Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies
ISSN: 2663-7197
DOI: 10.32996/jhsss
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jhsss

JHSSS
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Asian Americans' Identity Crisis as Reflected in Day Standing on Its Head

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| ABSTRACT
Philip Kan Gotanda's heritage is professionally woven into nearly all of his work. The combination of family memories and theatrical inventions makes him the faithful chronicler of the Asian American experience. The past visibly invades the present in most of his works and characters, while he interweaves a distinctly theatrical magic charm around them, producing a crystal clear picture of Asian American life. His plays feature arguments between men and women with differing visions of how Asian Americans should fight to be a part of America. One can say that it would be more challenging to assign *Day Standing on Its Head* as a merely Asian American play because Gotanda exposes socio-cultural issues that can fit all the mainstream audience. Although the characters in this play confront problems rooted in the particularities of Japanese American history and culture, their conflicts reveal psychological and emotional realities that resonate beyond the Japanese American community. Along with all of Gotanda's works, he never sacrifices his ethnic authenticity to gain the acceptance and visibility of the mainstream audience. On the other hand, he claims the right to present the "real" face of the Asian American problems, issues, and conflicts, just to record their real life without any decoration. Gotanda argues that his style in discussing these issues can help in strengthening relations with the mainstream.

| KEYWORDS

Gotanda, ethnic theater, Asian Americans, model minority

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 January 2021 **PUBLISHED:** 10 January 2021 **DOI:** 10.32996/jhsss.2021.3.12.7

1. Introduction

It is worth noting here that Gotanda begins writing this play after spending one year off. This self-imposed vacation could reevaluate what he wants to achieve as an artist and shape his future path. So, one can quickly discover that *Day Standing on Its Head* (1994) comes with renewed vision and a more mature awareness of its relation to the Asian American experience. Gotanda thinks that he still has many stories he wants to convey as he comments:

> If I could finally say exactly what I want to say and get it all out, I could give it all up. Then maybe I would do the things I always thought I'd end up doing – lying on some beach in Kauai – getting fat, eating mangoes. But everything I say never quite says it. So I keep going back and trying to figure out how to say this thing that just keeps eluding my grasp. (qtd. in Omi, 1991, p. xxiv)

Day Standing on Its Head differs from Gotanda's other plays in some points. Firstly, the critic Vincent Canby (1994) sees that this play is "quite different from Gotanda's earlier plays that are marvelously moving works about the increasingly assimilated Japanese-American community, but *Day Standing* is an interesting journey to self-awareness of one person's life" (p. 5). Secondly, this play does not follow the features of the multiethnic literary work traced in the earlier plays. Thirdly, the play adopts the surreal style with psychological readings for the characters. Brantley (1994) comments on this point: "the writer throws the quest for self-awareness in the form of a hallucinogenic detective story, gives a certain natural momentum" (p. 1). Fourthly, the characters' names, Harry Kitamura – the main character and the only name that may refer to Japanese Americans, the other characters' names (Lillian,

Nina, Joe, Lisa, etc) do not necessarily refer to Asian-American names. Finally, all the characters wear identical black suits and Hamburg hats. In addition, the cast is relatively small, with multiple roles for most of the characters.

The critic Susan Chira (1994) comments on the differences between *Day Standing* and the other plays by saying:

> Intentionally raw and sprawling, Mr. Gotanda's new play... is far from the well-received close-up studies of relationships in 'The Wash' (1988) or 'Yankee Dawg You Die' (1989). The stylistic break was considered and, to some degree, a return to youthful experimentation... Indeed, after a long interruption, Mr. Gotanda wrote 'Day standing on Its Head' in two weeks... 'The Wash,' his poignant portrait of a standard Japanese-American couple. 'Yankee Dawg You Die', about the impact of movie stereotyping on Asians through the lives of two actors, took three years. (p. 1-2)

2. Theoretical Framework

In this play, Gotanda exposes his conflicts in a general and common context; the mid-life crisis with its symptoms and effects. Throughout the play, Harry Kitamura suffers from a mid-life crisis, and through his hallucination journey, Gotanda revisits and reevaluates the past of Asian American experience. The term "Midlife crisis" was coined in 1965 and used vastly in western societies to describe a period of dramatic self-doubt in middle age of life, as a result of sensing the passing of their youth and the imminence of their old age. Lachman (2001) indicates that some cultures may be more sensitive to this phenomenon than others, and there is little evidence that people experience a midlife crisis in Japanese and Indian cultures, raising the question of whether midlife crises are mainly a cultural construct (p. 283). Gay Courter and Pat Gaudette (2003) mention some of the significant symptoms that can be traced in some men:

> A man is depressed, anxious, fearful, and obsessive all at once. He feels unhappy with his lot in life, with his work, and with his spouse. He doubts his choices and begins to dwell on how he may never attain the pinnacles of success and fulfillment he always imagined were within his reach. He feels inadequate and begins to fear his aging and death. He may turn to sexual fantasy, alcohol, drugs, infidelity, or other escapes to cope with these feelings. (p. 50)

These symptoms can be easily applied to Harry Kitamura. Stan Yogi notes that this man is disturbed by memories of his political activism in the 1970s and bothered by uncertainties about his unsatisfying life (455). The theatre critic Amy Pang (1994) mentions that Gotanda has used Harry's crisis to touch upon betrayal and loss, not only from the Asian Americans but also for anyone who has placed their heart in an ideal and watched it disappear (p. 4). Gotanda comments on this point by saying:

> That play reflected what I was going through. It was exactly around the time of the L.A. rebellions. Third World politics and perception were a part of my life at that influential time when I was going to college— and there, Chicanos, African Americans, and Asians all struggled together. It was tough for me to realize that that model didn't apply anymore; it no longer worked to comprehend the world. I always sensed that the Third World Movement enabled me. I felt very much a part of something, something that was changing everything in America. And that it would change made me strong. Suddenly, I felt powerless because I now had no way to understand the world. I did not have anything to hold on to, and that for me was terrifying. Especially if you've lived for such a long time feeling like you knew, you understood. (qtd. in Hwang, 1992, p. 17)

In *Day Standing on Its Head,* Gotanda discusses three significant issues: the term of the model minority, the value of Asian American movement, and the conflict between repression and expression regarding the impacts of racism on Asian American life. Although Gotanda's play superficially centers on one man's personal life, it juxtaposes his radical past with his present advantaged "model minority" status that he swiftly feels stubborn about. Sean Lim, the artistic director at San Francisco's Asian American Theatre Company, notes: "[I] t's the hyphenated artists that will be able to deliver the stories that strike the chord of modern-day life [in America]" (qtd. in Hong, 2007 *Portraits by Gotanda,* p. 32).

As a result of his crisis, Harry Kitamura becomes unhappy with both his professional and social life. He is unsatisfied with his wife, Lillian, and their marriage rests on shaky ground. Kitamura begins to lose interest in everything around him and decides to counter this crisis by preparing for a study about his involvement in the radical college youth movement in the early 1970s. Kitamura speaks about himself:

> I'm a law professor at a local institution. It's not one of the more well-known ones and to tell the truth, I'd been a little embarrassed about it. However, I'd recently submitted an idea for an article to a prestigious law journal, and they accepted it. In the early 70s, I was part of one of the seminal strikes of the Asian American movement. I hadn't thought about it for a long period. But for different reasons, I decided to write about it. (*Day Standing on Its Head* 7)

Unfortunately, when he decides to face his crisis, he suffers from acute writer's block. This writing block deepens his restless case and begins to be disturbed by a series of dreams from his past and present: his late father's funeral, friends from his days of political activism, and some other shadowy figures who try to insult him, give him pills, or tempt him sexually. After a certain point, Kitamura feels that his suffering becomes more than a general symbol. He painfully distinguishes between reality and fantasy. He says:

> HARRY: I awoke from a deep sleep… I had the strangest feeling that my arm was disappeared. Becoming invisible… I wasn't dreaming, I was awake, or at least I believe so… The feeling left. I went back to sleep. The incident was soon forgotten as I was pretty busy researching a new paper I was writing. However, a week later, I had a dream. In this dream, I felt like my arm was disappearing again. Just like I had experienced earlier when I was awake. Only this time, in the dream, a Man appeared. (7)

The writer's block he is suffering now, symptomatic of his general difficulty in getting started, is ascribable to his absence of self-knowledge and initiative. He complains: "I'd begun to feel a little out of sorts. I couldn't write – every time I sat down and tried to recall the events of the strike…" (12). Concerning this point, Robert Feldberg notes that Gotanda's writing about this block is a way to express his own (2). So he tries to cure and overcome his block by reflecting it on Harry's character. Gotanda comments:

> I was exhausted from what I was telling. I was doing interviews, and the things I would tell looked worthy in print, but I no longer believed in them… writing has stopped being fun… I just let it kind of come out; let it not be so faultless anymore. (qtd. in Chira, 1994, p. 1-2)

3. Analytical Framework

One of the most critical issues Gotanda addresses in this play and which frees him from the confines of being a Japanese writer, is speaking openly about the concept of 'Model Minority'. Gotanda sharply criticizes this racial stereotype and condemns the Asian Americans' involvement in deepening this social identity. According to Dunbar (2005), this term originated in the Asian American movement of the late 1960s. This ethnic self-determination and realization put Asian Americans on the socio-political map of the U.S., giving them a social manifestation and the authorization to speak (p. 17).

However, many Asian Americans gradually lost any commitment to their ethnic group and became incapable of passion and conviction for anything. The final result is their complicity with the dominant culture. Throughout the play, Gotanda (1997) makes comparisons between different types of characters to show the behaviors and personalities that help in perpetuating this concept. For example, Harry notes:

> HARRY: Better not to … better not to feel … this kind of thing … anything. Because if you do … Better to hide. Run home, your tail between your legs … Be the dog … Silent, Obedient, dog-face … Because if you, if you open up, feel, let yourself breathe, howl … You betrayed me. The one time I found something. Open up. My heart … I told them. It was me. I told the school administrators what we were planning to do. They like people like me. They do. Quiet, hard-working. The model minority. We're not dangerous, we're not sexual, we're always wearing this silent frozen mask while inside I want to rage and scream. (p. 39)

In another situation, Gotanda uses the funeral of Harry's father to expose the difference between the emotional behavior of his mother's relatives and the natural and unrepressed grief of his father's relatives. This situation displays the gap between the "model minority", who have control over everything in their lives, and the portrayal of natural and ordinary people. The playwright shows Kitamura himself torn between the two responses of his relatives:

> HARRY: On the other side sat my father's family. They're all Hawai'ian – they gamble, they drink … My mother's side of the family was modified by his lack of decorum, his raw, unrestrained expression of grief and despair … I found myself feeling a strange mixture of emotions. I was at once stunned, painfully uncomfortable at his overt calling attention to ourselves, the event. Furthermore, at the very exact instant, wanting to join him, to moan, sob unabashedly, to let a flood of complex feelings discharge out of me. (p. 16)

Coincidentally, Gotanda represents the hegemony of the American culture and the overt discrimination that Asian Americans face. Here, he confirms the necessity of being allied against this hegemony. Sam, one of the radical activists from Harry's youth days, depicts the characteristics of a "model minority" and clarifies the reasons behind being accepted in American society:

> SAM: You have to stop fighting us. The Yellow Guard wants you to be part of the family … They like people like you. You're just like your parents. My parents. We always do what we're told. Quiet, hard-working, successful - the model minority… So they admit us for now but at what charge? To live like a cowardly mouse, never creating a peep' cause we're scared they'll take it away? Always wearing this silent solid mask

> of middle class propriety while inside you want to rage, yell at the injustices all around you?… One day we'll get too good at what to do, we'll make a little too much money, figure out the game a little too well, and then we'll see middle class American's genuine faces. They'll hate us; they'll hunt us down, kill us on the roads. (22- 23)

With this depiction of the Asian Americans' suffering in American society, Gotanda deconstructs the racial stereotype while dramatizing the complex historical constructions of sansei identity (Kondo, 1997, *Introduction,* p. xiii). Here, he addresses the non-specific audience; he calls attention to the impacts of racism against not only Asian Americans but also any ethnic group in America. Gotanda on many occasions expresses his sharp and evident refusal of all kinds of discrimination whether in the theatre or the social life. He uses his pen to portray the tension status of Asian Americans; they don't live in their homelands and don't know anything about their parents' history or culture, and at the same time, they are dealt with as "not American" but "Asian American". Gotanda says:

> Particularly now, Asian-Americans are left out, and they are 'insidious' while there is this feeling of knowing them. It's a peculiar double-bind. You get the worst of both worlds… Given the rise in anti-Asian sentiment and Japan-bashing, nothing surprises me anymore in what I read about and what I experience in terms of being Asian. The consciousness is raised while you have the ugliest, overt forms of racism in your face. (qtd. in Breslauer, 1993, p. 2-3)

In addition to Gotanda's criticizing of the model minority, he moves to the conflict between expression versus repression or the issue of self-containment and conformity with social concepts and expectations. We find that Kitamura is depicted as incapable of showing his emotions or ideas and continuously revising all of his past attitudes and involvement in the activism movements. With this picture, he wants to symbolize all Asian Americans who cannot show their true personality but are dealt with as "one group" without differentiation. Concerning this point, Gotanda describes the play as: "'a Zen paraple' of Harry Kitamura's struggle to break free of his own psychological restraints and the conformity society expects from a 'model minority'" (qtd. in Chira, 1994, p. 2).

On the other hand, Brantley (1994) sees that the sense of being one of the model minorities reinforces passivity and socially circumspect behavior. This sense is common among almost all Asian Americans in different fields of life. They want to be dealt with as human beings, not just as objects of their ethnic culture. The poet Garrett Hongo (1993) describes his feeling by saying:

> Our works were not so much delivered as our looks and personalities were interpreted and then along fairly simple lines of social image and ethnic pride, sociological themes of ethnicity, and political iconoclasm… We weren't so much listened to as intellectuals, as employed as ritual objects of the culture. (p. xxxiv-xxxv)

Brian Nelson (1997) mentions that perhaps no other Asian American writer makes as much use of the theatrical resources available to him as Philip Kan Gotanda (p. 5). In his treatment of the repression versus expression issue, Gotanda uses the masks as a sign of disguise to hide genuine emotions and ideas. The self-imposed masking of feeling was familiar to middle-class Japanese Americans. Nevertheless, his employment of masks differs entirely from the traditional dramatic technique. The number of sound cues for Gotanda production can number in the hundreds, and the interplay of sound, light, movement, and poetry calls for a stage crew with locating timing and a remarkable openness to the shade of the immediate moment.

Another prominent feature of Gotanda's departure from ethnic to mainstream is his explicit reevaluation of Asian American history and conflicts. According to him, he tries to disprove the controlling stereotypes. For example, we find that Gotanda presents Harry Kitamura as a former student activist and then as a moderate and respectable law professor who leads middle-class American life. During his hallucinogenic crisis, Harry suffers from memories of his past involvement in the activism movements. Throughout this journey, Harry begins to reevaluate his radical experiences. Kitamura recalls these days by saying:

> In the early 70s, I was part of one of the seminal strikes of the Asian American movement. I hadn't thought about it in a long time, but I decided to write about it for some reason. (7)

Then, Gotanda miserably questions the value of such movements to Asian Americans. However, this time, he makes it in the shape of a generational conflict between Harry and one of his students. The student confronts his professor with the truth:

> STUDENT: It's OK to tell old war stories about your days as an Asian American radical, but what does this have to do with us? I mean, to students right now, in the 90s. Isn't your idea of a Third World Student Movement a bit of a dinosaur given the trend toward anti-Asian violence in African American and Latino communities? (8)

This generational confrontation represents the double-identity of Asian Americans and helps Gotanda critique the various problems in the social movements in general, such as factionalism, theoretical and procedural disagreements among leaders. He wants to convey that movements have approximately nothing that can be of value to societies and people.

Philip Kan Gotanda and other playwrights from the third-generation Japanese Americans see that the radical leaders of the older generation have lost a great deal of prominence and influence. While they consider themselves victims of racism, they admit that they are active performers in deepening its impacts. Nelson (1997) sees that the characters in *Day Standing on Its Head* face the consequences of infighting among Asian American political fashion-whether they are caught refighting the old battles or they've lost their political drive as they become stockbrokers (p. 5). So, Gotanda's core notion in this play is that the real battle should not be against other Asian fashions or even the larger white society, but rather, inside oneself. According to him, the bliss that Harry Kitamura finds by making his life stand on its head is the true victory.

At the end of the play, Gotanda arrives with Harry to the utmost point of disappointment. Harry says:

> HARRY: – up everything – career, my standing in the community, personal life … It's all gone, taken, ripped from me, destroyed. All I can see is you. All I can think about is being with you. What's happening to me? I'm lost, lost … I'm nothing … I no longer exist. (37)

After that, Harry tries to cure himself by facing reality, and Nina – one of his hallucinogenic figures – stimulates this confrontation by saying:

> NINA: Harry? Harry? I think you're ready now. You want to get to know me, don't you, Harry? Really know me. You can. However, there's a price. A terrible, wondrous, excruciating price that most sane people would never dare to pay… You have to live the truth. Be the truth. Every instant of every heartbeat, the truth. Are you ready to do that, Harry? Live the truth… If you are, then you're ready to cross the line… (37)

At this moment, Harry Kitamura catches the moment of truth and retrieves his full awareness;

> HARRY: I awoke from a deep sleep. I had the strangest feeling that I had been asleep for a long time. [Looks around, inhales deeply.] Fresh air has a flavor; did you know that? Peaches? And Night… [Thinking.] Night is … [Surprised at his thought.]… Day Standing on Its Head… I awoke with a sense of fullness. Yes, dance. Dance any chance I could get… (41)

Day Standing on Its Head shows that some can "pay their ethnic or racial identity little mind" in their pursuit of socio-economic power and position. However, they may eventually face an identity crisis in the new socio-cultural amalgam and desperately long to be "a part of some manageable community of sentiment and cultural heritage" (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, p. 30).

The different styles and techniques adopted in *Day Standing on Its Head* encourage many critics to examine the playwright's eagerness to move beyond the borders of the traditional ethnic box. Craver (2003), for example, suggests that the play locates itself within a multiethnic landscape in fascinating ways: "… it is a journey as witty and engaging as it is indirect… elements of fantasy and reality and life and death became tangled in tantalizing ambiguity" (p. 169). We find, for example, Gotanda eagerly makes use of cultural references spanning three continents. From Japanese soap operas to Cream's music to Rene Magritte's paintings, Day is a postmodern feast; all of these become features in a dreamlike landscape, in a play that writes about the complex historical formations of sansei identity.

Other techniques include Gotanda's innovative use of the mask as being inseparable from one's person, the doubling of roles and fusion of identities, costumes with "an ambiguity of eras", dreams peopled by surreal figures from the past and present, hallucinations spilling over into waking life – all this perfectly builds up the atmosphere of "a German Expressionist film," making it difficult to label it a merely Asian American work (Gotanda, "Author's Notes" 4). Gotanda's dramatic material hardly blurs the concrete Asian American issues taken up in the play that attains a delicate balance between an abstract style and a concrete socio-cultural concern.

4. Conclusion

Finally, Gotanda's characters live against a background of interracial controversy that continues every day. Nelson (1997) mentions that references to the Vincent Chin case – in which white Detroit autoworkers beat an Asian they mistakenly believed to be as Japanese as the markers of Totyotas- and the Latasha Harlins case – in which an Asian woman shopkeeper received a shockingly light sentence for shooting a black teenage shoplifter – remind the audience that the issues lurking on stage may face them at home tonight, and this complicates the issue of ethno-racial identity in the play (p. 5- 6):

> HARRY: Now as I explained I'm researching this paper. In particular, I'm interested in the factionalism in the Asian American groups, politically what each group stood for… See if we can trace their roots back to early pre-war Asian communities, to any political, lefty learning that might have even been brought over from the old countries… And then trace those movements into the present to see how they've impacted present day activism, court litigations – things like the Korematsu case, Vincent Chin, the Soon Ja Du – Latasha Harlins case… (*Day Standing on Its Head* 20)

Clearly, Gotanda offers a vital examination of Asian American cultural, political, and social issues, but with more details and concentration than in his earlier works. David Henry Hwang comments on this play by saying: "Philip Kan Gotanda's Day Standing on Its Head suggests that political perspectives which once seemed sufficient for self-definition may grow old and wither with time" (qtd. in Nelson, 1997, p. viii). In this play, Gotanda strives to search for identity as a lifelong journey, challenging all kinds of obstacles he may face and trying to answer the questions of identity, but perhaps never to be definitively answered.

Funding: This research received no external funding.
Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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