Lost in the Passage: (Japanese American) Women in Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic*

JaeEun Yoo

(Hanyang University)

As is widely known, traditional psychoanalysis theorizes the mother-daughter relationship in negative terms; in order to grow into a mature individual, the daughter must sever emotional ties with her mother. As Marianne Hirsch writes, “a continual allegiance to the mother appears as regressive and potentially lethal; it must be transcended. Maturity can be reached only through an alignment with the paternal, by means of an angry and hostile break from the mother” (168). However, precisely because the mother-daughter relationship is conceptualized in this way—that is, as the site of intergenerational female alienation, many women writers have tried to re-imagine it as a source of strength and encouragement, though often not without conflict.

Asian American feminist writers are no exception. Re-conceiving and restoring the mother-daughter relationship is even more complicated for Asian American writers as they face issues of race in addition to those of gender. Critics have long noticed the specific way these writers imagine Asian American daughters’
attempts to relate to and draw from their immigrant mothers—a relationship conventionally thought of as unbridgeable due to generation gap and culture differences. As Melinda Luisa De Jesus points out, “what U.S. third world feminist writers have added to this genre [Mother/daughter stories] is the delineation of how women of color of all generations must negotiate not only sexism in American society but its simultaneous intertwining with racism, classism, heterosexism, and imperialism” (4). Recognizing the fact that their mothers also suffer from the double yoke of gender and racial discrimination, Asian American female writers tend to focus more on the difficult but necessary communication with and connection to the mother. In these writers’ works, for an Asian American daughter to grow up as a mature individual, she must both differentiate herself from and identify with the mother. Traise Yamamoto, writing specifically about Japanese American female writers, argues that “agency and connection are crucial aspects of the mother-daughter relationship for Japanese American women: the necessity for identification with the mother relates to issues of survival and resistance,” because “the structure of racialized motherhood suggest that the mother is a crucial figure for enculturating the daughter in modes of material and psychological survival in a social realm where she will be defined by both her race and gender” (145).

In this relatively short but significant tradition of Asian American writing, Julie Otsuka’s recent novel, *The Buddha in the Attic* (hereafter, *The Buddha*), stands out. The novel emphasizes the break, rather than connection, between Japanese American mothers and their daughters. Despite a strong attachment to their mothers,