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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Shame and Reconstruction: Transformation of Kazuko's Identity in *Nisei Daughter*

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| ABSTRACT
Monica Sone's Nisei Daughter offers a deep exploration of the growth and identity struggles of the protagonist Kazuko, a second-generation Japanese American, during World War II. This memoir not only records her childhood in the United States and her experiences in the internment camps but also reflects on how she confronts racial discrimination and identity crises. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories of affect, particularly her discussions of shame, this paper examines the formation and manifestation of shame in the memoir and its impact on the Nisei protagonist Kazuko's identity. Shame plays a dual role in Kazuko's process of identity formation: it is both a reflection of external oppression and a driving force for self-reconstruction. Ultimately, driven by shame, Kazuko attempts to reconstruct her identity by accepting and integrating her cultural background.

| KEYWORDS

Shame; Identity; Second-generation Japanese Americans; Monica Sone; Nisei Daughter

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1. Introduction

Nisei Daughter is a memoir written by a Nisei writer Monica Sone, a second-generation Japanese American born to Japanese immigrant parents in the United States. The memoir narrates her experiences growing up as a second-generation Japanese American before and during World War II, including her childhood in the Japanese American community in Seattle and her experiences in internment camps from 1942 to 1946. These experiences reflect the collective memory of the entire Japanese American community, making the memoir a seminal text in the study of Asian American identity. As the protagonist and narrator of the memoir, Kazuko's experiences reveal the complexities of a dual identity as a Japanese American. While facing systemic racism and the injustices of internment camps, she encounters an identity crisis. However, after leaving the camps and interacting with people of various races, she accepts her Japanese identity and believes in a harmonious integration of her dual identities. Critics of the memoir have mainly taken two interpretive stances: one criticizes the novel for supporting American assimilation. For example, Elaine H. Kim(2005) argues that the hopeful ending is unconvincing, as Kazuko still struggles with assimilation despite the text's assertion of a harmonious dual identity. The other interpretation reads the text as a subtle protest against American assimilation. Li Xingxing(2021), for instance, argues that the Japanese subject in the fluid narrative is overly ashamed, resulting in a text that is overly loyal to an Americanized narrative, thereby exposing alternative subversive stories filtered out by American narratives and transforming ethnic shame into national shame for the United States in her doctoral dissertation. However, both analyses overlook the protagonist's process of redefining her identity through affective management.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a key figure in the "affective turn" in Western literary theory, challenges the contemporary anti-essentialist epistemology centered on deconstruction, emphasizing a knowledge path that focuses more on affect and emotion. She posits that emotions are not merely internal emotional reactions but are products of cultural, social, and political environments. This paper argues that shame influences the protagonist's identity formation, which is neither a complete

submission to American assimilation nor a mere protest against it, but rather a more complex dynamic process of emotion and identity. Throughout her growth, Kazuko faces racial discrimination and confusion about her dual identity in American society, repeatedly experiencing shame. This paper will explore the reasons for the emergence of shame as an emotion in Japanese Americans and how it influences the protagonist's identity, ultimately reconstructing it due to its agency.

2. The Formation and Manifestation of Shame

In her 1993 article "Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel," American scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opened the door to a re-examination of "negative feelings" such as "shame" in Western academia. Her affect theory emphasizes the public and political dimensions of emotions, reshaping shame from a destructive negative emotional experience into a politically productive affect. That is, shame is not just an internal personal experience but also a profound social and political phenomenon. Within social structures, shame is often used to maintain power relations and social hierarchies (e.g., through racism, sexism, and oppression based on sexual orientation).

Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*(1992) describes the fundamental experience of shame as one of being watched. "This shame is the awareness that another person has seen me and categorized me as a snoop or a voyeur, or at least might well have done so."(Sartre 282) Sartre argues that shame reveals not any specific wrongdoing I have committed but an awareness that I am indeed the person that the other is categorizing in some way. He states, "my shame is a confession."(285)What is more, it is an awareness of being ascribed some unpleasant character trait, as though this trait is fixed aspect of my character, a part of my inner nature: "for the Other, I am leaning over the keyhole as this tree is bend by the wind."(286) In the context of American racism, this gaze becomes the white gaze. Whites occupy positions of advantage and dominance, serving as the subjects of the gaze, viewing others from a superior standpoint and defining the inferior attributes of the "Other." This gaze implies that Asian bodies are unassimilable outsiders, and even worse, it conveys Orientalist judgments that categorize Asians as backward, primitive, poor, and evil, as opposed to whites, who are perceived as advanced, civilized, and affluent. Once internalizing these racial gaze, Asian Americans, under the gaze of the white gaze, whether real or imagined, see the flaws in their self-image in the eyes of the white man, and then shame hits them.

In the novel, the Japanese body with its oriental features, traditional etiquette, accents, and other traits that do not align with white characteristics become focal points of white curiosity. The Japanese feel ashamed and develop bodily anxiety, feeling highly visible under the white gaze.

Kazuko's sense of shame first arises from her sensitivity to the white gaze. During a trip, Kazuko's mother converses in Japanese with a lady keen on Japanese etiquette on the bus, drawing the attention of white passengers. When the lady repeatedly bows to Kazuko's mother, insisting that she disembark first, this brings more attention and inconvenience. Kazuko becomes furious: "I screamed at Mother to tell Mrs. Kato to please get in and dispense with the ceremony."(Sone 48) Here, Japanese etiquette, symbolizing Japanese culture, is considered inappropriate under the white gaze, not just because of the inconvenience caused but because Japanese culture and the Japanese themselves are seen as foreign and unwelcome. Similarly, unrefined English represents "foreign" identity, deepening her sense of shame. When Kazuko's mother uses inappropriate words due to a language barrier while speaking with her white teacher, the teacher's subtle reaction makes her feel profoundly embarrassed: "A tense silence followed. Miss Powers was struggling to keep a straight face. I felt as if I were standing inside a furnace."(Sone 51) Her mother's broken English, revealing her difference from white people, is something that whites will magnify as something shameful. "I thought, miserably, as I walked home with Mother, how much the other teachers would laugh when Miss Powers told them about Mother's faux pas. I pointed out to Mother in a tearful, disgraced-for-life voice that she had made a terrible mistake."(51)

The first chapter of the novel, "The Shocking Fact of Life," describes how six-year-old Kazuko is astonished to learn for the first time that she is Japanese, only to later realize that the truly shocking thing is not her Japanese heritage but the discrimination she and other Japanese people face because of their race. On the eve of World War II, the citizenship of "Nisei" (second generation Japanese Americans) was called into question, and the prejudice of mainstream American society became evident. When the Ito family tried to find a place to stay near the beach because their youngest daughter was ill, they were completely refused. Later, Kazuko overheard from her parents and a Japanese friend that they were rejected because "they never rented or sold houses to Orientals, and I doubt they will ever do so in the future." (115) Monica Sone was extremely confused, sad, and ashamed: "My face burned with shame"(115).That is because her ancestral roots had suddenly become her identity, which was now being scorned.

After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, with anti-Japanese sentiment on the rise, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, authorizing the War Department to establish "military zones" in the most barren areas of the country as exclusive residential areas for Japanese nationals in the United States. This order resulted in 120,000 Japanese residents being forcibly relocated from their long-established homes on the U.S. West Coast to ten remote internment camps.

Within a short period, 120,000 people of Japanese descent were forced to close their businesses, abandon their farms, leave their homes, and move to distant internment camps. Two-thirds of these people were born in the United States, some of whom had lived and worked there for decades, owning their homes and jobs and leading quiet lives while striving to ensure a better future for their children. However, overnight, they were met with fear and despair. During the war, racist attitudes were heightened, reducing them to second-class citizens in society, seen as suspicious yellow people in a white-dominated society. Sone writes, "For years, the professional guardians of the Golden West had wanted to rid their land of the Yellow Peril, and the war provided an opportunity for them to push their program through."(157) This humiliation was evident in shop signs stating, "Open season for Japs!" and "We kill rats and Japs here,"(161) comparing Japanese Americans to animals that could be killed at will, depriving them of their human status and branding them with the mark of shame through internment, constantly subjecting them to societal hostility and discrimination, thereby deepening their sense of shame.

3. Shame and Identity Crisis

The uniqueness of shame lies in its distinction from negative emotions directed at others, such as anger. Shame involves an overall negation of self-existence, with the primary response being self-concealment. Bernard Williams (2021) similarly argues that shame is self-directed rather than other-directed because prospective shame can guide current actions. The self may modify its behavior to align with the anticipated judgment of others. Through the prospective experience of shame, the self internalizes the moral qualities of the other, transforming the fear of possible judgment into a motivation to improve itself. Thus, shame becomes a force for reconstructing or improving the self.

The sense of shame experienced by Nisei often stems from their anticipation of the negative reactions from mainstream society (the Other) towards their Japanese identity and characteristics. In such an environment, they strive to internalize the moral qualities of mainstream society, adjusting their behavior to conform to American standards, rejecting Japanese culture and identity, and making themselves more Americanized.

The chapter of the book where Kazuko's family returns to Japan is titled "We Meet Real Japanese." The term "real Japanese" signifies the protagonist's sense of distance from Japan and her rejection of Japanese identity. Upon arriving at her grandfather Ito's house in Japan, she and her siblings are ostracized because of their American lifestyle by the Japanese children who provoke them by belittling them and their country, After arriving at her grandfather Itoi's house in Japan, Kazuko and her siblings, because of their American lifestyle, were ostracized by Japanese children, who provoked them by demeaning them and their country: "Yahhhh! Look at those cowards. They're afraid of us." and "Oi, you, from America, you're afraid to fight, aren't you? Oi, American-jin, why don't you say something?" (98). Infuriated, Kazuko and her older brother Henry rushed forward to fight with them, feeling not only challenged as outsiders but also insulted because of their birthplace. Sone reflects, "We were tiring fast, but we knew this was no ordinary fight. The land where we were born was being put to a test. " (98). She fought not for herself but for her country. This action highlights the complex identity struggle faced by Japanese-Americans, particularly Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans), in reconciling their dual identities. Kazuko's experience in Japan reveals a tension between her American upbringing and her Japanese heritage. Despite her ethnic background, she and her siblings are not fully accepted by Japanese society due to their American mannerisms, which are perceived as foreign or even threatening by the local children. Kazuko's and Henry's reaction—to physically defend themselves and, symbolically, America—demonstrates their deep-rooted allegiance to the country of their birth. Kazuko's need to fight for her country suggests that her identity and self-worth are closely tied to how others perceive her national allegiance. Her choice to defend America against the Japanese children's taunts reveals her internalized need to affirm her Americanness—a theme that runs throughout the narrative, especially in the context of racial prejudice and identity politics during and after World War II.

On the journey back to America, Kazuko reflects, "I realized we were home again and my visit to Japan receded into the background like a sad, enchanted dream. We had explored the exotic island of the Japanese. I had felt the charm of its people. I had been impressed by its modern cities as well as by its historic beauty, but I had felt I was an alien." (118) Feeling alienated in Japan, Kazuko deeply realizes that America is her true home and identifies with her American identity when she sees familiar landmarks in Seattle.

However, Americanization proves to be fraught with difficulties in reality. As the pressures of war enveloped the entire community, the situation for Japanese Americans became even more challenging. To avoid being mistaken for Japanese, Chinese Americans had to wear badges for identification, and Japanese American families had to dispose of any Japanese items. Upon learning of Japan's recent attack on Pearl Harbor, Kazuko's rejection of her Japanese identity intensified due to shame. "I found myself shrinking inwardly from my Japanese blood, the blood of an enemy." (146) When President Roosevelt officially declared war on Japan and described the Pearl Harbor attack as disgraceful, Kazuko felt extreme shame, as if she were one of the Japanese attacking America. "I writhed involuntarily. I could no more have escaped the stab of self-consciousness than I could have changed my Oriental features." (150) Realizing that she could not erase her Japanese identity while mainstream society narrowly defined American identity in racial terms, Kazuko felt, "Once more I felt like a despised, pathetic two-headed freak, a

Japanese and an American, neither of which seemed to be doing me any good." (158) She fell back into the quagmire of racial shame, akin to the Jewish situation described in *The Jewish Root: Travels among the Jews*: "Our greatest pain is the ambiguous feeling. We are, and yet we are not… If we have any identity at all, it is this: we refute ourselves, we face the opposite direction, we are the contradiction of ourselves."(Howard 3)

For Japanese Americans during World War II, the entire country viewed them as a symbol of danger and disgrace, leaving them unable to live with dignity. The internment camp's "resettlement" measures subjected Nisei to loyalty tests. If second-generation Japanese Americans were deemed suitable, they were sent to dispersed locations across the country to work or study, where they had to blend in as much as possible and, in a sense, become as invisible as possible. In the novel, Kazuko is warned by soldiers not to cause trouble when leaving the Minidoka internment camp. "I had been warned over and over again that once I was outside, I must behave as inconspicuously as possible so as not to offend the sensitive public eye."(219) Such directives assume that the racial characteristics of Japanese Americans are an unacceptable threat, and Americanization is seen as an ideal goal. Embracing this racist ideology, Kazuko decides to "make myself scarce and invisible."(219) The government claimed that the internment camps were a democratic laboratory where Japanese Americans would learn self-management and become model citizens. However, in the camps, Kazuko felt, "we had drifted farther and farther away from the American scene. We had been set aside, and we had become adjusted to our peripheral existence."(198)

In other words, Kazuko's sense of shame lies in her dual identity of being an American and Japanese. The social structures and cultural standards under the white gaze have created an ambiguous sense of shame about her cultural identity. She feels ashamed not only because of her Japanese heritage but also because she cannot fully assimilate into American culture. Her dual identities, which should coexist harmoniously, are instead seen as mutually exclusive. Kazuko begins to reject her Japanese heritage and embrace American culture to escape this shame, hoping to integrate into the dominant white society. However, she realizes that her efforts are futile, as she continues to face systemic discrimination and prejudice. Her internal conflict and shame become evident as she grapples with the reality that she is neither fully American nor Japanese.

4. The Energy of Shame: Reconstructing Identity

Sedgwick(1993) proposed the example of "shame on you" as a second-person performative utterance, where an anonymous, impersonal "I" projects shame onto another "I" that is still in a state of delay and not yet fully formed. This process of shaming and stigmatization is a recurring experience in queer development, where a negative second-person performative continuously imposes societal discrimination onto the queer individual. However, the humiliated individual, whose subjectivity remains to be constituted, therefore has the potential to be repeatedly reconstruction. Through the repetition of this performative, the subject invoked in a shaming manner also constructs an identity, using the scene of shame as a nearly inexhaustible source of energy conversion. In other words, shame not only acts as a negative performative by society against individuals but can also become an active emotional force that prompts individuals to reflect and reconstruct their identities. This agency is manifested in how it drives individuals to confront external scrutiny and criticism. On one hand, it can oppress individuals, forcing them to align with society's negative definitions; on the other hand, it can inspire individuals to reassess themselves, seeking new identity affirmations and meanings of existence.

Kazuko's experiences in the internment camp exacerbated her identity crisis. The camp's conditions deprived her of basic rights and dignity as an American citizen and intensified her sense of shame as an outsider. In this oppressive environment, Kazuko felt both ashamed of her Japanese American identity and angered and helpless. On two occasions Kazuko's subjectivity is activated by shame. When one feels shame, the impulse to defend oneself rises simultaneously, transforming the frustration of shame into a political mobility to defend oneself. She paralyzes herself with the joy of making a home from scratch in the camp's humble barracks, ignoring the harsh weather and gun-toting guards there. However, as soldiers' searchlights sweep the camp's dormitories at night, Kazuko once again feels the white scrutiny that seeks to erase the subjectivity of their community and reduce them to prisoners of sin. As a Japanese American (non)subject, the humiliating operations of the white state she had previously suffered were evoked, which made it impossible for her to pretend that the state had done them no harm. Anger thus floods in and galvanizes her subjectivity. Tearing and exposing her old wounds as a person of Japanese descent, she begins to confront and return shame to the state that humiliated her. She angrily complained about racism and unconstitutional internment: "I remembered the wire fence encircling us, and a knot of anger tightened in my breast. what was I doing behind a fence-like a criminal? if there were If there were accusations to be made, why hadn't I been given a fair trial?"(177) This internal and external conflict of shame forced her to start reflecting and reconstructing her identity.

After leaving the camps, Kazuko continued to face oppression in the workplace that was closely tied to her identity as a Japanese American. Discrimination and unfair treatment in the workplace once again made her feel the shame of being marginalized as a "non-subject". Kazuko's situation is even more complicated, however, because the requirements of the War Relocation Authority (WRA) effectively restrict her freedom of movement, forcing her to resign and leave in the face of

oppression, and the WRA requires her to maintain an "Americanized" image to preserve Japanese Americans as a whole. The WRA required her to maintain an "Americanized" image in order to preserve the reputation and opportunities of Japanese Americans as a whole in the workplace. This demand is essentially a further suppression of her identity and behavior in an attempt to maintain the standards of white mainstream identity through internalized self-policing. This is consistent with the pressure to assimilate into the culture she was subjected to within the concentration camps, reinforcing the formation of shame. In the face of continued threats and oppression, Kazuko ultimately chose to resign, an act that signaled her reaffirmation of her identity and insistence on her dignity. Her resignation was not only a revolt against workplace oppression, but also a challenge to WRA control and white social expectations. In the process, shame is once again transformed into the energy of resistance, and instead of suffering in silence, Kazuko takes action, reasserting her subjectivity and refusing to continue to be treated as a passive object that needs to prove its "Americanness."

Furthermore, the productivity of shame lies in the fact that when triggered, the previously suppressed interests or joys do not completely vanish. Sedgwick points out that when we feel shame, we simultaneously strive to avoid contact with others while yearning to reconnect with others. "To a lesser extent, the blush—are semaphores of trouble and at the same time of a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge." (Sedgwick 2021:36) A common way to quickly detach from shame is to reestablish safe and effective interactions with others, which allows individuals to temporarily forget their sharp self-awareness and regain a sense of existential affirmation from nurturing and caring exchanges. This became more evident after Kazuko entered an international university. In college, Kazuko experienced the inclusivity of a multicultural environment, which gave her a new sense of freedom and identity. She gradually realized that America, while a place full of discrimination and exclusion, also offered the possibility of multicultural coexistence. She began to reassess her identity in this environment and felt the complexity and uniqueness of being both Japanese and American.

For Kazuko, shame was not merely an internal torment; it also mixed with complex feelings about herself and her family, as well as a conflicted attitude toward her cultural roots. She felt ashamed of her Japanese identity, a feeling that caused her pain and also made her parents feel guilty, believing their Japanese heritage led to their child's exclusion in American society. Yet, this sense of shame also encompassed a deep emotional connection to Japanese culture. Despite this recognition being obscured by contradictions and self-conflict on the surface, "If only you knew how much I have changed about being a Nisei. It wasn't such a tragedy. I don't resent my Japanese blood anymore. I am proud of it," (236) she did not completely abandon her cultural identity. Instead, she hoped that societal discrimination would change and no longer view Japanese heritage as a burden or shame. Ultimately, Kazuko transformed this shame into a positive force, allowing her to redefine her identity in a more affirmative way. She no longer merely conformed to external prejudices but gradually recognized that her Japanese cultural background was a part of her identity and could be a source of pride. In this process, a subtle tension formed between shame and cultural identity: she acknowledged being "shamed" by others, but she also sought to transcend this shame and embrace her cultural identity with a more positive attitude. "I was going back into its main stream, still with my Oriental eyes, but with an entirely different outlook, for now I felt more like a whole person instead of a sadly split personality."

However, Kazuko's process of reconstructing her identity through shame was not without challenges. Despite her attempt to transform shame into a positive force, the internal contradictions in this process remained evident. Her identity reconstruction was still constrained by the pressures of American mainstream cultural assimilation, as well as certain self-denials and internal conflicts during this assimilation process. Even after enduring inhumane treatment, Kazuko still attempted to speak for the government and affirmed her steadfast belief and love for the country: "I used to think of the government as a paternal organization. When it failed me, I felt bitter and sullen. Now I know I'm just as responsible as the men in Washington for its actions. Somehow it all makes me feel much more at home in America."(237)

In the narrative, Kazuko still shows a strong sense of belonging and identification with American culture, and her depiction of white Americans is relatively mild, perhaps to present herself as more "American" and gain acceptance from mainstream society. This complexity and ambiguity in identity reflect the dilemmas she faced during the transformation of shame. American writer Some critics argue that the novel portrays white characters in an overly positive and gentle manner, which may undermine readers' experience of the tragedy of Japanese American internment camps. This is particularly evident in the protagonist's enthusiastic hope for America at the end of the book. This, in turn, reflects the social pressures and experiences of shame that the author faced when publishing the novel. Published in 1953, a time of nationalist fervor, the book emerged in an era when American society, still largely unprepared to confront its own shame over its treatment of Japanese and Japanese Americans, required Japanese Americans to continually reaffirm their patriotism and assimilationist tendencies.

5. Conclusion

In Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, Kazuko, as a second-generation Japanese American, undergoes a complex journey of identity formation that reveals how shame profoundly affects her cultural identity and self-perception. This memoir not only depicts Kazuko's struggles with racial discrimination and social exclusion but also highlights the dual role of shame as both an

oppressive force and an active impetus in her development. Shame drives Kazuko to reflect and reconstruct herself in the face of identity crises, and ultimately, she chooses to embrace her complex dual identity, viewing it as a unique source of strength while still facing the pressure of society and assimilation. Kazuko's journey from initial self-denial to attempts at identity reconstruction demonstrates the complex dynamics of emotion in identity formation. Sedgwick's theory provides a new perspective for understanding how racial shame in the novel functions not only as a negative emotional experience but also as a potential positive force, driving Japanese Americans to redefine their identity.

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