

The Theme of Mobility as Depicted in *All I Asking For Is My Body* by Milton Murayama

Nobuko Shimazu*

The freedom of mobility is one of the most important values of American individualism. Indeed, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, in *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, a thematic and intertextual study of Asian American literature, states, “America is FOUNDED on myths of mobility.” She continues, “Since its birth as a political and social entity . . . America has customarily defined its uniqueness in terms of the enhanced mobility it can offer: the opportunity to go where one wants, do what one wants, shape life anew” (118). Obviously, Wong is not the only scholar to point out that the freedom of mobility is a particularly distinguishing American characteristic. Albert Borgmann echoes Wong’s observation when he maintains that the children of the pioneers, who were hungry for land, “inherited commodious freedom in the ways they prefer to shape their private lives—above all the freedom to move about, nearly at will” (39). As both Wong and Borgmann contend, the freedom of mobility, then, has been one of the most distinctive American values to this day.

In view of the importance of mobility as one of the fundamental human rights in American society, it is quite natural that the theme of mobility has been taken up repeatedly in American literature. In fact, concerning the theme of mobility as depicted in mainstream American literature, Wong notes, “[A] controlling influence in American literature has been the perception of an open continent and the limitless opportunities it implies.” Yet in studying such a recurrent literary theme, Wong contends, “[T]he Asian American has been conspicuously absent in existing generalist formulations of a presumably universally applicable theory of American mobility. . . . The absence of Asian Americans in the literary scholarship on American mobility must be deemed a serious . . . omission” (119). As Wong points out, while the theme of mobility in mainstream American literature has been long examined by literary critics, the study of the mobility theme in Asian American literature has been deplorably neglected.

In her discussion of the theme of mobility in American literature in *Reading Asian American Literature*, Wong’s analyses revolve around the two concepts of “necessity” and “extravagance.”

*人文学部教授—英米文学

Regarding the subtitle of her book, Wong explains, “The terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance* signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness and autotelism” (13). Based on those two notions, Wong argues that the characters in Asian American literature must live according to the pragmatics of existence, “necessity,” and that they are not allowed to indulge in “extravagance”—something more than the necessities of ordinary life. Further, addressing the mobility theme in particular, Wong remarks,

One striking difference presents itself upon even the most cursory comparison between mainstream and Asian American discourses on mobility. In the former, horizontal movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, and opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal renewal—in short, Extravagance. In the latter, however, it is usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfillment for self or community—in short, Necessity. (121)

Thus Wong concludes that Asian American literary works portray the theme of “mobility because of necessity.” Drawing on Wong’s analyses of the mobility theme in Asian American literature, this paper discusses the theme of mobility depicted in Japanese American literary work *All I Asking For Is My Body* (1975) by Milton Murayama, adopting her perspective on “necessity” and “extravagance.”

All I Asking For Is My Body is essentially a Bildungsroman of a second-generation Japanese American boy in Hawaii in the 1930s. The novel reflects the author’s biographical background in that Murayama himself was born and grew up in one of the plantation camps in Hawaii. As Asian American literary critic Stephen H. Sumida acknowledges, Murayama then served in the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) of the United States Army from 1944 to 1946. He was trained in Japanese and used the language for his work, and naturally he became interested in Japanese culture. He had enrolled at the University of Hawaii in 1941, planning to major in English. After the war, using the GI Bill that funded veterans’ educations, Murayama resumed his studies and earned a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Hawaii. Later, he completed a master’s degree in Japanese and Chinese at Columbia University from 1948 to 1952.

Murayama eventually moved to San Francisco and got a job with the United States Customs Service. Meanwhile, he read and wrote in his spare time, and *All I Asking For Is My Body* is his first novel. When the first portion of the novel appeared as a short story in the *Arizona Quarterly* in 1959, however, Murayama was told to correct his English, eliminating the uses of pidgin and Hawaii creole in order to make it more accessible for mainstream readers. Murayama,

nevertheless, stuck to the original version and together with Dawn Pyne published the first two thousand copies of the novel in 1975. As the book's critical reception and the demand for it continued to rise, the University of Hawaii Press reprinted *All I Asking For Is My Body* in 1988. In addition to this novel, Murayama published *Five Years on a Rock* in 1994 and *Plantation Boy* in 1998, and the stories of both novels are related to that of *All I Asking For Is My Body* (*A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature* 130–33).

With regard to Wong's notion of the theme of mobility as depicted in Asian American literature, *All I Asking For Is My Body* is a typical Asian American literary work illustrating the theme of mobility "because of necessity." The Japanese immigrants in this novel leave their home country, hoping to return eventually after having acquired new wealth in a distant land. Having no hope for the prospect of improving their financial situation in Japan, they place a high expectation on amassing a fortune in America, the land of countless opportunities. Upon arriving in America, however, they unexpectedly but inevitably suffer from the plantation system.

All I Asking For Is My Body portrays the phenomenon of internal colonization that immigrants often confront under imperialistic capitalism. Speaking of the phenomenon of internal colonization, Anne McClintock succinctly explains, "Under imperialism, certain groups are expelled and obliged to inhabit the impossible edges of modernity: the slum, the ghetto, the garret, the brothel, the convent, the colonial [B]antustan and so on." According to her, "Abject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, and so on" (72). The characters in *All I Asking For Is My Body*, the Oyama family, are precisely the abject peoples McClintock describes. They are literally bound to a sugar cane plantation in Hawaii during the 1930s and early 1940s, for they are deeply in debt, owing nearly six thousand dollars, while the average plantation pay for forty-eight hours a week is 25 dollars a month for adults.

The plantation system holds tight control over the workers, who belong to various ethnic groups. The plantation does so by segregating the laborers according to a rigidly established hierarchy. There are only a few white people in this plantation, only one of whom is an Anglo-Saxon American, the plantation overseer Mr. Nelson. The workers are classified according to their races and assigned different jobs according to their racial backgrounds. Kiyo, a second son of the Oyama family and the protagonist of the novel, notices that even the plantation housing is organized according to this hierarchy:

It was a company town with identical company houses and outhouses, and it was set up like a pyramid. At the tip was Mr. Nelson, then the Portuguese, Spanish, and nisei [second-generation Japanese American] *lunas* [foremen] in their nicer-looking homes, then the

identical wooden frame houses of [the] Japanese Camp, then the more run-down Filipino Camp. (28)

Thus the novel depicts how the plantation company attempts to perpetuate its system in order to continue to exploit immigrants' cheap labor.

In such an ethnically segregated community, the development of camaraderie among workers of different ethnicities is virtually impossible. When more than ten thousand Filipino workers go on a strike, for example, Kiyo and other seventh- and eighth-grade students are willingly recruited by Mr. Nelson at a higher-than-usual wage in order to break the strike. Observing these students' eagerness not to miss a good opportunity to make extra money, Kiyo's white, liberal-minded grade-school teacher, Snooky, is exceedingly disturbed by their conduct: "Amazing. . . . I always thought everybody low on the pecking order hated it. Not so. Not you. You love getting pecked from above, you enjoy pecking those below. . . . What do you want to be in life? A pecker in the pecking order?" (33). In response to this challenge from the teacher, Kiyo's classmate answers defiantly, "It teach everybody to know his place. It make everything run smooth" (34). Clearly, the hierarchy established by the plantation system is pervasively ingrained even in the minds of the children, which helps to keep the system intact.

The plantation system paternalistically dominates its workers not only in work but also in every aspect of their lives. In addition to the housing, the plantation provides all the necessities of the community and life for its laborers, including a plantation store, a plantation mess hall for the Filipino bachelors, a plantation community bathhouse, a plantation social hall, a Catholic Church, the Japanese language school which becomes the Methodist Church on Sundays, a Buddhist hall, and a plantation dispensary. Furthermore, the plantation tries to control its workers by organizing activities that purportedly address their perceived physical and spiritual well-being:

Everything was over-organized. There were sports to keep you busy and happy in your spare time. Even the churches seemed part of the scheme to keep you contented. Mr. Nelson knew each of us by first name, knew each family, and asked each time anxiously about the family. He acted like a father, and he looked after you and cared for you provided you didn't disobey. Union talk was disobedience and treason, and if you were caught talking it or organizing, you were fired and your family and your belongings dumped on the "government" road. (96)

Thus the plantation keeps its workers divided along ethnic boundaries and rules them in every sphere of their lives in a system involving absolute patriarchy.

The Japanese immigrants in *All I Asking For Is My Body* must be virtually colonized by the capitalist and imperialist mindset of the plantation system. According to the world view of the Eurocentric and androcentric hierarchy, a European male, who is on the top of the social constellation, attains the position of subject. In the milieu of modernism, this white male subject, then, proceeds to aggressively appropriate “the other”—women, nature, indigenous peoples, and colonized countries. Being located at the bottom of the hierarchy, the Japanese immigrants must accept the position of object and must be thoroughly exploited by the plantation system. This is extremely ironical because they are not the subjects of a colonized country but American-born youngsters and their immigrant parents came to America with the aspiration to realize opportunities to amass wealth in the land of, supposedly, great freedom.

At the beginning of the novel, Kiyo's immaturity and naivety hinder him from realizing certain realities about plantation camp life. Writing *All I Asking For Is My Body* decidedly in Hawaii's pidgin English, Murayama's use of the first person narrator Kiyo works well in order to depict this fact. Kiyo, at the beginning of the novel, is in fourth grade and has grown tired of his family's repetitive meals of barely affordable rice and fish. At one point, therefore, he takes great relish in a meal of canned corned beef that Makot, his new gang leader, fixes for lunch. Makot's family is “the only Japanese family in Filipino Camp,” and his father does not “seem to do anything but ride around in his brand-new Ford Model T” (1). Makot always has money to treat his younger friends, and Kiyo likes Makot. Kiyo's parents, however, forbid Kiyo from associating with Makot. In spite of Kiyo's repeated inquiry of the reason for this proscription, they do not provide any clear explanation and merely insinuate that Makot's parents are “bad.”

After Kiyo's parents demand that he break off his friendship with Makot once and for all, he visits Makot's house one evening in order to exchange some parting words, although Makot has expressly asked that his friends never visit him at home at night. Kiyo, somewhat curious, notices a number of Filipino men lurking in the shadows near the house. Meanwhile, Makot's mother comes out of the house, wearing a flashy kimono and heavy make-up. Kiyo politely expresses his appreciation for delicious meals he has been treated to on his visits there. To Kiyo's bewilderment, she bursts into unstoppable laughter. By this time, the reader has become aware of the fact that Makot's mother is the resident prostitute serving the male, bachelor Filipino Camp. Yet Kiyo, it is clear, does not make the connection. He only perceives that something is strange about Makot's family. The gap between the reader's awareness and Kiyo's naivety brings more effect to the novel in terms of illustrating an ironical social actuality that the richest family of plantation workers has achieved its wealth through the mother's prostitution.

As Kiyo matures, so does his perception about the world surrounding him. Eventually, Kiyo comes to see that his brother Tosh and he are confined not only in the plantation system but also

in the Confucian value system. The Confucian value which is most emphasized in the Oyama household is filial piety. In fact, a vicious circle of filial piety haunts the Oyama family. The debt of Kiyo's parents originates in the fact that they paid their filial debt to the grandfather, working for him for twelve years and giving him all their earnings to take to Japan in order to resolve his debt there and open his clothing shop in Tokyo. Kiyo's parents, therefore, insist that their two sons, likewise, must repay them the amount of their consequent debt. Thus they make their eldest son, Tosh, quit high school and work at the plantation. Kiyo, too, must demonstrate his filial piety by getting a job at the plantation immediately after finishing grade school.

Even with three men working, the financial situation of Oyama family does not improve at all. They are unable to pay back any debt and barely maintain their day-to-day existence. Meanwhile, Kiyo's mother gives birth to two more children, placing a heavier financial burden on Tosh and Kiyo to help to support a family of seven children. While obligating themselves to hard physical work at the plantation, moreover, the two sons have to bear the additional humiliation of witnessing their younger sisters, who are notably academically less capable than they, going on to high school only to be paired off eventually with other high school graduates and, thus, ultimately become successful middle-class citizens. Sensing her role as the backbone of the family, it is Kiyo's mother who repeatedly preaches the Confucian virtue of filial piety to her sons, stressing that they are to remain single and stay at home as long as possible, turning over most of their income to the parents.

While the daughters have a means to escape from the confinement of the plantation system by getting high school educations and moving into middle-class status, the male children, Tosh and Kiyo, have absolutely no way to get out of the entrapment of the plantation. In this novel, it should be noted that there is an interesting gender reversal of the usual pattern in which the male children of a family are more educated than the females. Being humiliated, Tosh, the "number one son," rebels against his parents. He takes up boxing as a means of asserting himself in the world, saying, "All I asking for is my body. I not even asking them to send me to high school. Hell, I can work my way" (55). Toward the end of the novel, Kiyo, on the other hand, despairingly feels that he has come to a dead end, feeling imprisoned in the Confucian value system imposed by his own family as well as in the internal colonization enforced by the plantation system.

The situation is then worsened after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Hawaii is placed under martial law, and people are, in effect, frozen in their plantation jobs. The plantation is a kind of prison, and it is, itself, further imprisoned. Looking at the arrangement of the outhouse, Kiyo realizes, "The camp . . . was planned and built around its sewage system. . . . Shit too was organized according to the plantation pyramid" (96). This time, however, he comes to a new determination:

I would have to get out and be on my own even if the old man was successful and he was doing me the favors, even if the plantation made me its highest *luna*. Freedom was freedom from other people's shit, and shit was shit no matter how lovingly it was dished. . . . Shit was the glue which held a group together, and I was going to have no part of any shit or any group. (96)

Thus Kiyo ultimately comes to see the plantation as a feudal, colonial, and oppressive system.

Ironically, it is also the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that promotes socioeconomic upward mobility for Kiyo, offering him an opportunity for education after his service in the military and a new life off the plantation: "Everybody in Kahana was dying to get out of this icky shit-hole, and here was his chance delivered on a silver platter. Besides, once you fought, you earned the right to complain and participate, you earned a right to a future" (98). With his matured awareness and judgment, Kiyo volunteers for the army, taking the perfect chance to escape from the constraining entrapment of the plantation.

After Kiyo's enlistment, the story of *All I Asking For Is My Body* ends rather quickly. In his spare time in the military, Kiyo wins enough money in a crap game to repay the family debt, conveniently freeing Tosh and himself from their filial obligations. Kiyo sends the money to Tosh, saying to him, "Take care the body" and "See you after the war" (103). With regard to this ending, many critics consider that the novel ends both too abruptly and too conveniently. Stephen H. Sumida, however, views this ending of the novel as quite convincing, for he thinks that the author wants to see Kiyo still observing his filial piety, thus emphasizing the fact that Kiyo loves his family and respects the values of his parents despite his feelings of confinement (*And the View from the Shore* 136-37).

Sumida's interpretation of the ending of the novel is convincing. Earlier in the novel, contrary to his rebellious words, Tosh, Kiyo's elder brother, has also demonstrated his filial piety through his actions of helping to support the family financially even after his own marriage. Unlike Tosh, Kiyo is depicted to be feeling, at times, sympathetic toward his parents throughout the novel, which indicates Murayama's deep understanding and compassion for those Japanese immigrants who must necessarily enforce filial obligations on their children because of their exploited and impoverished life under the plantation system. Through creating an unexpected ending, Murayama shows Kiyo and Tosh, even as they resist and rebel, ultimately retain certain "Japaneseness" in their unwillingness or inability to completely renounce the powerful bonds of familial obligation.

By delineating the conduct of the two brothers, Murayama clearly expresses his resistance to assimilationism, which is in sharp contrast to the position held by assimilationist second-

generation Asian American writers such as Amy Tan. Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), for example, depicts the inter-generational cultural conflicts between immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters from the viewpoints of both the mothers and the daughters. Significantly, though, the novel ultimately emphasizes the "improvement" and "progression" of the daughters by submitting to mainstream American culture. In contrast, Murayama, by contriving a totally unexpected ending, succeeds in delineating the conduct of filial piety that the two sons observe to the end. In doing so, he, unlike Tan, does not uphold seeming submission to mainstream American culture as either improvement or progression.

The counter-hegemonic writer Murayama positively declares the establishment of Hawaiian nisei identity and celebrates their authentic experience as a racially visible minority by vividly illustrating the interactions between the two brothers in Hawaii's pidgin English. In *All I Asking For Is My Body*, Kiyo and his brother Tosh use four languages. Kiyo reflects, "We spoke four languages: good English in school, pidgin English among ourselves, good or pidgin Japanese to our parents and the other old folks" (5). They flexibly choose an appropriate language to use depending on different social discourses. In such circumstances, Kiyo forms his identity.

Kiyo is simultaneously exposed to different social practices and values and flexibly develops his identity by verifying and keeping some aspects of his own Japanese culture and adopting other aspects of new cultures in a series of encounters with them. In forming his identity, the most influential figure for Kiyo is his elder brother Tosh. In fact, Kiyo regards Tosh as his second father, and they talk to each other in pidgin English, formulating a discourse which is very different from the one formed by their Japanese-speaking parents. Thus Tosh's words and actions inspire and widen Kiyo's vision.

Through his interactions with his brother Tosh in the discourse of pidgin English, Kiyo comes to perceive himself not as Japanese but as Japanese "American." In their independent discourse, indeed, Tosh is in charge of certain things regarding his younger brother and himself. Thus concerning Japanese citizenship, under which Kiyo and himself were automatically registered when they were born, Tosh tells his father to cancel it, saying "In case of war, Kiyo and me will fight for America" (37). After the outbreak of the war, Tosh's authority in the family is enhanced even more. Kiyo observes, "He was top man in the family now. Father and mother who spoke no English depended on him and me to stay out of trouble" (91). By creating this discourse between Tosh and Kiyo, Murayama achieves what he aims for in his writing: "The aim of writing is to get as close as possible to the experience, and if the experience is dialect, you write dialect" (Murayama, "Problems of Writing in Dialect and Mixed Languages" 8). To Murayama, to avoid one's dialect is to deny one's authentic experience as a racially visible minority member. Murayama clearly refuses an assimilationist discourse that blindly encourages American-born nisei to avoid the use

of pidgin.

In conclusion, *All I Asking For Is My Body* by Milton Murayama fits into Wong's description of the mobility theme among Asian American literary works in that it portrays the theme of mobility because of economic necessity. Further, *All I Asking For Is My Body* illustrates the phenomenon of internal colonization, the "necessary results of capitalist development" in Patrick D. Murphy's words, faced by Japanese immigrants (154). It is one of the few Asian American texts that deals with class issues, which, as King-Kok Cheung notes, "have perhaps been the most neglected to date" among the themes of Asian American literary works (13). Using decidedly pidgin English, the author of the novel, Murayama, celebrates the establishment of Hawaii's nisei identity and chronicles the harsh experience of Hawaii's nisei genuinely and authentically.

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