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"'We' as Witness and Resistance: The First-Person Plural Narrative as a Feminist Tool in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*"

Arundhathi Mohan
MA in English
Central University of Karnataka
India

ABSTRACT

Julie Otsuka's The Buddha in the Attic tells the account of Japanese picture brides who traveled to the US in the early 1900s. The book is written completely in the first person plural. This study examines how Otsuka's collective "we" voice functions as a feminist narrative device that resists erasure, amplifies silenced experiences, and negotiates the complexities of identity under conditions of both colonial and patriarchal subjugation. This article uses feminist narratology (Lanser, 1989; Lanser, 2023) and postcolonial feminist theory (Spivak, 1988; Petersen & Rutherford, 1986; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) to argue that the "we" voice creates a communal subject capable of bearing witness to historical injustices. Through close readings of key moments—from the women's hopeful arrival in America to their eventual disappearance during World War II—the analysis reveals how the collective voice both disrupts dominant historical narratives and stages the paradox of visibility and invisibility inherent in subaltern expression.

By framing migration, labor, and generational conflict within a shared narrative consciousness, Otsuka mobilizes the "we" as a political and aesthetic strategy that foregrounds women's agency even in contexts designed to silence them.

Keywords: first-person plural, feminist narratology, postcolonial feminism, subalternity, Julie Otsuka, The Buddha in the Attic

INTRODUCTION

The first-person plural narrator in literary fiction is ambivalent, promising camaraderie and common memory but also potentially erasing individual differences. In The Buddha in the Attic (Otsuka, 2011), Julie Otsuka employs this voice to narrate the journey of Japanese picture brides who travelled to America in the early 1900s. Told entirely through the pronoun "we," the novel collapses multiple individual lives into a single collective consciousness, chronicling migration, exploitation, and eventual disappearance against the backdrop of racial discrimination and wartime internment.

This study proposes that Otsuka's "we" is more than an aesthetic choice; it is a feminist narrative tool that confronts the silencing of women in both historical records and literary traditions. By rejecting an individualized focalizer, Otsuka creates a narrative space in which subaltern women speak together, generating a testimony that cannot easily be dismissed as a singular, isolated account. The "we" voice embodies what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) describes as the paradox of subaltern speech: even when women speak,

their voices are often muffled or reframed by dominant discourse. In The Buddha in the Attic, however, the collective narrator resists this silencing by multiplying presence, making the very act of speaking a shared

and therefore amplified political gesture. Drawing on feminist narratology (Lanser, 1989, 2023), this article reads the "we" voice as a means of reclaiming historical agency. The collective narration bridges personal and communal histories, positioning the Japanese picture brides not only as subjects of migration narratives but also as active witnesses to their own erasure. Through close textual analysis, the article explores how Otsuka's plural voice negotiates visibility and invisibility, memory and forgetting, solidarity and difference—revealing its potential as a feminist form that transforms marginalized women from silent victims into a chorus of resistance.

This research uses a qualitative interpretative method to literary analysis, with The Buddha in the Attic (Otsuka, 2011) as the major text. The analysis is informed by feminist narratology, postcolonial feminist theory, and subaltern studies. The theoretical framework is based on Lanser's (1989, 2023) work on feminist narratology, Spivak's (1988, 1999) idea of subalternity, and Petersen and Rutherford's (1986) theory of double colonization.. The study examines how Otsuka's use of the first-person plural narrative functions as a feminist tool that both amplifies and complicates marginalized voices. The method combines close reading of selected passages with thematic and structural analysis. Passages are chosen for their illustrative use of collective voice, their engagement with themes of migration, gendered labor, and cultural erasure, and their contribution to the novel's political and aesthetic aims. Secondary sources include academic articles, theoretical texts, and current works on collective narrative (Fludernik, 2023; Richardson, 2025; Evaristo, 2023), postcolonial feminism (Mohanty, 2003), and subaltern women's portrayal in literature. This methodology enables a nuanced reading that situates the novel's narrative technique within both feminist literary traditions and the broader discourse of postcolonial studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist Narratology and the "We" Voice

Feminist narratology examines how narrative form intersects with gendered power structures, questioning whose voices are privileged and whose are excluded (Lanser, 1989, 2023). Within this framework, the first-person plural narrator occupies a particularly charged space: it can create solidarity among marginalized subjects, but it can also risk subsuming individual experiences into a monolithic voice. Otsuka's novel uses the "we" voice to craft what Lanser terms "communal focalization," where narrative authority emerges from a chorus rather than a single speaker.

Postcolonial Feminism and Double Colonization

Postcolonial feminism critiques both mainstream feminism's tendency to universalize women's experiences and postcolonial theory's neglect of gender (Mohanty, 2003). The concept of "double colonization" (Petersen & Rutherford, 1986) describes how women in colonized or migrant contexts face oppression both as colonized subjects and as women in patriarchal systems. In Otsuka's novel, double colonization manifests in the women's subjugation by both their husbands and the dominant white society that excludes them.

Subalternity and the Problem of Voice

Spivak's (1988) "Can the Subaltern Speak?" frames the subaltern as structurally silenced in historical and cultural discourse. The "we" voice challenges this by asserting a shared narrative presence, yet it also reflects the erasure it resists: the lack of individualized identity mirrors the historical invisibility of the women it portrays.

Collective Narration as Political Strategy

Recent scholarship suggests that collective narration can function as a form of political solidarity and witness (Fludernik, 2023; Richardson, 2025; Evaristo, 2023). In *The Buddha in the Attic*, it constructs a communal identity that resists fragmentation, turning personal suffering into collective memory—while acknowledging the tensions of inclusion and exclusion that "we" inevitably entails.

ANALYSIS

The "We" as Collective Hope

The novel begins with the women on a boat to America, comparing photographs of their future husbands (Otsuka, 2011). The "we" turns a solitary anticipation into a communal ritual of hope. By framing betrayal and disappointment as shared, the narrative protects individual dignity while forging solidarity.

The "We" as Witness to Oppression

As the women adapt to life in America, the "we" voice documents their exploitation in both domestic and public spheres. Language becomes a site of subaltern silencing, yet the collective narration bypasses public erasure by speaking directly to the reader, transforming silence into testimony (Spivak, 1988).

The "We" as Erasure

The final chapter's shift from "we" to "they" enacts the violence of historical exclusion, as the women's collective voice is overwritten by the dominant group's perspective. This loss of the "we" forces readers to confront the fragility of collective memory in the face of institutional erasure.

CONCLUSION

Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* demonstrates that the first-person plural can be both a shield and a vulnerability for marginalized voices. As a feminist narrative tool, it transforms scattered, silenced lives into a shared record of endurance and resistance. Yet the novel also insists on the instability of that record: solidarity is powerful but not invincible. The "we" can speak—but it can also be erased. This paradox makes the form especially potent in feminist and postcolonial storytelling, where reclaiming voice is always a contested act.

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