


THE WASH: A Traditional Ethnic Play in The Mainstream Arena

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ABSTRACT

The Wash is considered the third part of Philip Kan Gotanda's family trilogy alongside with A Song for a Nisei Fisherman and Fish Head Soup. This series represents his sincere attempt to discover and truly depict the Japanese American family, as well as to delve deeper and deeper into it. The idea of the play is mainly driven from two real-life stories. The first is about a friend whose elderly nisei mother has left her father and begins a new relationship, but this story did not spread in the Japanese American community. The second is about a writer whose ex-husband still comes to cut her garden even after the divorce. And both stories represent the old traditions in this community, which Gotanda himself tries to expose and criticize at the same time. Gotanda uses this play to push the restrictions of his ethnic community to be familiar in the mainstream arena.

The Wash (1985) can be safely regarded as an example of the traditional Japanese theatre because it has many features that constitute this type of theatre. Many researchers such as, Galda and Cullinan in their book *Literature and the Child* and Jenkins and Austin in their book *Literature for Children about Asians and Asian American*, have classified specific criteria that should be traced for any literary work to be described as ethnic. These points will be summarized as follows: the work must (1) contain language that provides insight into culture of the group (2) avoid racial and cultural negative stereotypes, (3) present cultural details accurately such as food, dialects, customs and clothing, (4) expose cultural authenticity and the experiences honestly (Galda, L. and Bernice E. Cullinan, 2006), (5) attempt to amend historical errors or omissions, (6) contain illustrations that are true reflection of the way of life and (7) depict women in transition from traditional to contemporary (Jenkins, Esther C. and Mary C. Austin, 1987). Clearly, these criteria can be traced to a great extent in his play. Firstly, the play is peppered with a lot of Asian objects and Japanese words. Secondly, the play provides an authentic portray of a nisei family conflicts. Thirdly, it exposes Masi (Nobu's wife) in a transformation status. Fourthly, it explains the true way of life and thinking of Japanese families with their traditions and habits. So, Gotanda exposes some typical conflicts in this play with an attempt to push the limits of ethnic box by discussing other untouched subjects in the Asian American literature.

To start with, the text is full of Japanese American references and Japanese words and phrases that remain untranslated on the stage; this gives the dialogue authenticity but it also makes parts of the play less accessible to non-Japanese American audiences. Instead of pandering to the majority, Gotanda forces them to understand his culture on its own terms. For example, Nobu uses chopsticks and drinks green tea. The characters eat tempura and nukemono. In addition, most of the characters talk in Japanese words and phrases such as: (*Kitanai means dirty, shoyu means soy sauce, oshiri means backside, Dozo means please, Dozo yoroshiku means How do you do? desho means Isn't he?, Isogashii no? means Busy?, Ojiisan dozo means old man please, Suteki da nah means looks beautiful, etc*), their meanings not always readily understood from the context. Furthermore, the characters' names refer to their ethnic identity such as Nobu Matsumoto, Masi Matsumoto, Sadao Nakasato, Kiyoko Hasegawa, Curley Sakata and Chiyo.

Secondly, the play depicts constraints affecting Japanese Americans through the problematic relationship of an older couple. Gotanda makes no effort to explain what may seem unfamiliar motivations for his characters, leaving audiences to work them

out for themselves (Abbotson, 2003). Thematically, Gotanda's *The Wash* deals with some issues often found in Asian American literature. The first is the break-up of the marriage between an elderly nisei couple. The second conflict in the play between "the old assimilationist versus traditionalist". On the other hand, Gotanda exposes some unfamiliar topics for his ethnic community, like the older characters' sexuality and interminority racism. Although he knows that presenting these topics cannot elicit more enthusiasm from the Asian Americans, he believes that Asian Americans in general and particularly the Japanese Americans have changed and matured over the past twenty years, and are now able to accept and entertain more critical perspectives on their experience and life. He comments:

The community can now appreciate works which don't paint such a pretty picture. They don't need plays which are merely self-congratulatory. (Gotanda, 1991)

The play is a touching, bittersweet love story about disintegrating forty-two-year marriage of a Japanese American couple (Ruth, 1990). It details the relationships within a nisei family, and how the separation of the parents Nobu Matsumoto and Masi Matsumoto deeply affects all the family members. Gotanda wants to convey a message that oppression – from the side of the husband or even the whole society – can easily shake traditions and customs that are settled long years ago. Tradition collides with the ever-changing landscape of the contemporary American culture when a Japanese American marriage dissolves, and a wife torn between her Japanese upbringing demands and the happiness her American sense of self-fulfillment urges her to pursue. In other words, Susan Abbotson elucidates that in the Japanese culture, as depicted in the play, a woman is expected to live for her husband and children and not give a thought to her own needs and desires (Abbotson, 2003). Living in America, with its cultural ideal of self-reliance and one of the world's highest divorce rates, we can expect the clash with such beliefs. Masi's Japanese background asks her to stand by her family, so she has withstood years of unhappy marriage before going against her upbringing and leaving her husband. The fact that she continues to care for him by doing his laundry (or the wash – the title of the play) and preparing his food – even while living in a separate apartment, testifies to the difficulty in making a clean break.

With a highly qualified treatment of the death of a marriage Gotanda creates a special place for himself as the creator of realistic characterizations of Japanese Americans and their lives. According to Jen Gish, the play's characters are more captured than constructed, more like flesh – and – blood than cartoon (Jen, 1991). Craver comments on this point by saying: "... Gotanda's extremely simple and sensitive play captures most of the ludicrous aspects and bitter failures two people feel at the dissolution of a marriage ..." (Craver, William, et al, 2003). After a long marriage, the wife does the unthinkable and decides to get her independence and leave her home. After their separation, both the husband and the wife undertake new relationships (Guessow, 1990). Masi – sixty-seven years old – strives to carve out a new life for herself and begins to enjoy a new love with Sadao, a sixty-five years old, retired pharmacist, widower and completely different from her ex-husband, Nobu. At the same time, Nobu – sixty-eight years old and retired worker – becomes involved with the owner of his favorite neighborhood restaurant, Kiyoko, who is in her mid-fifties and widow.

Apparently, Gotanda describes a failure of traditional marriage, revealing the reasons behind that decision in one hand. On the other hand, he conveys a picture of the traditions that rule all the relations in this ethnic group. We find that although Masi and Nobu are separated; she continues to visit her husband's house each week to pick up and do his laundry, just because the culture-bound habits and customs are hard to break. Gotanda comments: "We're working as hard as we can with everyone to capture a Japanese American essence" (cited in Brown, Joe, and Kara Swisher, 1994). The second conflict in this play is between those who are able and willing to adapt to new circumstances and those who are inflexible and resist any kind of change. Dunbar describes this situation by saying that it is a conflict between "the old assimilationist versus traditionalist" (Dunbar, 2005). Gotanda provides examples of the two models of the characters to show the difference between them. For example, early in the play, Nobu is confused by Masi's new answering machine:

Masi? You got any... Masi?

(Masi's phone machine kicks in, Nobu doesn't know how to deal with it.)

I am Nobu Matsumoto. My telephone number is 751...damn. (Checks the number) 751-8263. (Not sure if he has said his name) I am Nobu Matsumoto. (Act 1, Sc. 11, 168)

From the previous exchange, we can elicit Nobu's hesitation in using the new answering machine. At the same time, we find that Masi tries to master using her new fishing equipment, a gift from Sadao. Between Nobu's confusion and self-doubt and Masi's smoothness and confidence, we can extract the difference between them.

While Masi is prepared to move on with her life, Nobu lives in the past. He is trapped by his culture, history, and personality and cannot liberate himself from the internment's psychological walls. He hates change; when he eats at Kiyoko's restaurant, he always sits in the same seat and eats the same meal. Nobu is nostalgic for the way life used to be – as indicated in the old lullaby

song he sings, other people's lives move on and Nobu is left behind. His kite is a symbol of freedom he is unable to grasp - the possibilities of America he feels are unavailable to him because of his Japanese heritage.

At the end of act 1, scene 9, Nobu imagines that his kite flies high, showing his longing for the greater freedom he felt as a child, but the weight of his own life and the traditions he feels he must live by keeping him and his kite on the ground (Abbotson, 2003). Another example of his inflexibility is evident in his refusal to tolerate racial differences or speak well about "Kurochan" (blacks) and Mexican neighbors. Nobu's racial attitude comes obviously when he refuses to recognize his younger girl's marriage to an African American, or even to see his only grandchild, he says;

Japanese marry other Japanese; their kids are Yonsei [fourth generation Japanese American] – not these damned ainoko [biracial people]. (Act 2, Sc. 6, 182)

He is unable to believe that his wife has permanently left him - this is just partly why he never asks Masi to return. It is not only his ego that causes him to think so, but his culture encourages him to disbelief that a wife can behave independently. He accepts her visits to bring him food and do his laundry as natural, because he still sees it as her duty. It is clear that Nobu is withdrawn, emotionally inaccessible and narrow traditionalist - from insisting on the way of building his kite to his refusal of his daughter and her child because she married an African American. He loves his wife and children, but his pride prevents him from expressing that love, and he cannot accept their behaving independently of him.

Despite Nobu's self-centered behavior, Gotanda ensures that we still feel sympathy for him because he is a victim of his culture rather than a real tyrant. We are shown his tender side when he is with Kiyoko and when he sings his lullaby. Even Masi has to admit that he has always been very caring and good with the children, and we witness this when he finally meets his grandson. Unfortunately, Nobu sadly ends up alone, and it seems to be a fate he cannot avoid; given his cultural background and his inability to adapt to changing circumstances.

At the end of the play, there is a long speech in which Nobu himself reveals the reasons why he has closed himself off from the changing world. He refers to the effects of his internment experience during World War II and his difficulties in dealing with white Americans in the following years. But Fei argues that this revelation is not part of the dramatic action; it helps the audience and the reader understand the stubborn old man better (Fei, Faye C., and William H. Sun, 1992). At the time we think that Gotanda wants to present Nobu as a victim of his cultural upbringing and of his war time experiences as a west coast Japanese American internee, he returns to present Nobu's daughter Marsha in dialogue with his father, comparing him with Sadao and reveals the reasons behind ruining this house;

MARSHA: He's a nice man... He treats her like a very special person...

He takes her fishing ... He teaches her how to bait the hook and cast it out...

They even dig up worms in his garden at his house. I saw them. Side by side...

I MEAN DID YOU EVER DO THAT FOR MOM!! Did you? You're so... so stupid... you didn't even have to say, "I'm sorry."

You ruined everything. It's all too late! YOU WRECKED EVERYTHING! (Act 2, Sc. 10, 192)

Gotanda artfully and cleverly swings between the two couples and their overlapping lives. The crafted exchanges between Masi and Nobu not only reveal aspects of their relationship, but explain a crucial dimension of the Japanese American dialogue as well. Gotanda notes: "What's not said is as important; if not more important than what is said" (Omi, 1991). Masi is a Japanese stereotype; devoted and self-sacrificing wife. She devotes herself to serve her husband, even after she leaves him. She feels compelled to continue doing his laundry and shopping. Jun Xing sees that Masi is presented as a complex woman full of tender emotions and compassion (Xing, 1998).

Masi has been totally subservient in marriage and remains dutiful during their separation. In his article *Wife is Dutiful Though Separated*, the critic Mel Guessow mentions: "... the laundry becomes the central symbol of a wife's self- subjugation and the hesitancy with which she assumes a life of independence" (Guessow, 1990). We see Masi as a victim of verbal abuse, at least according to the American culture. She is ultimately left to choose between allowing Nobu to abuse her and salvaging what is left of her life. Unlike many nisei women who sacrificed themselves in the name of husband and their families, Masi chooses to save herself and declares that she has "the right to be happy" (James, 1988).

Masi realizes that she is in need to renew her life and try the sense of equal give and take relationship. She meets a widower; Sadao, who treats her as an equal partner. At this time she does not have any more sympathy to Nobu, even when he later considers his impassive and intolerant attitude with her and his two daughters. She wants to face him with the truth when she

asks him: "Well, move then. Move to the north side like me. I kept saying that all along. For kids-better schools, better neighborhood ... you don't like white people, you don't like black people, you don't like Mexicans ... so what do you like?"(Act 2, Sc. 4, 178). Masi's transition from the endured, dutiful and scarified wife to unsympathetic, aware and dependent woman is driven by Nobu's stupid, selfish and stubborn treatment. Here, one can mention that Masi's modified behaviour achieves the third criterion of ethnic Japanese theatre referred to earlier in this chapter. It also contradicts the end of his play *Yohen*, he comments on the relation between the two plays saying:

Yohen was actually written as a companion play to *The Wash*. In *The Wash*, the story's ending turn on the woman's decision to leave the man. I wanted to write a play which had an arc ending with the opposite happening...That is, the man deciding to leave the woman. (Hong, 2003)

Another important character in the conflict between "assimilationist versus traditionalist" is Sadao. He is an enlightened Japanese American male who can cry in public and feel no shame, contribute to the household chores, compliment his woman, include her in all aspects of life, and allow her far greater freedom - all impossibilities for Nobu, who has a very traditional attitude toward women. Sadao is the man who helps Masi take the decision of leaving her husband and begins new life. Sadao opens her eyes to what a loving husband can do for a wife. He plans their outings, makes picnic lunches, and takes her to a movie. Most importantly, he listens to Masi and responds enthusiastically. John Simon notes that Sadao and Nobu are of the same generation, and Sadao is also an ex-internee, but their outlook and approach to life are completely different (Simon, 1990). With Sadao, Masi feels she is still desirable, unlike with Nobu who has ruined her life:

MASI: I don't feel good. (Pause) I think something's wrong with me.

SADAO: What, what? Want me to call DocTakei? ...

SADAO: You have a fever? Headache? What's wrong?

MASI: No, no, nothing like that. (Pause. Thinking.) I'm too happy.

SADAO: What?

MASI: I feel ... too happy. (Sadao stares at her, uncomprehending.)

MASI: I used to feel like this as a kid, I think. But it was different. (Pause.)

SADAO: You feel too happy?

MASI: When you're a kid you get ice cream and 'member how you used to feel? Happy, right? But then you eat it all up and it's gone, or you eat too much of it and you throw up. But this just goes on and on.

SADAO: You mean us? (Masi nods.)

SADAO: Yeah, but this is a little different from ice cream, don't you ...

MASI (interrupts): Of course.... (Act 2, Sc. 2, 173-174)

In addition to the main characters, there are Nobu and Masi's children. They are third-generation Japanese Americans (sansei), and we see in them a clear dilution of Japanese ways and a stronger embrace of mainstream American culture; their names, Marsha and Judy, reflect this. Both are concerned about their parents, but do not exhibit the traditional Japanese sense of duty (Abbotson, 2003). Judy, the younger and rebellious daughter, is completely different from her father. She married an African American and has a baby. At one point, she complains about her father, "You're gonna die out, you know that. You're gonna be extinct and nobody's gonna give a goddamn ..." (Act 2, Sc. 6, 182). In contrast, Marsha is more traditional and she is trying to get her parents back together without realizing what she is doing (Xing, 1998).

In this attitude towards Nobu and the other characters in *The Wash*, Gotanda is both sensitive and fair-minded. His purpose is not to apportion blame but to clarify all aspects of Japanese American life and, thus, to lead the audience to better understanding. Guessow sees the result is a play that is small in scale but has a broader relevance and reflection for families, especially Asian-American (Guessow, 1990), and this point reflects the fourth feature that can make this play a traditional ethnic drama.

Gotanda is still playing within the traditional Asian American framework with the earlier themes, but he wants to widen the margins of his ethnic stage to address issues such as racism and older Asian American sexuality. One can say that Gotanda's fearless treatment of racism goes to the heart of the Japanese American community itself because this community suffers a lot

from racism in the internment camps. *The Wash* deals with racism manifested in the familial relationships and the generational effects of this legacy. So, he decides to expose this disturbing issue for the community to reflect on and actively confront. He comments:

Japanese Americans are in tremendous denial as to what extent racism has affected how we live our lives. How it forces us to act in all sorts of peculiar ways. This finds expression in forms of self-hate and overcompensation. (Gotanda, 1991)

In *The Wash* Gotanda proves his ability to understand both the external symptoms of racial oppression and the internal impacts of racism, and how it deeply affects each family member. Furthermore, he criticizes the Asian Americans for their roles in deepening the impacts of racism by enduring it without any resistance. He says:

Internalized racism is a fact of life. If you live in America, you have been infected by it. By internal I mean how we buy into racism, how we participate in it, and how engage in a kind of dance of allowing ourselves to be victimized. (Gotanda, 1991)

The other issue in which he persists to move beyond the box of ethnicity is speaking openly about older character's sexuality. It is an eye-opening and moving to explore the allegedly "stoic" Japanese Americans (Xing, 1998). Gotanda's treatment particularly focuses on the nisei characters. Kaplan sees that the portrait of sexual behavior in older characters is not satirized as ugly at worst or inappropriate at best in American popular culture, which typically reserves depictions of the erotic desire for the young accompanying with their physical beauty (Kaplan, Randy Barbara, Ed. Miles Xian Liu., 2002). Nobu McCarthy - the actress who performed the role of Masi in this play and later in *The Wash* film - comments on this point by saying;

Japanese Americans have a stereotyped image that we don't touch each other... so we're looked at as asexual, particularly older people... But we do have feelings..., and {Gotanda} really wove it in such a beautiful way. (cited in Cooper, 1994)

Gotanda's sensitivity to deal with this topic is driven from his understanding of the contradictions in the nisei older men's personality. Earlier in the play Nobu expresses the loss of his sexual interest in his wife, but Masi finds sexual magazines that reflect his desire and interest in women. Furthermore, he shows Nobu's desire in her ex-wife in one of the most expressive moments in this play, where Masi massages Nobu's back. He says:

NOBU: just breakfast. Then in the morning when we get up you can back to your place. (Masi stops, realizing he is asking her to spend the night. Masi doesn't move. Nobu stares ahead. More silence). Then, tentatively, she moves her hands forward and begins to massage him. A faint smile appears on Nobu's face. Dim to darkness. (Act 2, Sc. 4, 180-181)

With this contradiction, between his negligence of his wife during the years of marriage and his realization of desire and interest in the same woman, Gotanda tries to, as Nobu McCarthy comments:

investigate this Japanese-American woman's endurance, not only in the camps, but also in her relationships and with her husband. She endured this awful, suppressed marriage for 42 years, and she breaks it off. (cited in Cooper, 1994)

So, Gotanda's portrait of Masi's deprivation and abuse during the years of marriage is an attempt to justify her eagerness to leave this stubborn and authoritarian husband. Meanwhile, presenting the elderly men and women in a compelling fashion, not as helpless or demanding or as perverse imitators of youth, proves Gotanda's strong affinity to the elderly and their lives.

In addition to Nobu and Masi, the issue of sexuality extends to reach another nisei woman in the play - Kiyoko, who is a widow and was previously married to an American soldier. She talks openly about the impacts of the loss of her husband and describes her need to men:

KIYOKO: It's not easy for me... when Harry died... then he's gone. No more Harry in bed. No more smell of aftershave on the towel... No more sweaty Harry coming up and hugging me... I missed the smell of men. (Act 2, Sc. 9, 189-190)

Gotanda's writing about these sensitive issues demonstrates his attempts to illuminate all aspects of the Japanese American life, not only the positive things but also the negative ones. This step aims at making his issues more accessible to ordinary people and to remove all signs of bias to his ethnic group. Gotanda comments on that by saying:

The more truthfully you tell a story, the detailed it is, the more it is driven by a truthful cultural psychology, the more it opens up, the more it opens up, the more human it becomes,... in fact it becomes more universal. (cited in Weinraub, 1994)

Throughout these traditional family themes, Gotanda's skills and experiences produce a piece of ancient pottery that becomes a mixture of human tragedy that transcends the details of ethnicity (Berger, . "Family laundry comes clean in 'The Wash', 2001). Meanwhile, Omi thinks that these ethnic details show Gotanda's credit in presenting the world along with other intriguing aspects of the Asian American historical experience and sensibility (Omi, 1991).

Gotanda himself is aware of choosing these certain subjects and never denies his conscious intention behind writing, particularly about the Japanese Americans experience. He comments on a question about this point:

Almost all my work is driven by a Japanese American psychology. I grew up in a Japanese household in an extended Japanese American community. In and everyone around the table looked like me, so my stories are peopled by Asian American faces. But no one is holding a gun to my head. I have no agenda. (cited in Weinraub, 1994)

Although *The Wash* is one of the most seemingly Asian American of Gotanda's works, he damages, to some degree, the limits of the genre, reaching out to broader audiences and social issues. As the taper's artistic director Gordon Davidson puts it, the play "speaks to the experience of every man and woman whatever age and ethnicity ..." (cited in Fei, Faye C., and William H. Sun, 1992). So, *The Wash* is considered a step away from the narrow borders of ethnic drama.

Actually, the writer discusses the experience of Asian Americans, but in the way that can help the audience understand and interact with the pains and happiness of those marginalized people. Dewight T. Martin - producing director at Manoa Valley Theatre MVT- comments: "We can relate to the ethnicity but also we can relate to the underlying universality" (cited in Berger, "Family laundry comes clean in 'The Wash', 2001). This makes his themes appropriate for both ethnic people and mainstream audiences, and later his plays become desirable in the mainstream theatres as well as ethnic theatres. One can say at the end that *The Wash* represents an important stage in the development of Gotanda's career from the hyphenated playwright to one is more aware of his ethnic group issues and conflicts.

In brief, *The Wash* is the first of Gotanda's works to receive significant mainstream attention. It opens doors for him to write for audiences beyond the specific community. For the first time, mainstream audiences got a glimpse of the inner world of the Japanese American community, but some of this community disliked this exposure of their conflicts. The play addresses deeply personal and private issues that the Japanese American community would rather ignore. For instance, the wife in the play is portrayed as a sexual person who can appreciate her new lover, and the husband is forced to accept a mixed-race grandchild whose father is black.

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