

Food as a Bridge between Cultures: An Analysis of Gastronomic Transculturalism in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*

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Abstract

This article explores the role of food in bridging cultural divides in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*. The novel tells the story of Japanese immigrant women in early 1900s America, showing how food unites cultures and helps people share their traditions. These women cook, share, and change their food habits to balance their old and new identities and connect with their new environment. Through the close analysis of the significant food references in the novel, this article examines how food serves as a means of cultural exchange and connection between Japanese and American cultures, by breaking down cultural walls and helping people understand each other better. Furthermore, this article highlights the significance of Gastronomic Transculturalism in facilitating cross-cultural understanding and exchange.

Keywords: food, cultural unity, cultural exchange, Julie Otsuka, *The Buddha in the Attic*.

Introduction

Food is much more than just a source of energy, it is also a means of cultural communication that breaks boundaries, creating communities among people. Gastronomic transculturalism refers to the blending of food, culture, and identity when people from diverse backgrounds come together. It is about how food can bridge

cultural gaps thereby creating unity, new flavours, traditions, and narratives. Imagine a Japanese immigrant in the United States making sushi with a hint of apple pie spice from America. This is known as gastronomic transculturalism. It is a fusion of different cultures and it celebrates the differences and similarities of other cultures. It is a way to connect and get along with people from other cultures.

In Julie Otsuka's novel *The Buddha in the Attic*, food is a recurring theme in the daily lives of immigrant women. In the story, Otsuka uses food as a symbol to represent the culinary heritage of the picture brides and their lofty expectations as well as their dreams of the new country. Through this, food becomes a medium for these women to maintain a connection to their cultural roots, as well as a tool for adapting to their new surroundings by creating bonds with the American people around them.

The author of the book Julie Otsuka is a Japanese-American writer whose works mainly focus on immigration experience and cultural identity. She was born to a Japanese-American family in Palo Alto, California, US, in 1962 and grew up in a house that was deeply rooted in traditional Japanese customs. This has greatly

influenced her writing and the main focus of her literary works is her family's history with particular emphasis on their World War II experience, a time when Japanese-Americans were evicted from their homes in the USA and had their rights taken away. Her book *When the Emperor Was Divine* published in 2002 is about the story of a Japanese-American family during this critical, historical period. *The Buddha in the Attic* published in 2011 is her second book, it presents the story of Japanese immigrant women who lived in the early 1900s. It has won the PEN/ Faulkner Award in the year 2012. The novel is written in a unique collective voice and focuses on themes such as identity, belonging, and the difficulties of starting in a completely different place. Apart from these prominent themes food is also an important recurring theme in the novel which has been less explored by critics and scholars.

This study explores the role of food in bridging cultural divides in *The Buddha in the Attic*. It reflects on how food serves as a means of cultural connection and exchange between Japanese and American cultures. It mainly focuses on how food serves as a medium of cultural fusion and shapes the experiences of the Japanese picture brides in the story, highlighting the importance of gastronomic transculturalism in uniting the people of two different cultural groups.

Food as a Means of Cultural Connection

In the novel *The Buddha in the Attic*, the Japanese picture brides immigrate to America at the beginning of the 20th century to marry men they have never met before. The novel portrays how these women constantly make attempts to adapt and adjust to their new country. Otsuka has used collective storytelling to expose issues concerning identity, displacement, and the lives of Japanese immigrant women who try to hold on to their cultural roots while adapting to the new American life.

Food plays a significant role in the novel helping Japanese immigrant women maintain their cultural identity as well as to feel connected with their new American surroundings. They carry with them cherished recipes and culinary traditions from Japan, like making *tsukemono* (pickled vegetables) and *mochi* (a sweet rice treat), which remind them of their homeland. These traditional foods provide the women with a sense of comfort in the new country. By sharing meals and cooking together food helps the Japanese picture brides to create moments of comfort and solidarity to forget their suffering for a little while. For instance, Otsuka presents a scene in the novel where the women sit together sharing bowls of rice and miso soup, bonding and feeling comfort in their common cultural traditions. Through these shared meals, the women temporarily forget the difficulties they encounter every day and it gives them feelings of warmth and closeness. Thus food is an important factor that helps the characters to hold on to their identities and to build a feeling of closeness to one another. Besides that, food also provides them with a sense of emotional attachment, bringing the memories of their original background to them and making them feel a sense of stability amidst changes in their lives. Those familiar flavours and beloved dishes bring them comfort and a sense of reassurance when times get tough and life becomes challenging.

In another example, one of the women, makes a pot of *ochozuke* (rice with tea), a dish that her mother used to do when she misses home, and when she ate that, she would feel a little less alone says Otsuka. It shows that the women realize that cooking and loving family dishes are ways to deal with the challenges of their new lives, which give them a sense of comfort and bond with their motherland. Based on these examples which Otsuka presents, food is, thus, a kind of cultural bridging or, in other words, it

enables the Japanese immigrants to not only conserve their identities but also develop a feeling of community. This novel presents food not just as a source of living but also as a strong tool for connection and cultural preservation. It helps women deal with the adversity of displacement, maintaining their cultural base and promoting a feeling of belonging in a distant land.

Food as a Medium for Cultural Exchange

In Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*, food is used as a gateway for people from two different cultural backgrounds to interact. There are several instances in the novel where food serves as a powerful tool for creating connections between Japanese immigrants and their American husbands, neighbours, and colleagues. Japanese immigrants in the United States utilize food to demonstrate their culture and become friends with their new American environment. The women maintain the Japanese heritage and learn to make sense of their American lives by incorporating American culinary practices into their traditional Japanese cooking, resulting in a blend of flavours and methods that reflect their double identity. This blending of culinary practices represents their cultural adaptation. For example, the immigrant women learn to bake pies using fruits from nearby orchards, a distinctly American practice. They add family Japanese touches, such as a hint of cinnamon and a hint of sugar, and are surprised to find that the pies remind them of the mochi they used to do at home. This blending of traditional ingredients highlights the ability of food to draw parallels between their traditional Japanese dishes of the women and the new American meals they learn to make. The act of baking pies also shows their willingness to adopt new cultural practices while still preserving their Japanese inheritance. By mixing the culinary traditions of their

hometown with those of their adoptive country, they promote gastronomic transculturalism.

There is another instance in the novel where women prepare a traditional Japanese lunch for their bosses, in an effort to share their culture and promote mutual understanding. They make dishes like sushi, tempura, and soup and give it to their bosses. At first, the bosses were hesitant to take a bite, but soon as they did, they were surprised by how much they enjoyed the unique flavours. The positive response from their bosses reflects the potential of food to act as a medium for understanding and acceptance despite the various cultural differences and the willingness of the American bosses to get involved and appreciate the Japanese culture. These shared meals also mark a significant attempt towards bridging cultural differences between Japanese women and their American bosses. By introducing their bosses to Japanese cuisine, these women not only share a part of their heritage but also create an opportunity for cross-cultural exchange and connection. Here the act of sharing food serves not only as a gesture of kindness but also helps in building cultural exchange and mutual respect. This scenario exemplifies the role of food as a universal language that is capable of transcending cultural barriers by bringing people of different backgrounds together.

In the novel, food becomes a symbol of compassion and care, by which people connect across cultural divides. In a scene where an immigrant woman becomes ill, and her American neighbour gives her chicken soup. This small but heartfelt gesture breaks cultural boundariesdemonstrates the universal power of food as a means of expressing empathy and solidarity. In this situation the neighbour chose to make chicken soup, a dish that is very much associated with cure and comfort in American culture, to make it clear that they are feeling

empathetic and want to comfort them during a time of need. The woman who receives it feels it as an act of kindness and genuine care. Food sharing in this context becomes a powerful symbol of love and connection, highlighting its ability to gather individuals from various origins. The neighbour's gesture is not just to provide food but it becomes an expression of care and support that transcends cultural differences. This act of gastronomic transculturalism highlights the power of food to connect different communities, creating mutual respect, belonging, and understanding. Through such gestures of generosity, the Japanese picture brides begin to feel a stronger connection to their American surroundings.

Therefore through such gastronomic instances in the novel food becomes a universal language that transcends the various cultural barriers, allowing individuals to connect at a deeper level. Through the fusion of Japanese and American flavours and sharing traditional Japanese meals with their American husbands, colleagues, and neighbours, the Japanese picture brides use food as a means of promoting connections in America.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* illustrates how food transcends cultural boundaries and becomes a medium for cultural connection and exchange. It plays a significant role in the life of Japanese immigrants, who are faced with the tests and opportunities of cultural adaptation. Through this study, it becomes evident that the culinary traditions in the novel serve as a bridge between the Japanese picture brides' homeland and their new American lives. Thus in the novel food becomes a source of comfort and solidarity by allowing these immigrant women to preserve their cultural heritage while adapting to their new environment. The sharing of traditional

Japanese dishes with their American husbands, neighbours, and colleagues, and by blending the foodways and culinary practices, they promote mutual exchange and understanding of each other's cultures. Through this exploration, Otsuka makes it clear that food has the universal power to unite people despite cultural differences. Therefore in a world often marked by various cultural divisions, food becomes a platform where people belonging to different cultures can find a common ground for cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding thereby creating unity. Otsuka's novel *The Buddha in the Attic* thus illustrates how food can create avenues for gastronomic transculturalism.

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