *The Thing about Luck*. (London: Simon and Schuster) p. 4. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

² Cynthia Kadohata (2005), *Kira-kira*. (London: Simon and Schuster) p. 2. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

If for Foucault (1980) power “induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourses” (p. 119), than one should speak about various facets power can be seen from. In other words, the forms of power can be gained through knowledge and revealed through discourse, but one should also bring to light the pleasure that comes after exercising it. According to Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1992), power is “not something that is acquired, seized, or shared. Something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (p. 94). In simple terms, power refers to the relations of domination and resistance seen from social, political and cultural points of view. One should, hence, refer to power being ‘ubiquitous’, as Jeff Browitt calls it, because it can be encountered and exercised everywhere.

Japanese American Perspectives on the Power of Love

When talking about Kadohata’s selected novels, one should focus on cultural representations of power, in this way exposing the way in which the Japanese culture is perceived by Americans, and at the same time, the American ways seen from Japanese perspectives. For these reasons, when reading *The Thing about Luck*, one should pay attention to the Japanese way of arranged marriages because there are several instances in which Summer exposes and comments on this cultural practice. She recognizes that: “I thought Jiichan and Obaachan talked to each other the way that they did because they’d had an arranged marriage. Obaachan said that if I had an arranged marriage, I would never give or receive a broken heart” (Kadohata, 2013, p. 6). Judging from the narrator’s interpretation, Summer’s grandmother is clearly a representative of the old Japanese culture. Another example of exposing the Japanese way of life can be seen in an episode in which the beauty of women’s hand is believed to decide their fate. Because Summer was not wearing any gloves when she washed the dishes, the grandmother chose to teach her a lesson of life by giving as example her hands. Obaachan claims that: “Even if I ugly fish for face, someone would marry me for my hands” (Kadohata, 2013, p. 26). Even if Obaachan is old and does not seem to understand the way in which the world functions, she acknowledges that many things differed from the days of her youth. She tries to tell Summer not to look after boys: “In my day girl not married by eighteen, she a reject. Different today. Girl get married at thirty. So if I stare at boy at twelve and get married at eighteen, that mean you stare at boy at twenty-four and get married at thirty” (Kadohata, 2013, p. 54).

Kira-kira also presents elements related to the Japanese culture, in this way putting emphasis on both the American way with which the sisters were accustomed and the Japanese world. This time, however, Katie fantasizes about her dream life with Joe-John Abondondalarama, an imaginary perfect match for her. In one of her stories, Katie imagines that she is seventeen and visits the Grand Canyon when suddenly her life is in danger as she might fall anytime. Luckily, and not surprisingly at all, Joe-John is there to save her. Another story also bears a title “The Bathroom Story”, in which Joe-John and Katie are at a party and they accidentally end up being locked in the bathroom. Katie recognizes that: “at night we would tell each other secrets, and then by morning we would be in love” (Kadohata, 2005, p. 81). One could easily recognize that Katie’s stories are clearly inspired from American culture only by pointing to the Grand Canyon landmark. Moreover, the pattern of Katie’s bathroom story can be seen in numerous American films for teenagers. To put it differently, power seems to have more influence on Katie because she is an American born Japanese girl, and it is obvious to relate to the culture that is closest to her understanding.

The Culture of Food

Another facet of culture is concerned with food and in Cynthia Kadohata’s novels there are several instances in which Japanese traditional food is brought to light. For instance, when talking about her family Katie recognizes that: “we were poor, but in the way Japanese are poor, meaning we never borrowed money from anyone, period. Meaning once a year we bought as many fifty-pound bags of rice as we could afford, and we didn’t get nervous again about money until we reached our last bag” (Kadohata, 2005, p. 16). Another instance in which Japanese food is mentioned is when Katie says that after their arrival in Georgia, her family together with other Japanese ones gathered and ate all night long. She mentions “rice balls, fish cakes, rice crackers, rice candies, and barbecued chicken” (Kadohata, 2005, p. 38).

The Thing about Luck also has references related to Japanese food. Apart from Summer and her grandmother having to deal with what Mrs. Parker’s receipt book, Robbie, Mrs Parker’s son, asks if they will ever eat something traditionally Japanese. Summer admits that they are allowed to cook shabu-shabu i.e. “think noodles with thinly sliced beef and vegetables” (Kadohata, 2013, p. 134).

The irony, however, comes together with Robbie admitting that he once ate 'cooked sashimi' and Summer explains that "cooked sashimi didn't make any sense, because sashimi meant 'raw fish.' It was like saying raw carrots" (Kadohata, 2013, p. 135). One could further claim that through Cynthia Kadohata's novels the Asian culture is perceived by means of inserting Japanese words and explaining their culinary customs. Although in both her novels there are specific references that link to Japanese food, there are some humorous instances, as it was shown above.

Storytelling as a Cultural Practice

Storytelling is another cultural practice and it is present in both novels. One could say that through their storytelling, the grandfather from *The Thing about Luck* and the uncle from *Kira-kira* succeed in creating a cultural bond with the children from both novels, in this way unlocking past secrets and creating a sense of nostalgia for their homeland. In *The Thing about Luck* Jiichan is the one who often talks stories with the purpose of teaching his grandchildren lessons of life. One of his stories is concerned with weed and how much he hates it. His story had as main point a day in which he chose to save and grow a weed he had found special. Although his mother scolded him, he ignored her and took care of his special weed until it grew as tall as him and produced oranges, the best tasting ones. He ends this story with encouragements for both Summer and Jaz: "So I want you to remember, always keep eye open for special weed. You both special weed" (Kadohata, 2013, p. 29). Another story Jiichan chooses to tell is again a story about life in which the grandfather recalled a day in which he was supposed to walk to school but he got lost. He suddenly found himself in a mandarin orange farm and spent the night outside because he was too afraid to call for help. The next day his parents found him and told him that school was the most important thing in life and Jiichan ends his story with another piece of advice for his grandchildren: "When you walk, think of walk" (Kadohata, 2013, p. 181). A third story belonging to Jiichan revolves around him and his brother this time. Even if they had a lot of chores around the house, one day they decided to go fishing. The grandfather recognizes that when they were children, he and his brother had a habit for fighting, but that day they behaved like best friends because they enjoyed it so much. When they finally arrived home, they were severely punished by their father. However, the most impressive part of this story is that when Jiichan's brother was close to dying, he remembered that day very clearly. The moral of this story is that even if there are consequences for every decision in life, one still enjoys the choice made.

If in *The Thing about Luck* Jiichan was the storyteller, in *Kira-kira* Uncle Katsuhisa has this role, but the narrator regretfully claims that: "Uncle's stories never seemed to come to a point" (Kadohata, 2005, p. 77). Katie supports her statement with a good example in which she re-tells one of her uncle's experience with a legendary tornado. He bragged about how he and his first wife almost witnessed this tornado, but they had the luck to pass through that town one day before the tornado. Clearly, his stories do not make much sense and they certainly do not have a moral as compared to Summer's grandfather. However, the last story that Uncle Katsuhisa chooses to tell is the only one that bears meaning both for him and Katie. Looking at Katie and seeing her devastated and guilty because of Lynn's death, the uncle tells her how his first son died. The baby was so sick that he couldn't stop crying until one day when the noise stopped. The purpose of his story is that "when someone is dying, you have crazy thoughts" (Kadohata, 2005, p. 222). Seeing that Katie felt guilty for not being able to tell Lynn how much she loved her, her uncle told her about some of the Buddhists' belief that the spirit remains in the world for forty-nine days and advised her to take care of Lynn's altar. It could be added that from uncle Katsuhisa's story Katie learned that one can overcome hardships and guilt only by honoring the spirits of the loved ones.

One could further claim that judging from the selected novels, the Japanese practice of storytelling involves representatives of patriarchy teaching children lessons of life. If one were to compare the Chinese way of talk-stories to the Japanese one, than he/she would immediately reflect on some differences that can be easily spotted. For instance, in Chinese American writings women are the ones who tell stories to their daughters, granddaughters and even sisters. One must only think about Maxine Hong Kingston or Amy Tan to see that the portrayed male figures are plain, sometimes even absent from memoirs and novels. Obviously, the Japanese way of telling stories seems to value patriarchal figures even if the selected novels are written by a woman.

Powerful Position(s) of Statements

Another Japanese custom presented in the novels is the way in which Japanese people enter a house. First, they must be invited in and second, they must change their outdoor shoes with indoor ones. Because Summer is a Japanese young girl born and raised in America, she has troubles convincing her grandparents to enter the Parkers' house, their employers. While both Jiichan and Obaachan agree that it is not polite to enter somebody's house unless you are invited, Jaz chooses it is best to shriek "Helloooooo!" and Mrs. Parker opens the doors saying: "Toshiro, Yukiko, come in. you don't have to knock!" (Kadohata, 2013, p. 42). The American hospitality seems to be in a constant struggle with the way in which institutions exercise power over the foreign workers from factories. When talking about her mother, the narrator from *Kira-kira* feels rather embarrassed by the fact that her mother smelled funny and she explains that "the factory workers weren't allowed to take unscheduled breaks, so they all wore pads in case they needed to use the bathroom" (Kadohata, 2005, p. 97). Katie further decides that when she is rich she will buy the factory and let all the workers use the bathroom anytime, hence proving that she wishes for a certain kind of power that will make any one feel less miserable.

Moreover, if one were to compare Mrs. Parker's way of behaving with Japanese immigrants and the way in which Katie's mother was treated by American citizens, than one should bring to the fore an episode in which people often looked down on the ones who worked with poultry. Katie specifically mentions that: "when Mom and I ran into the girls from my school with their mothers, the other mothers would not even acknowledge mine" (Kadohata, 2005, p. 89). Although Katie's mother worked in a factory which contributed to the economy of Georgia, the other mothers do not acknowledge her efforts, but chose to ignore her because of her heritage. In a slightly similar way, *The Thing about Luck* presents the female employer who does not seem to take into account Obaachan and Summer's efforts of preparing food. Even if Mrs. Parker claims that she does not mean to "micromanage" the way in which Obaachan deals with the culinary dishes, through her constant disapproving and disappointment with Obaachan's decisions she proves differently. One of the instances in which Mrs. Parker reminds the reader about power and control is: "can you cut the sandwiches into rectangles, not triangles? It makes them easier to eat" (Kadohata, 2013, p. 82). Nevertheless, she has control over the food but not in a direct way as she specifically points towards certain details to show that power can be exercised at any moment and when it is considered to be necessary.

Power Seen through the Lenses of Education

Representations of power can also be seen in the American educational system as it is portrayed by the two narrators in Kadohata's novels. Some episodes that reflect both Summer and Katie's inability to seriously deal with the imposed homework link to the fact that the two narrators are unable to fully understand the teacher's requirements. If Summer recognizes that she gets only 'iffy grades' due to her inability to write good papers, Katie resorts to her sister's intelligence to bring forward the theme of different stories she has to read for school.

Moreover, *The Thing about Luck* presents the narrator's little brother doing his family tree homework. Summer recognizes that: "our family consisted of farmers and fishermen as far back as anyone knew, but when I'd sneaked a peek at his paper, he'd claimed we had several samurai in our background" (Kadohata, 2013, p. 102). Clearly, Jaz thinks that if he tackles aspects related to the Japanese history as it was perceived by the other societies he will eventually succeed in emphasizing cultural facets that will help him in making new friends. However, from a new historicist perspective, one could claim that Jaz aspires towards a kind of power associated to the samurai, thus attempting to make a difference in the American context he is forced to live.

In *Kira-kira* Katie describes her sister as being a genius in everything she does starting with winning a chess match with their uncle and ending with having only straight A's at school. If for Lynn school work was a way of achieving power through knowledge, for Katie it was close to a nightmare. She clearly recognizes that: "I got straight C's at school. So far I had never gotten a B or a D in any subject. My father said that 'C' stood for 'consistency'" (Kadohata, 2005, p. 62). In other words Katie is not able to compete with her sister's grades and her father encourages her to be herself. However, the 'C' could also stand for what Maxine Hong Kingston explains in *Tripmaster Monkey*, namely 'the Chinese C', a practice which the professors use to raise the grades of Chinese engineering majors to a 'C'. This remark would not be viable if Katie would not have been asked in her first day of school what kind of '-ese' is she: Chinese or Japanese.

Power Motivated by Wonder and Enchantment

If one were to think about Stephen Greenblatt's "Resonance and Wonder" (1996) which presents power as being motivated by both 'wonder' and 'enchantment' and compare these terms with what the two narrators usually do in the selected novels, than it would be sensible to add that both Summer and Katie's abilities to raise questions and express fascination for certain episodes in their lives could indeed be read from a new historicist perspective. For instance, immediately after Katie found out that Lynn was going to die sooner or later, Katie thought about different people who helped her in questioning her life as it was. Remembering the Chinese lady from Iowa, wondering why they moved to Georgia, why did she fancy a boy from school and why was her sister sick, Katie finds these explanations:

For everything in my life, I would ask, Why? Why didn't the Chinese lady have teeth? Probably it was because she didn't brush them enough. I asked myself why we had to move to Georgia. It was because my father needed to work at this hatchery so he could support us better. Why did I kind of like that boy? Because he was kind of cute. And why was Lynn sick? Why? There was no answer to that (Kadohata, 2005, p. 167).

Clearly Katie is used to raise questions and find answers, but in her sister's case, there is no answer yet. She is fascinated by all the questions she is able to raise and devastated by the fact that she cannot answer her last question.

Summer would often express her wonder through her brother Jaz. By answering his questions she more than often makes the reader wonder if her answers are genuine or just products of imagination. For instance, in an episode in which Jaz confesses that he was called a freak at school, Summer tries to convince him differently. She confesses that: "I think you're a very intense boy and are really good at concentrating, and Jiichan says that people like that are very successful in life" (Kadohata, 2013, p. 114). She obviously turns all her brother's disadvantages into advantages because there are numerous references in the text in which Jaz is depicted as being unable to pay attention to more than one thing. She also mentions their grandfather, a figure which Jaz respects. Summer's opinion makes Jaz shift from him being a freak to him being a 'great thinker'. To put it differently, Jaz's fascination of questioning everything in his life and Summer's ability to find answers to all her brother's curiosities could be viewed as powerful products of Greenblatt's both 'wonder' and 'enchantment', thus proving that in any kind of discourse, one embraces the statement that has power, the one that comes from a powerful position.

In fact, both novels portray the narrators as gradually evolving, thus achieving a certain kind of power. Summer from *The Thing about Luck* decides that she can overcome her days of bad luck by helping her grandmother in the kitchen, her brother with understanding how social life works and finally her grandfather by driving the combine in his place. In other words, she successively becomes responsible while at the same time realizes that power goes hand in hand with knowledge and by achieving knowledge, she discovers the pleasures that come after exercising it. In a similar way, Katie from *Kira-kira* learns how to live without her sister, hence achieving responsibility of her own actions and learning how to take care of her little brother. Although she does not have the required knowledge to take good grades, through her experiences as they were reflected in the novel, Katie has acquired a kind of knowledge that would help her in seeing the special part of any ordinary thing on Earth.

Conclusion

The Thing about Luck ends with Summer looking at two combines driving in the field and realizing "how beautiful hard work looked – the combines moving slowly in tandem, the moon hanging over the field. It was wabi-sabi" (Kadohata, 2013, p. 269-70). Her last thoughts were that her family's year of bad luck had ended the night she realized what wabi-sabi really meant. Wabi-sabi, as her grandfather told her, is the type of love that cannot be described; if it is described, than it is not wabi-sabi, but "tsukanoma" i.e. temporary love. Summer realizes that she can contribute and help her family, in this way being aware that her year of bad luck had ended. The last pages of *Kira-kira* portrays Katie, Sam and their parents moving to California and going to the sea for the first time. The narrator acknowledges that Lynn had taught her to look at the world as a place that glitters, as a place where every common thing could be magic. As she approaches and feels the sea, Katie recalls how much Lynn would have loved to live by the sea and says "I could hear my sister's voice in the waves: 'Kira-kira! Kira-kira!'" (Kadohata, 2005, p. 244). In both novels power is seen in various ways: the power an educational system has over Japanese children and the power the working system has over the grandparents and parents respectively. Power can also be encountered in the way grandparents speak thus linking to the influences that contributed to their formation in the American space.

If we accept that power is practiced in different centers, as it has been shown, than we should further argue that it is in close connection with the culture that practices it. Through their storytelling the characters from both *The Thing about Luck* and *Kira-Kira* prove that they are indeed insignificant parts of a system full of powerful centers and, thus, the only way to resist power is by becoming part of the system itself. Hence, if Summer from *The Thing about Luck* is aware that the next day she is supposed to drive Jichan's combine, in this way assuming an adult's responsibilities, Katie from *Kira-Kira* proves her values through grades and by taking care of her brother. Both novels offer a sense of hope for all Japanese Americans who were not able to find it for themselves.

Biography of author

Iuliana Vizan is a 1st year PhD student at Ovidius University, Constanta. Ever since she became a student of this faculty, she displayed an affinity for the cultural particularities of ethnic groups in America, which determined her to be gradually interested in this field up to the point when she decided to focus her researches on Asian American Literature. She took part in a number of conferences, such as the National Conference for Students of English Studies at the University of Suceava – CONSENSUS (2011, 2013 and 2014 editions), the 7th Scientific Conference “Chinese Civilization: Tradition and Modernity” that took place in Kyiv, Ukraine on the 6th of December, 2013. In September 2014 she participated in the 8th International Conference in Bulgaria – *Language, Individual and Society*, while in October she took part in the 2014 RAAS Conference which was organized at Ovidius University. She was also a participant of two international conferences which were held in Tirgu Mures, Romania: the 3rd edition of *Communication, Context, Interdisciplinarity* and the 2nd edition of *Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue*.

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