

Haiku: A Dance in Solitude

--- The Separateness of Asian Americans

in Hisaye Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables"

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Abstract

The short story "Seventeen Syllables" written by Japanese American woman writer, Hisaye Yamamoto embroiders on the style of intergenerational communication among Issei and Nisei, which is complicated by cultural differences. Focused on the experience of Tome, the Issei mother, a gentle and intelligent Asian American woman, who is consumed by an urgent need to create and express herself, being submerged and destroyed by a male dominant society with a stoic, pioneering moral system and a suffocating culture, this paper intends to explore the inner development and separation of the Issei mother, the limitation of the Nisei daughter and the conflicts and confinements between the two generations, and then go further to find out their social, historical and psychological origins laying behind the texts.

Keywords: Limited perspective, Interaction, Barrier, Independence, Separateness, Metaphor

In the much acknowledged and anthologized short story "Seventeen Syllables", its author, Hisaye Yamamoto gives a tale which "simultaneously records a daughter's – Rosie's – awakening sexuality, and depicts a mother's – Tome Hayashi's – devastating annihilation" (Mistri 197). The narrative tensions arise out of the interplay between Rosie and her mother Tome and reach the climax with the mother's revelation to and request for Rosie. As a typical Yamamoto story, "Seventeen syllables" adopts multiple limited perspectives which should be traced back layer upon layer. The short story mainly follows a parallel plotting: a Nisei daughter, Rosie's awakening womanhood as well as her Issei mother, Tome Hayashi's devastating effacement. The narrator seems to be looking at the story through the eyes of them alternatively. With these two Japanese-American women as its alternating narrative center, the story is unfolded piece by piece. To some extent, it is not reliable. Being completely restricted to one character's experience only, the account of the story is mostly a subjective observation and understanding of this single character, which is prone to mislead the readers. However, in the context of external and internal limitations, limited points of view and secondary plots turn out to be not mere literary devices but artful brushstrokes upon a much larger canvas. Through her unreliable narrators, Yamamoto conveys the painful effects of human limitations to greater effect than her plots do tell. The narrative is mostly composed by a reluctant witness, Rosie, whose life has been leveled "to the very ground". In recounting a deep wound in her psyche, it is at once inevitable and revealing that Rosie is unreliable for what is not told is often as meaningful as what is.

The story's real power lies in the tension created by the mother, Tome's stepping out of her traditional Japanese Issei role of farm worker, cook, housekeeper and wife while entering the haiku literary world. On the one hand, the story depicts the cultural and mental barrier that haiku brings about and reveals among Tome, her husband, and her daughter; on the other hand, the story elaborates on the proceeding destruction of a woman who aspires and initiates independently.

Through out the whole novel, haiku is employed to conceal a deeper metaphor for separation which it suggests. Its simplicity is deceptive concerning with its origin and its experience. The experience of composing or appreciating a haiku is often compared to a kind of enlightenment in which the reader sees into the life of things. R. H. Blyth explains in his introduction to *Haiku* that this type of poetry needs to be understood from the Zen point of view, being described as "a spiritual state of mind in which individuals are not separated from other things, instead remain identical with them while yet retaining their individuality and defining

peculiarities.”(Blyth, Vol.1) For haiku actually represents a kind of Oriental religious and poetic experience, people like Rosie and her father, who have been stripped of the inner ability to be an individual and separate soul by the Japanese traditional roles and the American world respectively, lack the “undiluted, intuitive quality” which is necessary for understanding haiku. We’ve learned from the very beginning that neither Rosie nor Mr. Hayashi is able to understand haiku or the meaning it has for Tome. During the three months that Tome contributes haiku to the *Mainichi Shimbun*, “a daily newspaper,” she takes for herself the “blossoming name” of Ume Hanazono. In Japanese, the name *Ume* stands for “an exquisite flowering tree which blossoms in early spring and bears fruit by the end of spring—that is, in three months.”(Mistri, 505) *Hanazono* means “a flower garden.” Both names are suggesting one of the central experiences described in the story: Tome Hayashi’s gradual awakening into a creative independence which does not include her “simple minded” Japanese husband or her Nisei daughter who only pretends to understand haiku because she doesn’t want to disillusion her enthusiastic mother about the “quantity and quality” of the Japanese she has learned. Besides, the name *Tome* ironically signifies “good fortune,” or “luck,” while *Hayashi* means “woods.” The number “three” also plays a subtle role in “Seventeen Syllables.” Tome’s inner awakening only lasts for a season, “perhaps three months”, and so does the her pseudo namesake tree, Ume, which blossoms and bears fruit just in three months. The three months are also echoed by the three line scheme of haiku—five, seven and five syllables—when it is translated into English. Therefore, haiku becomes the metaphor for Tome’s separateness. After the work in the field has been done, house kept, dinner cooked and served, dishes washed, she becomes a significant other person, “an earnest, muttering stranger who often neglected speaking when spoken to and stayed busy at the parlor table as late as midnight scribbling with pencil on scratch paper...”; she has transformed into Ume Hanazono, an intelligent and independent poetess.

The creative power Ume recently acquires assumes threatening prospects as she discusses haiku with other males. Tome steps outside her original role as an insignificant subject and seeks for intellectual stimulation and challenges in the process of composing poetry. Essentially, haiku transforms her from a voiceless, peaceable wife into a true Japanese woman to a certain extent. Mr. Hayashi now is left to play solitaire by himself. The gulf between the couple becomes wider each time the family goes visiting others. The haiku composing causes the Issei mother to forget her traditional role and responsibility as a submissive, passive working person but engages in comparing ecstatic notes with visiting poets while her husband entertains “the nonliterary members” (Yamamoto,9) or himself by reading *Life* magazine instead of intuiting and examining *life* through his wife’s poetry as a true lover of haiku would do.

Tome’s three months of haiku writing parallels her daughter, Rosie’s emerging sexuality and womanhood when the girl secretly meets Carrasco, the son of the Mexican family hired for the harvest. Rosie is so deeply enveloped in her own emotions that she fails to notice her mother’s need for identity, creativity and approval. Each time Ume reads her a poem for affirmation, the daughter’s response seems to be an automatic, mechanical refrain: “it was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no.”(8) The “yes, yes” she says to comfort her mother reflects the cultural gap that exists between the mother and the daughter.

In this mother-daughter interaction, Rosie’s choice between saying “yes” and “no” to her mother seems to be a key issue. The story begins with Rosie’s hesitation between “yes” and “no” upon her mother’s asking for approval of her newly composed haiku and ends with Rosie’s reluctant utterance of “yes” to her mother’s powerful request – “promise me you will never marry”(19). Rosie’s swaying between “yes” and “no” reflects a true dilemma of women Nisei immigrants. On the one hand they seek a departure from their Issei mothers’ frustrated and unfulfilled life and Japanese culture as a whole; on the other hand they conform to their mothers’ memory, struggle and perhaps fate which they cannot tear themselves free from. The gap between the said “yes” and unsaid “no” shows Rosie’s rejection against and painful acceptance of her mother’s defeat by the imposed traditional Japanese norms.

Here, the metaphor of haiku works as the central symbol of the disparity between the daughter and mother. Obviously, Rosie, like his father is unable to understand haiku which her mother is so devoted to. When Tome reads to Rosie a haiku for her approval, she “pretend[s] to understand it thoroughly and appreciate no end” (8) only because she doesn’t want to disillusion her mother about “the quantity and quality of Japanese” (8) she has learned. According to Zenora Mistri in her ““Seventeen Syllable’: A Symbolic Haiku”, haiku represents “the Eastern world of religious and poetic experience” (Mistri 198). Rosie’s American experience seems to have stripped her innate ability to build a connection with her mother culture.

The language barrier deepens the cultural vacuum between mother and daughter. Tome has known as little English as Rosie does with Japanese. Rosie actually doubts that she could “reach her mother” and “to communicate” (8) with her. When the haiku is read to her, Rosie only calls to her mind another haiku in English

and French. In fact, Rosie expresses her tiredness with Japanese tongue – “English lay ready on the tongue but Japanese had to be searched and examined” (8). Even at her Japanese class, Rosie gets greater satisfaction by imitating the British and American movie stars. The glib “yes” to her mother actually means “no”. “It was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when meant no, no”(9). Rosie utters a silent denial to her mother Japanese culture and yearning to be completely American which stands as an unmountable cultural barrier between her and her mother.

However, this language barrier between them fades away when the haiku barrier between her parents is growing up. One afternoon, “the hottest day of the year,” (15) Tome’s creative power has reached its breaking point: the haiku editor of the *Mainichi Shimbun* personally visits Ume, delivering to her the first prize award. The Hiroshiges Mr. Kuroda produces subtly echoes the spiritual chasm in the Hayashi family. Since like haiku, Hiroshige’s famous landscapes “evoke emersion and must be intuited,” (Trudeau, 506) the gap in understanding is reflected in Rosie’s cold, literal description of the Hiroshiges: “Rosie thought it was a pleasant picture, which looked to have been sketched with delicate quickness. There were pink clouds, containing some graceful calligraphy, and a sea that was a pale blue excerpt at the edges, containing four sampans with indications of people in them.”(17) Her entire description reveals the failure to see the mysterious interplay among life, the painting and the self. Rosie’s inability to imagine the floating world of haiku or to intuit what the picture suggests reaffirms the barriers between her mother and herself as well as between the Japanese culture and herself.

Being so excited of receiving the prize, Tome, the original subservient tomato packer has been taken over by Ume, an enthusiastic poetess immediately, who entertains the illustrious Japanese visitor at tea. Because of the lack of a true understanding as well as a violent jealousy of his wife’s success as a haiku writer, her husband was annoyed this time to such a degree that he can’t hold his temper any longer. He storms in, seizes the prize, takes it outside to smash and burn it.

As her efforts for self-fulfillment, haiku has special meanings for Tome. After Tome and Rosie quietly watch the fire die, Tome uncovers her story to her daughter. At nineteen, she has “come to America and married her father as an alternative for suicide (18), with a stillborn boy, after an unfortunate love affair with a young Japanese man who was above her social position. At this point, the title “Seventeen Syllables” attains another meaningful level: As Mistri has suggested that “the title ‘Seventeen Syllables’ seems to stand not only for the number of syllables in a haiku but also for the stillborn illegitimate child Tome bore seventeen years ago in Japan, a syllable for each silent year she has spent in America.” (Mistri 200) It accounts for the patience with which Ume had explained haiku to Rosie: “see, Rosie, it was a haiku, a poem in which she must pack all her meaning into seventeen syllables only...” (8) Writing haiku is also Tome’s yelling to express freely and create independently. But Rosie is so wrapped in herself that she fails to see her mother’s need for identity, creativity, and approval. As an astute reader, one who can quickly piece the hidden narrative together, aided by Yamamoto’s masterful control of detailed depiction, will realizes that deep solitude and despair which runs tragically and poignantly in the mother’s inner world. Through examinations of an unhappy marriage, the wife begs the teenaged, blossoming daughter to promise never to marry. “Yamamoto selects as her main characters those who are hurt, who have deviated from the norm, who are grasping for some bits of beauty in their desperation...a farmer’s wife who writes haiku in the evenings, ...all those who seek but lose are of interest to Yamamoto, and somehow she wins our understanding, largely through the accepting interpretations of the narrator.”(McDonald, 501)

Rosie’s disregard or deliberate denial of her mother’s craving expresses the Nisei generation’s wish to grow out of the fruitless life of their mother’s generation into a fruitful life, given that they have less strict economic and social limitations. The better possibility the daughter’s generation has urges them to say “no” to their mothers to cast out the shadow of their failure. However, even when Rosie means to say “no” to her mother, she never does manage to do it. Each time she utters a “familiar glib agreement” (19). Rosie does this partly because she doesn’t want to disillusion her mother as she explains to herself, but more importantly, she tries to deny to herself the harsh illumination that she could not tear herself from her mother’s tragedy. In many ways, she shares her mother’s passion, struggle, pursuit and perhaps fate. Thus Rosie develops an ambivalent feeling toward her mother, sympathy mixed with rejection. There is an apparent juxtaposition between Rosie and her mother in the tale. Both share a pursuit of self-fulfillment. Or put it in Ming L. Cheng’s words, “both are seduced by extravagance” and both are held back.

Rosie’s awakening womanhood parallels the three months of her mother’s haiku writing. Rosie is engaged in her short illicit romance with Jesus Carrasco, the son of the Mexican family hired for the harvest, to fulfill her desire. Her secret meeting with Jesus gives her an inexperienced sensational joy. But this little adventure like her mother’s is going to be damaged by her father’s axe and fire and blown even harder by her mother’s request. She

could comprehend that her mother's punishment for her breaking gender restrictions would be one day hers, although the restrictions on her would be less severe. Tome's revelation foreshadows another possible female tragedy in Rosie's future. As Mistri has observed, "Rosie and Jesus' relationship harbors a potential intercultural conflict, for Jesus is not of her ethnic group or station" (Mistri, 201). She tries to deny the harsh fact but her mother's request makes it clear. Rosie wants to "pull free" from this dictate of fate which holds her so tightly but fails. All she could say is a feeble "yes, yes". The ambivalent feeling she has towards her mother displays ever so clearly. In one way, her mother is Rosie's ally in the gender struggle for advancement. In the other, her mother's destruction forces Rosie to accept the reality of what she denies and threatens "to level her life, her world to the very ground" (19).

Caught in between, Rosie is in a struggle to seek fulfillment under the dictates of tradition and grip of foreshadowing failure and thus concedes a defeat. This reminds readers of the scene when Rosie sits between her quarreling parents on their way back from the Hayanos'. Rosie feels a hate for her mother's begging and her father's denial and wishes the car to crash. In her imagined crash come "three contorted, bleeding bodies, one of them hers"(12). Now in the crash of her acceptance of and rejection against her mother's experience, Rosie again turns out to be a victim, split and bleeding. In this short story, Hisaye Yamamoto doesn't presents a fusion of the Nisei daughter' American experience with the Issei mothers' memory, but leaves the tension even more tense at the end with the daughter's swaying between "yes" and "no".

The conclusion of the story also echoes the cultural chasm between the mother and the daughter, for Tome asks Rosie to promise that she will never marry. Rosie responds with the same glib lie she used for haiku—"yes, yes, I promise."(19) Ironically, just as Tome barely understands English, Rosie hardly understands her mother's suffocating plea. Each is a prisoner separated in solitary confinement. Rejected by both husband and daughter, Ume Hanazono is destroyed on the end, no longer a "flowering garden." When one recalls Mrs. Hayano, the woman possibly has her spring as well when she bears her first child, Haru(spring): she was "reputed to have been the belle of her native village", but now "moves stooped and shuffling, violently trembling, always."(10) She is destroyed as a counterpart of Tome Hayashi. These women blossom and pay the price—"intense personal jeopardy or annihilation" (Trudeau, 506). Short time duration of their flowering is quickly replaced by an endless confinement and compression.

"Seventeen Syllables" is infallibly a woman's story. The primary theme of this seemingly simple but internally forceful Nisei tale is to exhibit a gentle and intelligent woman, who is consumed by an urgent need to create and express herself, being submerged and destroyed by a male dominant society with a stoic, pioneering moral system and a suffocating cultural "straightjacket". The flavor and anguish which sublimates it and make it powerful come from the collision of Eastern and Western values. Tome aspires to come out of her room and attempts to gain control of her own life and carve an independent artistic territory for herself, and she is unfortunately smothered.

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