

## **Contemporary Literature**

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Good morning. So, when in our last class on Asian American writings, we were talking about Frank Chin's anthology called *Aeeiiiiii!* which was published first in 1974 and the central idea of the edited anthology is that Asian Americans, particularly the Chinese and the Japanese in American literature as written by the white people, their masculinity is undermined. They are presented as people who lack masculinity and in order to address this, Louis Chu wrote a book called *Eat a bowl of tea*, which was a response to this so called emasculation of the Chinese or the Asian male. So, that is the point where we stopped last time and I will take you to the political conditions of this time. Now, I am sure some of you are familiar with a term called the banding conference in 1955. So, this is it, the banding conference, which was held or organized in Indonesia in 1955.

It was a meeting of leaders from the 29 newly decolonized nations in Asia and Africa who came together and issued a sense of shared purpose because see this is extremely important. It was felt that Asian Americans, we were seeing last time that there is no fixed entity called Asian Americans. Asian Americans, what are they? They could be Chinese, they could be Indians, Japanese, Indonesians, Vietnamese, Filipinos, any number of, you know, even from Singapore and Hong Kong. So, what exactly constitutes that particular identity? So, because they do not have a shared sense of purpose, this particular meeting was held called the banding conference in 1955 and it was also directly related to NAM or non-aligned movement of 1961.

So, what happened at Bandung? A meeting of Asian African states organized jointly by Indonesia, Myanmar, that is the erstwhile Burma, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan. It was held in Bandung, a place, a city called Bandung in Indonesia and the 29 countries represented more than, where more than half of the world's population sent their delegates. So, it was an important event, at least politically and what were the highlights of the banding conferences, banding conference? One was that the Asians felt that their decision, they have no voice or they have no role in the decision making process, which most of the powerful western countries make and decide, you know, determining their state of affairs, determining their future. So, the purpose of banding conference was that

even the Asian countries should have a voice, should have a say in the matter, that was the most important, you know, resolution. And they also expressed their tension, sorry, their concern over tension between China and the USA.

See, it is nothing new, it has been happening for several decades. So, they expressed their concern over the growing tension between China and the USA and then, they also denounced the, you know, the colonial practices, especially there were some countries, which were still colonized even during that. Do you remember, you are talking about 1955, so Hong Kong was a British colony and some countries in Africa, which were colonized by the French. So, those were the major concerns. Now, from politics, I will take you to literature and there was an important novel called *No No Boy*, published in 1957.

See, Bandung conference happened in 1955. *No No Boy* was published in 1957. The author was John Okada. John Okada, it talks about the Japanese people in Seattle during the Second World War and it is a study of racism in America. And you find several, you know, derogatory terms, which are applied to the Japanese people.

For example, they are called the little yellow people, which is extremely condescending. They were called the jab boys. And then, one refrain is one sentence that persistently appears is go back to Tokyo. And what John Okada is trying to hint at is a phenomenon or is a term called the strain of Americanism. So, this is one feature that all those who are interested in studying Asian American literature should understand what exactly means, what exactly do we mean by strain of Americanism? It means, assenting to white supremacy in America in order to survive.

that is the central theme, central idea of *No No Boy*. Now, why this, all this was happening? Something else socially was taking place as well. Now, during the late 1950s, the great newspaper, the New York Times, it featured a story which was called success story, Japanese American style, success story, Japanese American style, a feature which was published in the New York Times, around the same time as *No No Boy*. And another important publication did a feature called success story of one minority group in the US. And this time, the story was about the Chinese Americans.

So, the Japanese Americans, the Chinese Americans. Two features came in quick succession and highlighted to Asian, the achievements of these two major Asian American communities. And what did they say, what the highlight of these articles was? One was that Asian Americans have overcome the racial discrimination and have displayed praiseworthy American values. Now, this again is a very controversial term. What do you understand by displaying praiseworthy American values? Can you tell me?

Gopika, yes, this is what we are talking about.

Look, you know, this could not have been a coincidence. The novel talks about the strain of Americanism. The newspaper, the journalistic feature praises these Asian Americans for displaying virtues which are, you know, decidedly American. So, that means that it was true. What Okada said was really happening because the idea was that they should assimilate, they should integrate completely into the American system and thereby, you know, diminishing their own cultural identities.

that was considered extremely praiseworthy. That was the highlight of the two articles. So, good people who come to America, they assimilate and integrate completely with the society. And of course, the community in these two articles was also praised for having low crime rates. So, they were told, we were told that Asian Americans as a community, they have lower crime rates, they have higher education standards and they have little need for government welfare programs.

Therefore, the two communities were termed model minorities, a very interesting term, model minorities. They displayed all the characteristics of a model minority. And if you do a sociological or anthropological study of the communities, you will feel that the imperative was to belong, not to question, not to interrogate, but to belong, to assimilate, to integrate. Now, I will take you to some, from socio-political and literary highlights to something which is, you know, extremely political in nature, but not really so well discussed. How many of you are familiar with this term, Manzanar? This, this was a place in America, specifically in the Owen valley of California.

Literally, it means an apple orchard, Spanish term apple orchard. Now, this is a little known facet of the American history. Manzanar was a sort of camp where almost 1,20,000 Japanese Americans were relocated or imprisoned rather during the Second World War. This, this place is very much in America and the Japanese Americans who were imprisoned were of American origin. So, they were not like refugees.

They were people who had established or settled, who were settled in America. But why, why did that happen and why did this particular, you know, event Manzanar happened? Now, Manzanar has been referred to as, it has been referred to through various terms. So, one is a war relocation center. It was called a war relocation center. It was also called a relocation camp, but most popularly it is called the internment camp.

So, the controversy still exists. What should be the exact or the specific nomenclature of Manzanar? Was it a war relocation center? Was it a concentration camp? Was it an internment camp? So, what really happened? The immediate cause was the bombing of

Pearl Harbor in 1942 during the Second World War. That was the immediate cause, 1942 bombing of Pearl Harbor during the Second World War and President Franklin Roosevelt felt that there is a need to relocate the Japanese American population in the West. So, they were asked to leave their homes and move to one of ten relocation centers or such facilities across the nation. Sadly, most of these relocated Japanese were of American birth.

So, this order came about as a result of great prejudice and war time hysteria. The bottom line is that you cannot be trusted. We cannot allow you to co-exist with the white Americans. So, even though you have been living here for several decades or even one or two generations, we still do not trust you because of the Pearl Harbor incident. So, they were forced to leave their homes and stay and live in those relocation centers.

it is the typical as we know, as we call in literature, the fear of the other. Now, this interestingly, this historical fact has not been addressed in much depth in literature or in any of the publications. So, this fact remained unpublicized for a very long period that there was any such thing called men's manner or there were such centers called the war relocation centers. Why do you think that this happened? So, there is another critic called Marita Sterken who has coined a term called or perhaps not exactly coined, but popularized a term called the absent presence. Marita Sterken, a media critic who has given us a term called the absent presence.

This is in relation to the Manzanar incident. Now, what is absent presence and why do you think this particular very embarrassing incident was never highlighted by the media? They were looked in a very skeptical manner. They were relocated to the camps, but then they did not want to give up the city because they knew that they were not really involved in all these issues and they wanted to support American policies at that point. So, both the American media as well as the Japanese media, the incident was sort of swept under the carpet. The Americans did not want to highlight it for very obvious reasons.

It tarnishes their image as a free nation, as a world's leading democracy. You cannot call yourself a democracy and then indulge in or then practice these things. On the other hand, why did not the Japanese publicize? Why did the Japanese writers remain silent? The reason is clear. They did not want to become very visible. They did not want to incur the wrath of the American government.

So, again we are talking about this model minority system. They should present and no matter what happens, we still get to live in America. That is important. Therefore, this term called the absent presence makes yourself invisible and silent and remain here and

prosper. Nobody will question, but if you raise your voice, then there is trouble.

This is a very good term to indicate the situation during the Second World War. Any questions? Anything that you want to comment on? Very long time. Much later than this. Much later after the Second World War.

Then things got normal. There is this poem by Janice Mettaton, something about breaking silence. When did it come out? I think it is much later. I do not remember the exact period in which she wrote, but in which she speaks about the silence and how long we can remain. This kind of literature happened much later. This was a response to Manzanar, but it is like the other day we were talking about the holocaust.

For a long time, there was no literature. People did not want to address those because it was too immediate an incident, too painful an incident and also people wanted normalcy to be restored. Only after that, they were saying that such issues can be addressed. So, there was a sort of lull before the literary storm. Now, if you remember, we were talking about Frank Chin's anthology.

I just referred to it, i.e., which criticized the emasculation of the Chinese Asian men in the writings of the white people, especially the Americans. The idea again was that Asian men particularly are not as masculine as white people. They are not as their white counterparts. In this connection, we have a feminist critic Alain Kim, a very influential critic, a Chinese American critic, Alain Kim who comments that Asian men have been coded as having no sexuality, while Asian women have nothing else. They have only sexuality and both exist to define the white man's virility and the white race is superiority.

So, I will repeat the quotation. Asian men have been coded as having no sexuality, while Asian women have nothing else. Both exist to define the white man's virility and the white race is superiority. So, this is the idea. Those of you who are familiar with the works of Edward Said Orientalism, they may also recall that such observations have been made by Said also in Orientalism. So, what is the central argument here? Asian men have no sexuality, no virility.

Asian women are highly sexual beings and it is the white men who have all the masculinity. What does it mean? What does it translate into? Controversial terms, but what does all this lead to? It is a kind of gender prejudice that exists. Gender prejudice is of course. Asian women most of them were American women, in the white they were attracted to one another. They are Asian, their own Asian, they were kind of, they were not really interested in.

It is sort of legitimized white man's taking over of the Asian women. It justifies. Why? Because your men have no virility and no masculinity. In other, so from gender you can also apply the argument to racial superiority because by nature Asian men lack masculinity. Asian men lack masculinity, lack strength, whereas the white man has all these things.

So, it sort of legitimizes the taking over of the Asian territory, the African territories by the white people. So, all these were extremely controversial ideas and however extremely successful, you know, IE became one of the major documents of the Asian American writings. It became so popular that there was a second edition in 1991. So, from 1974 we had the second edition in 1991 and it was called the big IE. The big IE in 1991 where the editors almost most of them the same group of people, the same group of scholars and where they argued for presentation of selected Chinese and Japanese heroic opinions and epics as the sources of Asian heroic tradition.

The idea was that to present or to represent the Asian American male as a hero, something which was not addressed so far by the white writings or by the white dominated media and publishing industry. So, what they did was they brought out an anthology where all the stories focused on the mythic and the heroic men of Asian origin, especially the Chinese, Japanese origin and they argued that authentic Asian American writing must look back to these heroic tales and to early immigrant in endeavors. Early immigrant in endeavors that is, you know, when Asian Americans first started arriving in America. And who were the first Chinese and Japanese people who arrived in America? Traders as well as the working class people who helped in building of the rail roads and the harbors. So, the shipping industry, the railways, they owe much of their existence to the hard work and the labor of these immigrants.

The idea was to mythologize, to heroize these people who were the first immigrants, first generation of immigrants and also the heroes in the tradition of the mythologies of China and America, China and Japan. But not just that, it was not just lionizing or glamorizing the heroes, the men of the community. At the same time in the big IE, you also find denouncement of writers such as Amy Tan and writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston. Are you familiar with these names? Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Maxine Hong Kingston, Maxine Hong Kingston. And David Wong, so the editors of the big IE condemned writers, particularly these three ones, for being complicit with the white publishing industry and distorting the great media.

So, great Asian legends, so the idea, the argument was that writers like these, they work in compliance, in complicity with the white publishing industry and what do they want?

What does the white publishing industry want? They want the reinforcement of the stereotypes and the accusation by the editors of the big IE was that these people are pandering to the whims and requirements of the white people. Therefore, they present the traditional, you know that the stereotypical American notions of gender issues and racial issues. So, women warrior you see, she is not talking about the heroic male, she is not talking about madam butterfly, where a woman is, where a Chinese woman is highly sexualized. So, there is this plate called FOV, Fresh Shook Boat, which he actually glorifies all these Chinese tradition, but there also I get, he speaks about the formula and women warrior, how the women is. So, the editors of the big Aaaaaa! They argued for reasserting the masculinities of the American male.

It was, it has nothing to do with presenting the feminist point of view, where in the works of these writers, they felt that because the female characters are so strong. Therefore, they, it auto, you know automatically subverts the masculine authority. So, that was, so what they, they accused them of creating unflattering portraits of the Chinese male, that was the major condemnation, the major criticism. And, Frank Chin and others, they went to the other extreme of calling these people as fake American writing, fake Asian American writing, whereas they identified their writings as the real and authentic American writing.

So, fake versus real. So, this is what we were talking about, the growth of literature. Any questions, any comments you would like to make at this point, any anything? This is also like in the, but now the focus is on both issues, both feminism, I mean both women and men are focus, not just the masculine. No, no, no, we are talking about one of the earliest attempts to, you know, give a definite structure to this phenomenon called Asian American writing.

So, masculinity, especially because 1974's, i.e., that was one of the first major, earliest major attempts. Before that, all those novels which came, they were just like pandering to the white supremacy, how well the Japanese Americans, the Chinese Americans should integrate, you know, or you in between, you had works like the no no boy, where the idea was, the central idea was the same, you know, strain of Americanism, but it was not a subversion or not an interrogation of the American practices. But with i.e., it was considered extremely radical for those times because in a way, it was asserting the Chinese men supremacy over the white male.

So, it was all, it has a lot to do with gender issues and gender is how gender supremacy can be associated with racial superiority. Which were written by the white Americans, which definitely portrayed the Chinese man as you know, beaks. Yeah, several works of literature, but then you know, it is not like whether the whites were highlighting the

Asian American presence. It was Asian American men would be minor characters in major works. So, it was not like they were consciously writing literature about the Asian American people, male or female, that was not happening at all.

The society's attitude was such that Asian American male were emasculated. So, it was, it is not like some major work of literature was done just to highlight this issue, but minor characters were portrayed as you know, extremely sort of repressed and suppressed characters. Yeah, very submissive characters who lacked virility. So, minor characters, minor roles for the people of Asian American origin. And coming to the point you just made, so we were talking about the big I in 1991 and then after that there was you know, of course, Amy Tan who wrote the very famous, very successful the Joy Luck Club. So, Joy Luck Club is another major study of people of Asian American origin, who now are very successful in America. So, this was the novel came in the late 80s. Now, I am going to talk about a novel called Tropic of Orange, which is a work of 1997 and the author is Karen Tai Yamashita. The story is set in LA and it is a story about a beautiful of magical realism and it combines the elements of film noir, hip hop culture and chicanismo.

Are you familiar with the term chicanismo? When we do American literature and especially contemporary American literature, the Chicano is an important part. What is chicanismo? Not a tribe, do not call it a tribe, it is not a tribe. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, not at all, it is the Mexican community, Mexican American. Not all, not all Mexican, all the Chicanos are not necessarily Hispanic. So, it combines for example, Asian American, they know fixed stable construct.

Likewise, Chicano is not a stable construct. It combines people from Mexican origin, Puerto Rican, Hispanics etcetera. So, chicanismo, a word like machismo is about the hyper masculinity of the Chicano male, but also you know you can stretch it to mean all those features, all those features which are common in the Chicano, Chicano community. And then of course, since the novel is set in LA, so references to Hollywood is inevitable. So, Tropic of Orange combines all these elements.

It is a typical postmodernist inter-textual pastiche kind of a work. There are several themes and several stylistic genres collide and co-exist. The plot basically covers only one week, but it is extremely epic and global in scope. So, you have angels descending from all over. So, at one point you also have wrestling match between the devil and an angel. How does this happen? So, there are the plot combines or incorporates two major elements or events.

One first event is that there is a traffic accident because the driver bites an orange.



Therefore, the name Tropic of Orange, the driver bites an orange containing cocaine, lethal combinations of cocaine. Therefore, there is an accident and as a result of that accident, there is a traffic jam on the highway. So, what happens? People start walking away. They abandon their cars and very soon people start abandoning their homes as well because it becomes you know it just goes out of proportion, the chaos, the traffic, the population and everything just goes beyond everyone's control and the rich people start deserting or abandoning their homes and their cars.

Now, what happens when the rich let go of their property? The poor take over. The poor, they suddenly come into so much of wealth. So, there is real estate, there is so much of metal in forms and shapes of cars and then they take over and soon they build their own very lively thriving flourishing community and it is extremely democratic. So, that is one event and it is a satire also on the unit.

It can be metaphorical. It can stand for anything, but in the novel orange is an orange. Orange is an orange and then of course, what something else interesting happens that is the second event, major event, relocation of the Tropic of Cancer. You know Tropic of Cancer is a geographical imaginary line, but that gets relocated because an orange from a tree growing exactly at the latitude of the Tropic of Cancer falls to the ground and the arch angel's job now is to bring the equilibrium back to its normalcy. So, that is the literal story, but it can also be read very figuratively which is the conflict between the north and south America. So, north is represented by the arch angel and south is represented by this evil angel or the satyr and then after Tropic of Orange, let us discuss another major work which is native speaker.

Native speaker by Chang, Ray, Lee, and Lee. So, it is a very important topic. It is a novel who is a Korean writer and the novel was published in 1995 which is set in contemporary New York. So, if you read Tropic of Orange and if you read native speaker, you will realize what a long way Asian American writing has come from no no boy from the days of Okada's no no boy where strain of Americanism is felt so much and to these days to these writers where they are under no pressure. So, they write like any ordinary American person. So, there is no question of asserting any identity, but in native speaker, the problem is no longer of ethnic representations. That is not a problem anymore which was a big problem in the earlier works and you do not have problems of the gender issues, the white superiority and supremacy.

So, all those issues are no longer present. The problem, the hero Henry Park, the narrator, his problem is that his English is so perfect, total change, you know that he does a total from the earlier writers. So, perfect that he has lost his own language. That is the problem. It is not no it is he and he is married to a white woman. He is going through the

same marital crisis that most people of his generation go through and so it is nothing you know that there is no highlighting or there is no problematizing the racial identity.

So, if you look at these two novels, you will find that there has been a major change. I will read you an excerpt from native speaker. The hero is described as a B plus student of life. B plus student not in some cause, but of life.

He is an illegal alien, an emotional alien. So, not an illegal immigrant, an alienated kind of a person. Therefore, an emotional alien, neo-American, a stranger, follower, traitor, spy and his wife, you know that is what his wife calls him, his white wife. So, he does feel that he belongs neither to the American culture completely nor to his own culture because he has completely lost his language.

So, loss of language equates loss of identity. Bicultural. Bicultural. So, now, coming you know when we conclude this talk today, so what does it mean to be white in 21st century America? So, what does it mean to be white? I am not asking you what does it mean to be an Asian American in 21st century America? What does it mean to be a white when you have so many Asian American making the presence felt? What do you think? What does it mean to be a white now? Silent majority. Yes, they have become a silent majority. They have become, yes, they have become a silent majority. There is an increasing presence of Asian Americans both in intellectual, political sphere as well as in the realms of popular culture. So, the whites have become like a silent majority or minority in their own land and this you can perhaps credit to or discredit to the forces of transnationalism, forces of globalization.

They can say that they have become more liberal. Exactly, they can say that they have become more open to because you know we were last in the last class we were talking about establishment of centers like Asian American centers and in places like UCLA, Berkeley, see all these strong radical movements, they are political of course, but also very intellectual in nature. So, when people start voicing their descent where their concerns, so then the majority has no other choice but to listen. So, there was a movement which started very forcefully from the 60s onwards. We have seen all the major movements in the last class counterculture movement, Vietnam, assassination of very important political social figures and all this has led to and then we have also seen major radical movements in terms of writings, publication of Aaeiiiiiii! Æ for example and responses to that. Why both white responses as well as feminist responses to writings like IE, then the subsequent success of the Asian Americans in the spheres of literature and intellectual life and political life, social life and today we have come to this where they have made their presence increasingly very vital when very important.

But in spite of all this, there is always a sense and this is another term that you should always keep in mind while discussing Asian American writing is a sense of collective nostalgia. How important this is to understand? So, this is a sense of collective nostalgia and constructs of memory. See, memory as a topic, as its own theories, there is so much of theory on memory that one can do an entire PhD dissertation on constructs of memory and identity. So, these are the two themes that you should be concerned with, collective nostalgia and constructs of memory. As we were talking about last time that Asian Americans, even community wise there is too much of diversity in the term.

You have Filipinos and Vietnam, Chinese Americans, Indians, we were talking about that. Apart from that, as we were discussing recently, there is also diversity in terms of whether those Asian Americans are born in the US or outside US, so born in Asia or in America. They are born of Asian parents or do they have mixed parentage. So, there can be one parent of some other race and communities. So, that also influences or impacts on their writings. Whether they belong to the educated or the working class, this is extremely important, educated or working class.

Both these categories will have very different perspectives, whether they are from, they are refugees or non-refugees. Refugees are like they just, they were forced to leave the country, they are living in exile or whether they chose to live in America, that also impacts. So, when you look at those writings, you should be concerned with those elements, whether they come from the urban or the rural part of their countries. Then, of course, what matters most is the degree of their identification with the home land.

So, nostalgia, memory and how much do they miss their home land, that also defines this category. So, these are some of the features. As we were saying, the construct of Asian American remains unstable and changeable. So, you can do as much reading of the Asian American writings and literature, especially in contemporary times. The construct, the notion will always remain extremely unstable.

You cannot define it categorically. Look at the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. They stand apart, extremely unique in their perspectives. So, all these, any question you have? Alright then, thank you so much.