MAŁGORZATA JARMOŁOWICZ-DZIEKOŃSKA[1]
Department of Foreign Languages
Medical University of Bialystok, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0402-0319

DOI: 10.15290/CR.2021.33.2.03

The picture bride phenomenon: A reflection on photography from a cultural perspective in Yoshiko Uchida's *Picture Bride*

Abstract. Literature and photography have always encouraged critics to explore interactions between text and image. Within the scope of culture, they also show significant potential in terms of their scholarly application, since the photograph becomes a practical tool for studying literary works within the cultural matrix. The paper aims to use this means of visualisation in order to examine the picture bride phenomenon illustrated in Yoshiko Uchida's novel *Picture Bride* (1987), which reveals that behind the veil of apparently prosperous and lifelong marriages, there is a harsh matchmaking system which—solely on the basis of personal networking and Japanese marriage intermediaries—allows for shipping prospective wives from Japan to Japanese immigrants who settled in the United States a few decades earlier. Thus, the photograph constitutes a tool of analysis, which doubles as a tangible means of representation and a factual visualisation of metacognitive imagery.

Keywords: picture bride phenomenon, photography, Japanese-American literature.

As a growing field of inquiry, the relationship of literature to photography has always offered illuminating insights into conceptual patterns interweaving literary and photographic tissue. These " 'photo-textual' experiments," as François Brunet (2013: 12) calls

1 Address for correspondence: Department of Foreign Languages, Medical University of Bialystok, ul. Mickiewicza 2C, 15-222 Bialystok, Poland. E-mail: malgorzata.jarmolowicz-dziekonska@umb.edu.pl

them, have revealed an unexplored space of meaning, which calls for further conceptualisation with a perspective of bridging the two fields in terms of their theoretical capacity. Brunet, attempting "to complete the depiction of a process of hybridization" (12), simultaneously emphasises that such patterns, already present in the history of literary and photographic co-existence, concern "especially photography's relationship to reality, presence, and representation—particularly of the self. Still, this history is envisioned primarily as cultural, linking ideas and practices in an investigation of art in society" (12). Hence, photography has become an instrument that enables claiming agency with regard to the reflection of a particular reality and the construction of an identity corresponding to a pictorial image, which enhances the process of identification of the self. Because of the fact that photography "has become in itself a paradigm event and something of a literary genre" (31), its connections to literature have also undergone a considerable change in terms of their mutual reference. As Brunet delineates, with the advent of this invention the balance between the ocular and the textual fluctuated in the interstices of their reciprocal interaction: "On one side, photography was the end of 'literature' in the sense of vain textual speculation; on the other, 'literature' in the sense of record of the imagination was the image of photography" (22). Nevertheless, within the scope of criticism, photography has succeeded in carving out its own space and is regarded as an autonomous means of expression. The critic distinguishes its significance and an independent theoretical trajectory, which has earned its own conceptual field of recognition: "Even though a lot of its traditional social uses remain seemingly untouched, photography's historic alternative as a medium—to supplant literature, or to become a new literature—would seem to have been resolved in favour of the second term, especially given … literature's own marriage to photography" (110).

With an interdisciplinary lens applied to this phenomenon, critics could search for yet a deeper meaning bonding the two conceptualisations within the purview of their theoretical horizons. Although the photograph is commonly perceived as a strictly visual, speaking-for-itself conveyance of representation, it is capable of creating more textual reference than meets the eye as its figurative means of parlance can transfigure the potential vectors of interpretation. Thus, it constitutes a tool of analysis which doubles as a tangible means of representation and a factual visualisation of metacognitive imagery. Sean Ross Meehan (2008: 14) points out that in spite of the fact that photography is considered to be "a crucially metonymic medium," the process of representation and reproduction engage it in a dynamic interaction: "Photography is a communication medium because it is a means for representing an image (the photographic product or photograph) and a technology, by way of photo-chemical exposure and development, for reproducing that image (the photographic process). This dynamic relation between representation and reproduction marks the complex character of the medium." Furthermore, another reference needs to be made to the characteristics of the

photograph, namely the way in which it articulates itself through the process of perfect mimicry, producing a facsimile of a subject. As Stuart Burrows (2010: 205) explicates, imitative representation encapsulated in mimesis, attributable to painted subjects, differentiates a photograph from a painting mainly due to its flawless emulating capacity which renders an exact image of a photographed person or object: "Photographed subjects do not look like 'something' precisely because they *are* that thing. Whereas a painting opens up a gap between the thing and its representation—the gap that ... is crucial to the existence of mimesis, which operates via a model of original and copy—photography conflates the two, rendering the thing and its image consubstantial." Analysing distinctive qualities of the photograph, Susan Sontag (1973: 12) additionally expounds that the act of photographing transgresses a passive act of observation, since it requires an active involvement on the part of the non-inert photographer: "Even if incompatible with intervention in a physical sense, using a camera is still a form of participation. Although the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing." All the aforementioned properties of photography make it a unique vehicle of representation, which allows for a substantial extension of interpretative measures in comparison with other media of articulation.

The noetic reading of photography with its hues of subjective understanding relating to inner wisdom—*noēsis*, as its Greek etymology indicates—opens up a new space for parenthetical analysis which may extend beyond the realms of common interpretative measures. W. J. T. Mitchell (1994: 2-3) emphasises the necessity of examining bipolar vectors of representation with reference to their historical frameworks: "What we need is a critique of visual culture that is alert to the power of images for good and evil and is capable of discriminating the variety and historical specificity of their uses." However, not only historical contexts should pave the way for heterogeneous perspectives pertaining to the conceptualisation of photography theory. In fact, Pierre Taminiaux (2009:11) voices "the need for an aesthetic perspective on photography that goes *beyond* a time-delineated cultural approach." Such a view capacitates applying a more unconventional visualisation to the entire concept, which is provided within an interdisciplinary scope. David Cunningham *et al.* (2008: 1) state that while the "field of interdisciplinary critical practice remains problematic, it also promises much of value and interest." Hence, as the critics continue, it is necessary to focus on

> a critical encounter between different approaches to such problems in order to enable the possibilities of research on literature and photography to be more effectively conceived and pursued. Its aim is not simply to question photography's idea of literature, nor literature's idea of photography. Rather, it seeks to trace the *heterogeneity* of conceptions of the intersections between the literary and the photographic from a variety of critical and historical perspectives. (1-2)

The medium of photography may erode the transparency of the text and become a repository of multi-dimensional interpretations through translating the rhetoric of image and text into spatial and time experiences within cultural and historical frameworks, thus assuming different roles of representation. According to Brunet (2013: 114), "the large-scale reshuffling of cultural functions between literature and photography" has already been observed, which necessitates further investigation and searching for new means of critical examination. On the part of the critic, this requires a particular sensitivity to certain cultural planes of reference. As every society has developed a set of cultural codes, according to which they function and fit into reality, a considerable disparity between occidental and oriental customs and practices can often be immediately noticed by foreigners of distinct origin, let alone cultural nuances among the inhabitants of various regions of the same country. Therefore, different conceptual tools need to be applied with regard to such idiosyncratic specificities. Japanese-American literary works need to be read from a perspective that takes into account their cultural and historical heritage in order not to be misinterpreted through far-fetched fallacies or incongruities—not uncommon for postcolonial criticism, whose weaknesses have been pointed out by Edward Said and other critics. Expanding the discourse with this aim in mind, there is another extension that requires to be outlined with reference to the conceptualisation of self-representation. It draws from a cultural background and focuses on deploying a photograph not for the sake of aesthetic contemplation but with the purpose of constructing an informative means of intercultural communication, which will be discussed further.

The established position of photography in creating cultural memory has been recognised for centuries. Since, according to Barbara Misztal (2003:13), "cultural memory refers to people's memories constructed from the cultural forms and to cultural forms available for use," the photograph forges a tangible connection with the past, which grants this medium a status of autonomous representation by the means of various cultural forms. As the author continues, "[t]hese cultural forms are distributed across social institutions and cultural artefacts such as films, monuments, statues, souvenirs and so on. Cultural memory is also embodied in regularly repeated practices, commemorations, ceremonies, festivals and rites" (13). For a long time, the photograph has served as an arbitrary and unmediated means of expression which, due to its ocular-centric properties, has been granted a putative role of transparency. Linda Haverty Rugg (1997: 134) emphasises that photography immediately became the *lingua franca* of visual representation: "One of photography's roles as an invention, in fact, was to invent internationalism. It is the popular assumption that images, unlike language, do not require translation, and photographs, infinitely and inexpensively reproducible shortly after the medium's invention, could reach across both national boundaries and classes, speaking to the literate and illiterate alike." However, it soon transpired

that the purported neutrality of the photograph is illusive and one cannot ascribe to this means a universal framework of interpretation, as the ignorance of such factors as historical or socio-cultural contexts may distort its overall meaning and intended purpose of communication.

Another aspect worth pointing out relates to the conspicuous entanglement of the photograph with time, which constitutes a fundamental plane of critical reference. Time fluctuations reflected in the events caught in the camera's eye during one's lifetime are capable of rendering the exact trajectory of the subject's life and hence, as Sontag (1973: 15) explicates, a set of photographs may become a reflection of one's internalised values and experiences, reminiscent of human impermanence and irrevocable demise: "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." The photograph has always been recognised as an instant vehicle of memory that enables travelling back in time, especially for family gatherings. Sontag delineates that "[m]emorializing the achievements of individuals considered as members of families (as well as of other groups) is the earliest popular use of photography. For at least a century, the wedding photograph has been as much a part of the ceremony as the prescribed verbal formulas. Cameras go with family life" (8). However, not only such ceremonial occasions gave an opportunity for taking photographs. The medium of photography immediately entered the world of bureaucracy and in an instant became an indispensable part of human identity, which—according to Sontag—renders it a staple tool for confirmation of one's existence in the contemporary world:

> The industrialization of photography permitted its rapid absorption into rational—that is, bureaucratic—ways of running society. No longer toy images, photographs became part of the general furniture of the environment—touch-stones and confirmations of that reductive approach to reality which is considered realistic. Photographs were enrolled in the service of important institutions of control, notably the family and the police, as symbolic objects and as pieces of information. Thus, in the bureaucratic cataloguing of the world, many important documents are not valid unless they have, affixed to them, a photograph-token of the citizen's face. ... Photographs are valued because they give information. (21-22)

At this point it is worth mentioning that apart from its informative properties, the photograph gained the status of a visual matchmaker and, due to its illustrative value, became an unofficial means of identification in an Asian cultural background. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Japanese developed a customary practice of marriage arrangement which became known as the picture bride phenomenon.

Portrait photographs of would-be-spouses were exchanged before the couple got married. Although face recognition was a primary objective behind this concept, the photograph did not act as a token of artistic representation but relied heavily on introducing a prospective personal bond with a previously unknown person. Thus, the first step to forging and cultivating an intimate relationship led in the contrary direction to the commonly held practices—through familiarizing with a future spouse in the photograph and then meeting him or her in person after a long-haul journey from Japan to the United States.

The life of a Japanese picture bride, Hana Omija, depicted by Yoshiko Uchida in the novel *Picture Bride*, reveals a potent point of convergence between the past and the present, constituting an informative framework which helps to familiarise with the cultural code based on "picture brides who went with nothing more than an exchange of photographs to bind them to a strange man" (Uchida 1997: 3). Figuratively speaking, the whole conceptualisation is enclosed in a photograph, since only this medium serves as a tool of agency and, at the same time, constitutes a remnant of the past. Rugg (1997: 156) gives prominence to the fact that photographs, acting as fragmented pieces in bodily form, present specific moments which are taken out of the time frame and translated into infinity: "Like allegorical objects, photographs function as 'fragments' in that they are moments blasted from the continuum of time, rendered spatial and shrunk to miniatures." The title of the novel encapsulates the picture bride phenomenon in the same way, which makes it the core trajectory of Hana's story. The Japanese-American author delves into her ancestral—albeit fictitious—past, dedicating the work to all the unvanquished female souls who a century earlier embarked on the ship to the United States to seek a better future. An epigraph at the beginning of the novel may simultaneously double as an epitaph on a memorial monument: "In memory of those brave women from Japan who travelled far, who endured, and who prevailed." In fact, an image of a picture bride, an unidentified woman from the early 1900s, speaks to the reader from the front cover of the book. Thus, the black-and-white photograph becomes a leading trope and a catalyst of the story as the novel gradually unfolds.

The phenomenon would not have gained such a resonance among the Japanese if it had not been for the American governmental immigration policy based on racist and discriminatory principles. According to Lauren Kessler (1994: 13), the beginning of the twentieth century saw the greatest wave of emigration from Japan: "From 1901 to 1907 almost 110,000 Japanese—most of them young, male, literate, rural and from the respectable farming class—ventured to America." What needs to be taken into account is the fact the majority of the Japanese who arrived in the United States between 1885 and 1907 were single men in their youth who wanted to earn enough money and return to their motherland. As Kessler continues, "they saw themselves as *dekaseginin*, or temporary sojourners. Their plan was simple: work hard for three to five years, saving

every penny they could; then return triumphantly to Japan, to either rebuy the land they lost to taxes or expand their holdings and fund new ventures. The sacrifices would be great, but the rewards greater" (10). What is more, they were conscientiously selected citizens who, with their thorough education, were supposed to form a group of proper representatives. Elaine H. Kim (1982: 122-123) pinpoints the fact that due to such a broadly crafted campaign, the *issei*—first-generation Japanese immigrants—were relatively high-spirited and eager to head for America:

> They had had opportunities to become familiar with the currents of Western thought and modern Western life; in the cities especially, information about important social, political, economic, and cultural world trends was readily available. ... Moreover, the Japanese government not only screened immigrants carefully to make sure that they would properly represent their motherland abroad but also gave an official briefing for each immigrant, during which he could become acquainted with some of the rudiments of American life. For the most part, the *issei* had a highly positive attitude towards America when they left Japan.

Over time, their optimism for a bright future often turned into disappointment as they encountered many obstacles which prevented them from achieving their goals. Poverty and a lack of family in an alien country precluded their further development, which resulted in the occurrence of the so-called picture bride phenomenon. It was created out of necessity to help the Japanese settle down and raise their economic and social status. Indeed, the demand for Asian wives was so significant that bringing in Japanese women became a widely accepted and frequently noticed practice. Helen Zia (2001: 5-6) attributes such a turn of events to laws which were highly unpropitious for Asians: "Finding marriageable suitors was not a problem for women from Asia. For more than half a century before World War II, several racially discriminatory laws prohibited Asian men from becoming U.S. citizens or marrying outside their race. The United States also barred women from China, India, and the Philippines from immigrating. The combined impact of these prohibitions created generations of lonely Asian bachelor societies in America." The law appeared to be more lenient for the Japanese as from 1907 it enabled them to ship into the United States their wives, or—in many cases—wives-to-be (which, in fact, was exercised as a loophole):

> According to the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, Japanese immigrants were able to bring in wives as non-laborers and to establish families in America as their Chinese predecessors were unable to do, but Japanese laborers were excluded from immigration. By 1924, when all Japanese immigration was finally halted by law, over 14,000 Japanese women had come, mostly as 'picture brides,' to join husbands they had seen only in

> photographs. ... the arrival of the picture brides helped encourage Japanese men to set down roots in American society, and the presence of women and, later, children allowed them to consider family-operated farms and small enterprises. (Kim 1982: 124)

The picture-bride system, called *shashin kekkon* (denoting 'photo-marriage'), relied on arranged marriages, which has constituted a staple of Japanese cultural tradition for centuries. Since marriage was a matter of not only personal but also, and predominantly, familial and community significance, it involved employing a go-between in order to select the best match for a spouse-to-be. Ester Mikyung Ghymn (1995: 74) observes that "[a] professional matchmaker usually worked as an agent. Working on commission, he or she made marriages in the manner of modern real estate transactions. The matchmaker sometimes exaggerated the qualities of the prospective mates, hoping to close a successful deal." This practice propelled a series of mishaps which eventually led to a gruesome predicament, where love and romance did not have a voice. As Kessler (1994: 36) emphasises, "romance was not, at least initially, a part of any pairing. Marital matches were arranged by outside intermediaries who might take many factors into consideration, but generally not the personal feelings of those they would be uniting. ... Women ... were supposed to sit back and wait for their families to arrange their futures." Ghymn indicates that the magnitude of the problem was significant as the prospects of a fabulous future transfigured into the greatest disillusionment of their lives: "The brides frequently became victims of false advertising. In many instances, marriage was not a state of emotional fulfilment but one of business. Marriage customs were rigid and cruel, rigid in adherence to society and superstition, cruel to the individual spirit" (1995: 74). Thus, many young women who fell prey to such intermediaries had to carry the burden of their contrivance for the rest of their lives.

Hana, the daughter of one of the last samurai, is among those females who become attracted to such an arrangement. She finds out from her uncle, serving as a matchmaker, about "the lonely man who ha[s] gone to America to make his fortune in Oakland, in California" (Uchida 1997: 2), and is seeking a wife from overseas. Bearing in mind the fact that she "was twenty-one, finding a proper husband for her had taken on an urgency that produced an embarrassing secretive air over the entire matter" (2). Her uncle pictures the man in bright colours, drawing a portrait of Taro Takeda as "a conscientious, hard-working man who has been in the United States for almost ten years. He is thirty-one, operates a small shop and rents some rooms above the shop where he lives. ... He could provide well for a wife" (2). The thought of gaining independence speaks to Hana instantly as she "felt a faint fluttering in her heart. Perhaps this lonely man in America was her means of escaping both the village and the encirclement of her family" (4). The Japanese women, accustomed to various manifestations of male supremacy, frequently did not and could not recognise their individuality as autonomous entities.

As Kessler (1994: 37-38) expounds, the life of a Japanese wife was miserable enough and hardly bearable: “Isolated from her own friends and family, she lived to serve and procreate. If she was fortunate enough to bear a male heir, her status improved somewhat, but she would have little control over the household in which she lived—or, for that matter, over her own life.” For Hana, a well-educated woman, in contrast to the majority of Japanese female society, the prospects of remaining in Japan seem to be not only a harbinger of a mundane future but, most of all, a major hindrance to her own development and creativity. Her point of view finds confirmation in the attitude of her sister’s husband, who notices her individuality and firmness soon enough to give it proper condemnation. As the head of the family in a patriarchal society, he cannot bear female autonomy, even if it finds its reflection only in her words: “Although he never said so, Hana guessed he would be pleased to be rid of her, the spirited younger sister who stirred up his placid life with what he considered radical ideals about life and the role of women. He often claimed that Hana had too much schooling for a girl. She had graduated from Women’s High School in Kyoto, which gave her five more years of schooling than her older sister” (Uchida 1997: 4). He believes that education “has addled her brain” (4) but, in fact, it is a statement of his insecurity towards a well-read woman, who might have much broader knowledge about the world than himself.

Undoubtedly, such a journey required a substantial courage on the part of a female and, as Kim (1982: 249) reasons, “Asian women who chose to immigrate to the United States as wives and picture brides were probably more adventuresome than average. Some, perhaps, were eager to escape from a shadowy past. Others undoubtedly wished to escape the social strictures of their village lives.” The aforementioned individual freedom must have been a great enticement as well, but their attitudes apparently also reflected a pressing sense of frustration and constituted the last resort to change their unfavourable course of life. According to Paul Spickard (2009: 36), a promise of a more manageable future was for the picture brides the most appealing factor: “For their part, migration to America was attractive to some Japanese women, even if they had to marry to make the trip. It was an adventure. Living standards were higher in North America. Sex roles were less hierarchical. Responsibilities to extended kin were less onerous. In the more fluid social situation of a migrant community, a woman had a greater chance than in Japan of carving out a degree of autonomy for herself.” Indeed, Hana’s spirit longs for independence, since she believes that only the wings of uncurbed freedom will make her a self-fulfilled woman, and she is eager to follow the wind of fate that could bring her to this destination. The sacrifice of coming to another continent seems to fade in the distance, as the reward may bring the desired fruit of satisfaction. Uchida (1997: 3) offers a conscientious study of a self-aware woman who seeks a space for herself where her free will would not be subjected to constant abuse and distortion:

> Hana knew she wanted more for herself than her sisters had in their proper, arranged and loveless marriages. She wanted to escape the smothering strictures of life in her village. She certainly was not going to marry a farmer and spend her life working beside him planting, weeding and harvesting in the rice paddies until her back became bent from too many years of stooping and her skin turned to brown leather by the sun and wind. Neither did she particularly relish the idea of marrying a merchant in a big city as her two sisters had done. Since her mother objected to her going to Tokyo to seek employment as a teacher, perhaps she would consent to a flight to America for what seemed a proper and respectable marriage.

The only obstacle she has to overcome is the final decision of the family, as a mutual consent on the part of both families might give her a preliminary passport to a brighter future. In response, the relatives "all nodded, each of them picturing this merchant in varying degrees of success and affluence" (3). It does not need to be overtly stressed that in such a patriarchal arrangement it was the male who supervised the major decisions and directed the flow of the family life according to his will. Ghymn (1995: 85) notes that this came as no surprise to the majority of Japanese women, since they "were taught that they were inferior to men. As children their brothers were always favoured, and as wives they were told to obey their husbands. It was considered a woman's duty and honour to obey her father and husband at all times." Thus, Hana's mother, after discussing the matter mostly with the male members of the family and the village priest—since "[a] man's word carried much weight for Hana's mother" (Uchida 1997: 4)—finally agrees to the further development of events: "an exchange of family histories and an investigation was begun into Taro Takeda's family, his education and his health, so they would be assured that there was no insanity or tuberculosis or police records concealed in his family's past. Soon Hana's uncle was devoting his energies entirely to serving as a go-between for Hana's mother and Taro Takeda's father" (4).

In the subsequent period, Hana and Taro begin exchanging their letters and photographs. It was supposed to be the most convenient way of bringing the matter to a successful end as it saved time and the cost of travel. According to Spickard (2009: 36), another relevant reason on the part of a male might pertain to the fact that he wanted "to avoid exposing himself to the Japanese military draft by going home". The exchanges between the couple are rather laconic accounts of their personal lives, without a hue of intimacy or a romantic tinge: "When at last an agreement to the marriage was almost reached, Taro wrote his first letter to Hana. It was brief and proper and gave no more clue to his character than the stiff formal portrait taken at his graduation from Middle School. Hana's uncle had given her the picture with apologies from his parents because it was the only photo they had of him, and it was not a flattering likeness" (Uchida 1997: 4). Over time, the relationship does not become tighter, as neither of them is willing to

confide their innermost thoughts to the mute person in the portrait. In this case, the photograph does not assume the role of a remainder of an affectionate relationship from the past, since the person depicted in it remains a mysterious figure of non-reference—without a voice, familiar gestures or other sensory sensations. Thus, instead of evoking memories to cherish every time one looks at it, the picture reveals an air of a transient sensation, which cannot form into a common sign of representation. It can be treated in terms of corporeal art, as its visual properties are the only informative clues one may acquire at the first examination. Despite several consequent letters which Hana receives in the meantime, the mutual emotional distance between the future spouses does not shrink: "By the time he sent her money for her steamship tickets, she had received ten more letters, but none revealed much more of the man than the first. In none did he disclose his loneliness or his need, but Hana understood this. In fact, she would have recoiled from a man who bared his intimate thoughts to her so soon. After all, they would have a lifetime together to get to know one another" (5).

The picture bride arrangement was focused mainly on achieving a final goal of marital union and less—if at all—on the means by which it was reached. The fact that the pair met through photographs, which rendered only physical features of a person, was one of the sufficient determinants for accepting each other and the first step towards a new life together. The future spouses, who were treated by their families like mere commodities, gazed from the photographs like lifeless mannequins on display in a store. The portrait of Hana becomes a token of her only apparent freedom because she is going to pass from the hands of her family to her future husband. At least she can live with a hope of forthcoming salvation and marrying a man who will meet her expectations. According to further proceedings, after a long-distance marriage proposal had been accepted, a bride married an absent groom in a Japanese ceremony in order to qualify for a passport:

> If the families agreed to the marriage, a mock wedding took place in the home village with a stand-in for the groom, and the woman's name was transferred to the man's family register. Then, making use of the loophole in the gentlemen's agreement, the new wife or 'picture bride' could secure a passport and journey to America to see her husband for the first time. Between 1909 and 1920, when the so-called Ladies' Agreement halted the immigration of picture brides, almost forty-five thousand Japanese women came to America. Most, like the men who preceded them, were young southern Japanese from respectable farming families (Kessler 1994: 39).

However, this was not always the case, as in further years, American state governments ceased to recognise proxy wedding ceremonies. Spickard (2009: 37) explains that the ramifications of such actions altered the course of the proceedings: "As a

result, some husbands married their wives at dockside, or in religious or civil ceremonies a few days later. Some wives, feeling defrauded, insisted on returning home. Some swapped husbands on the dock; others were swapped by the men who had paid their passage. But most women and men honoured the commitment they had made and quietly settled down to their new lives." Although the photographs often turned out to be outdated or fake, the majority of the picture brides humbly assumed their responsibilities and embarked on a new life. As Zia (2001: 30) states, "[i]n 1900, there were about one thousand Japanese women in the United States, but that number increased until 39 percent of Japanese immigrants were female. ... The U.S. government refused to recognize the legality of the Japanese picture bride marriages, and the public derided Japanese women as immoral, even though photo matchmaking was common and tolerated among European immigrants." As a matter of fact, the photograph became a useful tool of transnational migration, since it served as a medium of transition and doubled as a mute intermediary. The camera assumed the role of a typewriter which produced a pictorial letter. However, photography treated as a source of information did not turn out to be an inerrant vehicle of representation. The elusiveness of this mode of representation was articulated in its apparent flawlessness in terms of image rendering. The picture, reconfiguring temporality, usually presented a silhouette of a fine young gentleman in his prime. Blurring the boundary between the present and the past, the photograph—taken decades ago—often did not depict the actual image of the man and, in reality, the picture bride had to face a tarnished shadow of his past. In the voiceless photograph, the male image spoke for itself—ultimately triggering bitter disappointment, since the woman felt as if she was experiencing an illusion. Although she could verify the portrayed man's identity and recognise him, his aged appearance and a sense of deception placed the whole matter in a very unfavourable light. Thus, the incongruity between the past and present appearance revealed that the couple had been separated not only by a spatial but also temporal distance.

There is one more aspect that needs to be given attention with reference to the photograph as a means of representation. The picture gives its subjects a sense of eternal existence, which creates a timeless space of belonging. Taken out of the time framework, the photographed people seem to linger in an interval between two periods of time. Furthermore, Sontag (1973: 11) suggests that every event captured in time is instantly rendered immortal: "After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed. While real people are out there killing themselves or other real people, the photographer stays behind his or her camera, creating a tiny element of another world: the image-world that bids to outlast us all." Assuming the air of immortality, the prospective husbands presented themselves in the form of out-dated portraits, hoping that time had not worked to their disadvantage. This percept is also intriguing

from another vantage point. According to Sontag, "[a] photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" and "[t]he sense of the unattainable that can be evoked by photographs" (16) is here of particular significance. The past images of the prospective grooms turn into pseudo-present points of reference, since their existence did not find a truthful reflection in reality. Thus, they became tokens of absence due to the fact that they lost touch with the present and could not be anchored in actuality.

During her journey to the United States, Hana is overcome with excitement and apprehensive thoughts at the same time. Now her economic future is going to be totally dependent on her husband's income, since—as she hopes—only he will be the main provider of the family: "Hana wondered about the flat above the shop. Perhaps it would be luxuriously furnished with the finest of brocades and lacquers, and perhaps there would be a servant, although he had not mentioned it. She worried whether she would be able to manage on the meagre English she had learned at Women's High School. The overwhelming anxiety for the day to come and the violent rolling of the ship were more than Hana could bear" (Uchida 1997: 5). As it transpires, the path to her dream life is paved with more obstacles than she could think of. Before entering San Francisco, not only is she enclosed indoors and questioned for two days, but also undergoes rigorous medical tests to qualify for permission to enter the mainland:

> When she set foot on American soil at last, it was not in the city of San Francisco as she had expected, but on Angel Island, where all third-class passengers were taken. She spent two miserable days and nights waiting as the immigrants were questioned by officials, examined for trachoma and tuberculosis and tested for hookworm by a woman who collected their stools on tin pie plates. Hana was relieved she could produce her own, not having to borrow a little from someone else, as some of the women had to do. It was a bewildering, degrading beginning, and Hana was sick with anxiety, wondering if she would ever be released. (6)

Finally, she is able to depart and look for her future spouse. Exhausted and with growing fearful anticipation, she is repeatedly overcome with more and more apprehension: "The early morning mist had become a light chilling rain ... making the task of recognition even harder. Hana searched desperately for a face that resembled the photo she had studied so long and hard. Suppose he hadn't come. What would she do then?" (6). The scene that follows is a common one among many picture brides who encountered their picture grooms for the first time. Hana, staggered by the fact that Taro's appearance is far from his actual looks, seems overtly disillusioned. This is the next hindrance she must face and—most of all— accept if she wants to spend the rest of her life with the gentleman in front of her: "Hana caught her breath. 'You are Takeda San?' she asked. He removed his hat and Hana was further startled to see that he was already

turning bald. 'You are Takeda San?' she asked again. He looked older than thirty-one. 'I am afraid I no longer resemble the early photo my parents gave you. I am sorry'" (7). The moment appears to be awkward for both of them. It seems as if the photograph of the groom-to-be has not fulfilled its task and its apparent objectivity in rendering someone's image flawlessly is irrevocably distorted by time, since the photograph she has been given speaks for the past, not the present. The capability of constructing memory by photography exposes limits of photographic authenticity. The identity of Taro is lost in the past and that is why it is almost impossible to be deciphered from the photograph. Hana, taken back in time with the outdated image of the man, learns that this is a false representation of her future spouse. Hence, his photo-image triggers a sense of betrayal of the fundamental principles of honesty and trust. Squeezed between two images, she hardly manages to come to terms with this 'misrepresentation,' which is instantly noticeable for Taro: " 'Mr. and Mrs. Toda are expecting you in Oakland. You will be staying with them until ...' He couldn't bring himself to mention the marriage just yet and Hana was grateful he hadn't" (7). Although she is familiar with the fact that the Japanese men who want to attract young women to become their wives often resort to 'ambiguous' measures of persuasion, she did not expect on her arrival that the whole matter would be so far from the truth. Kiku, who becomes her lifelong friend through good and bad times, reveals much more disappointing circumstances:

> Hana's anxieties still haunted her, bringing back her own first days in America. She knew what it was to travel so far to marry a strange man. She knew too that, more often than not, the first meeting was a disappointment rather than a hope fulfilled, for no man was so foolish as to tell the whole truth about himself before marriage. He sent only the best photograph of himself, and a rosy view of the future based more on hope than on actual fact. Kiku knew more than one woman who had been led to believe her life in America would be one of comfort and prosperity. But often the landowner she had come expecting to marry turned out to be a poor dirt farmer who leased his land, and the car beside which he had posed for his photograph belonged not to him, but to his boss. The first months for many Japanese women were a cruel and bitter disappointment. (21-22)

Hope turned into mirage for a significant number of picture brides who experienced the first pang of regret after disembarking the ship. Kessler (1994: 43) points out that frequently they "were so distraught at seeing their new spouses—many of whom were twenty or more years older than the photographs they had sent to Japan—that they pleaded (unsuccessfully) to be let back on the ship and returned home." However, for the majority of the women, it was a one-way journey and the previously acquired consent to marriage simultaneously acted as a disclaimer. Finding a common ground between the couple was often marred by a lack of mutual understanding, since forging

a relationship of trust, after having been deceived from the very beginning, verged on the impossible. For that reason, as Kessler emphasises, "[t]he relationships that grew from these blind unions between young girls, who felt they had been tricked, and desperate middle-aged men, who lied about themselves and their prospects to attract a mate, were often uneasy, unhappy ones" (43). Although it used to be a common pattern of relationship that was cultivated in the aftermath, there occurred some more optimistic instances which did not support such a generalisation. Ghymn (1995: 76) notes that not all the married couples were doomed to a hopeless and grim future: "Love was not always a part of the bargain. In fact, it was often the exception. ... This is not to say that all marriages were miserable, but to point out that love in these marriages was not a given but a luxury."

It seems that Hana has never been granted such a luxury, as she has to face the subsequent obstacles that come pouring into her life in significant numbers. The image of an omnipresent freedom and an idealistic life visualised by the woman becomes tarnished again when she finds out that her dream of being maintained and provided for only by her husband is another misconception. When it clashes with the reality, she has to construct her vision of the future from scratch:

> Until that moment it had never occurred to Hana that she might go to work when she came to America. She intended, of course, to help Taro at his shop occasionally, but as the wife of the proprietor, she pictured herself sitting at the back of the shop knitting or crocheting in a comfortable chair. She had never once thought that she would go to the home of a white woman and do her housework for her. Taro was supposed to be a successful shopkeeper, and she had come to America to be a lady, not a servant. (Uchida 1997: 10)

The fact that Asian immigrants had to work hard and for minimum wages to maintain their families was a novelty to Hana. This was another disillusionment to be digested in a short space of time. The prosperity of the family often depended on frugality and a sparing use of resources. According to Spickard (2009: 39), "[t]he couples had to establish a common bond of duty, love, or resignation very quickly, for pressures were intense and resources were few. In America, as in Japan, the Issei had to work very hard to make even a meagre living. Women found themselves working for wages outside the home or working alongside their husbands on farms or in businesses." When Hana realises this, she knows that assistance with running Taro's store will become her duty as well.

Hana has been haunted by doubts about her future since the beginning of her stay in an alien land. She is overcome with reservations and filled with inner regret: "but suppose all was not as it had seemed. What could she do then? She had no money with which to return to Japan, and besides, she had promised to become Taro's wife" (Uchida 1997: 10). Quickly enough does she understand that any uniting bond will not be one

of love. Being torn apart between the past and the present becomes a torment she is hardly able to sustain:

> A mass of troubled thoughts tumbled about in her head as she prepared for bed. Perhaps she had made a terrible mistake in coming to America. In her anxiety to escape the drabness of Oka Village, perhaps she had leaped too far and severed too many roots. Now, like a tree transported beyond its native soil, she must grope for life and sustenance in an alien land, to be cherished by a stranger whose love she feared and whose life must, in the end, become her own. (26)

The story gets more complex when Hana falls in love with Taro's best friend, Kiyoshi Yamaka. Even though she is not married yet, she is not capable of claiming her own right to love and resists her feelings for Kiyoshi. Requited love is harder to abandon as they both realise that it feels as if they have known each other forever. The sole preliminary marriage agreement makes Hana keep her promise irrevocable. She would rather fall into an unhappy and loveless marriage than lose her face and dignity by breaking her word. She seems disposed to bleed for the rest of her life rather than hurt Taro and make him suffer instead. Moreover, any rash action would also influence their families in Japan, and that was too heavy a burden to be carried on woman's shoulders. The predicament appears to be unsolvable, as—according to her reasoning—no matter which direction she chooses, each solution will have dire consequences. Hence, Hana's pondering whether she could withdraw herself before the wedding ceremony does not bring any sound resolution and she still lingers at the same starting point:

> She must give herself more time before making judgements, but she couldn't help wondering if she could face the life that seemed to lie ahead. Yet what were the alternatives? She could beg Taro's forgiveness and break her engagement to him. She could wait a decent interval and perhaps marry someone else. Hana didn't dare let herself think who that might be. It was clearly impossible to renege on her promise, not only for Taro's sake, but for her uncle's. He would suffer a complete loss of face after having worked so hard to convince Taro's parents that she would be a good wife. (25)

Hana's final decision to be faithful to her future husband stems from her cultural background and is a direct fruit of a Japanese upbringing. Her personal sacrifice seems to be natural, since she could not think of any other conceivable twist of events on her part. Female servitude to men does not seem to play a more significant role than adherence to traditional Japanese values, which are the cornerstone of every social relationship in Japan. Stan Yogi (1997:132) distinguishes a few "overarching values among Japanese Americans: sensitivity and obligation. These values are seen in various

cultural phenomena such as *giri* (indebtedness), *on* (obligation), and *enryo* (reserve, constraint), which are based in empathy and interdependence." The aforementioned set of values passed on to offspring for centuries constitutes the rudiments of Japanese spiritual wisdom and is the major point of reference for the subsequent generations. An attitude of obligation which requires loyalty and obedience makes Hana stick firmly to her decision. Within the scope of indebtedness, she is also bound by a number of incurred obligations, which—for a person unfamiliar with Japanese culture—might seem quite incomprehensible. As Kessler (1994: ix) remarks, "[i]n Japan you are born owing ancestral debts that can never be repaid, and as you make your way in the world you accumulate new obligations, kindness and favours owed to family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, even strangers. This web of obligation connects people in ways that both include and transcend kinship and friendship." The entire way of reasoning is deeply rooted in an ancestral tradition since historically it derived from "a culture that stressed group identity over individualism, that emphasized, above all else, a sense of duty and responsibility to others. … The society was threaded together by *osewa* (aid, help or indebtedness), a meshwork that connected people to one another across families and across generations. That is how Japan functioned" (54). From this vantage point, Hana's mindset is completely compatible with the expectations of her Japanese community in her native land, and she does not seem willing to challenge the contemporary social construct, regardless of her personal inclinations towards individuality.

Before the wedding ceremony, hope blends with anxiety as the couple prepares to embark on their lifelong journey. Standing in front of the altar before taking vows, each of them realises how difficult it will be to make a successful living, not only in emotional but also economic terms:

> Now here was Hana, who also had sailed far from home, trusting and full of hope, to become his wife. She was like a child coming to be led by a blind man. He felt anxious and fearful for them both, but was determined not to disappoint Hana. He would work hard and try to give her a good life. Perhaps one day they would have a family, and he would have enough money to rent a house on a proper street. He would see to it that Hana never regretted coming to America. He owed her at least that much. (Uchida 1997: 28)

Hana's thrust into Taro's arms in a childlike manner is not indicative of an infantile attitude but represents a token of total confidence that a wife should evince towards her husband. Ghymn (1995: 87) argues that "[b]eing childlike doesn't imply stupidity; rather it represents the feminine way of behaving for Japanese women. This master/servant relationship for husband and wife has always been the custom in Japan. The traditional wife usually obeys the husband in all matters." Again, the Japanese way of thinking shapes their mutual attitudes towards the future, which finds its reflection in

female obedience and male primacy. Transferring the Japanese cultural matrix onto the American soil is supposed to provide them a stable and, hopefully, prosperous living. According to Ghymn, only such an arrangement was regarded to be a preliminary step to fulfilment for the issei: "A woman's loyalty to her husband has been considered one of her highest virtues. ... Raised on Confucian standards of patience and endurance, the first-generation women were not ill-equipped to face the harsh realities of early twentieth-century America. Persevering, determined to succeed, trained in discipline, the early wives started new communities" (76-77). After all, these were the virtues which for many Japanese women made it possible to withstand and resist the biting winds of an uncertain future.

One of the major obstacles to overcome for the newcomers was racial and ethnic discrimination. Hana soon finds out from Kiku that no matter how hard they try, the Japanese will always be placed at the lowest rung of the social ladder, as they are offered only menial jobs and do not have any prospects for improving their position in American society. Such a rejection engenders numerous reverberations which adversely affect their everyday lives:

> She turned Hana's face toward her and said gravely, 'You are going to have to realize something important, Hana. We are foreigners in this country, and there are many white people who resent our presence here. They welcome us only as cooks or houseboys or maids. Why, even if Taro's store was twice as big and it was on the best corner in downtown Oakland, still his only customers would be the Japanese and the men on Seventh Street. Don't forget, we are aliens here. We don't really belong. (Uchida 1997: 25)

Their plight made them one of the most vulnerable members of American society. Despite their constant struggles to maintain their interests and identity, the Japanese or other Asians, and later, Asian Americans, were prevented from speaking in their own voice. In consequence, as David Leiwei Li (1998: 24) underlines, all Asian Americans at the time were resigned to accepting their desperate predicament: "Since historically Asian Americans were denied access to the political and cultural production of the nation, and heavily restricted in finding alternative means of propagating ethnic consciousness, they were forced in to a sorry state of dependency on the dominant definition of themselves." Due to their oriental origin and exotic looks, Asian Americans were deprived of equal rights for citizenship—freely granted to Europeans—which rendered them social outcasts regardless of their assets. American history was caught in a vicious circle, which proved that, irrespective of an American past tarnished with slavery, skin colour still mattered. As Kessler (1994: 19-20) argues, a set of external features was the only factor that made Asians distinguishable from a white society. All other outstanding markers, such as language or customs, were malleable to change.

Thus, their distinctive Asian appearance became an indelible mark of their identity, which—in the society that despised dissimilarity—turned into a lifelong burden and stigma that condemned them to a deep-rooted sense of inferiority:

> Welcomed by the Statue of Liberty, the Europeans could shed the ways of the Old World. They could change their speech, their customs, their citizenship, even their names. In time, they could be, if they wanted to be—as so many first-generation immigrants did—indistinguishable from others who had been in the country for generations. But the Statue of Liberty showed her back to the Orient, and this was more than a symbolic gesture of exclusion. Although arrivals from Asia were sometimes welcomed as cheap labor, regardless of how long they lived in America and how Westernized they became, their faces would forever mark them as foreigners.

Speaking in photographic terms, their origin thrust Asians out of focus, which excluded them entirely from the American national scrapbook and rendered them invisible for the rest of American society. Because of their disparity, they were out of frame, which rendered them invisible for the rest of American society. Always in the margin and at the bottom of society, the immigrants were prevented from prospective development. All these determinants contributed to a growing sense of frustration, which has bred a desperate need for a change lasting to the present day, however in altered and less conspicuous circumstances. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993: 91) voices concern that "Asian Americans are forever marked by some untransformable alien element. Thus an identity that has been formed like a chemical compound, in that complex, irreversible process called living, is forcibly broken apart, treated as if it were a physical mixture with readily sorted-out ingredients." Torn between an oriental and occidental world, Asian-American identities have transformed into hybrids in a constant struggle, unable to determine whether the Asian or American part of themselves is prevalent.

The Japanese immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century were inclined to enter the flow of the American cultural mainstream as soon as possible. A number of the issei Japanese tried to blend in and emulate Americans in every possible way, which reflected their immediate urgency for assimilation. They comprehended that this was the only reasonable way to make them succeed in a new world. What is more, conforming to American rules often did not seem to bring much difficulty for the newcomers. Although they knew that they would never be treated on a par with European immigrants, the Japanese strove to achieve at least the appearance of conformity. According to Kim (1982: 125), changing the way of life was not an overrated price for the reward of being accepted as equals, which—after all—did not happen at all:

> One of the attitudes that set early Japanese immigrants apart from the Chinese was their

> active interest in adopting the clothing, mannerisms, and customs of Anglo-Americans. The early Chinese, required under penalty of death to maintain their queues as signs of their obeisance to Manchu rule and concerned with eventual return to their villages in China, did not generally adopt Western-style clothing. The Japanese, on the other hand, had their hair cut in modern European styles and attempted to dress like Americans as much as possible. Japanese picture brides told of being whisked from the ships by their new husbands directly to the dressmaker's, where they would be outfitted in Western clothing, including hats, corsets, high-necked ruffled blouses, long skirts with bustles, high-laced shoes, and, for the first time in their lives, brassieres and hip pads. Some Japanese immigrants converted to Christianity and tried to learn English.

The aforementioned practices are also vividly depicted in Uchida's novel. Hana, after disembarking the ship, starts to feel the first pangs of acute reality. While travelling with Taro by street car, she becomes "more and more aware of her conspicuous Japanese clothing" (Uchida 1997: 8), which makes her vulnerable to the transfixing stares of the people around: "'My clothes are not right,' she murmured, tucking her feet with their white *tabi* and *zori* as far beneath the bench as she could. She held her *furoshiki* bundle close to her chest, but there was no hiding it or her clothes, and the curious stares of the people who sat opposite her were cold and unfriendly. 'I feel very much out of place,' she whispered" (8). Taro's reaction was swift and comforting, he "nodded and understood. 'Mrs. Toda will help you get some American clothing,' he assured her." As far as Christian faith is concerned, Taro has already converted to Christianity and expects Hana to take the same measure. What is more, his idea of the wedding ceremony is also accomplished and ready to be realised, without a need to consult the future wife: "Taro had said he wanted to have a fine, American-style Christian wedding. He wanted none of the stiff formality of a Japanese wedding with a doll-like bride, bewigged and so heavily encrusted with powder that the groom scarcely recognized her. Nor did he want any of the ritual of the Shinto ceremony" (22). His instructions do not leave any free space for creativity even in terms of the bride's clothing: " 'I want Hana to wear a long white dress with a veil and carry a proper bouquet,' he instructed. 'I expect she will need white shoes too, and all the things that go beneath the dress' " (22). After a short period of time, Hana is baptized as a Christian, also at Taro's request. It is worth mentioning that her conversion is not the result of her personal beliefs. In fact, it is made in compliance with her husband's will, for the sake of marital obedience on the female part: "Hana agreed mainly because she felt it her duty to do so" (64). Indeed, a strong sense of isolation felt by the issei generated an overwhelming social pressure within the community, which could be eased by adopting the same cultural customs or religious practices as those of the white community. As Kessler (1994: 18) points out, according to some issei—adopting such measures shrank the distance between the two nations:

"While the vast majority of *issei* laborers kept the faith of their homeland, a number of the most successful Japanese immigrants were leaving Buddhism behind. Their acceptance of a Western faith seemed to make them more 'palatable,' or at least somewhat more comprehensible, to white society. It took the edge of their foreignness and gave them something in common with the dominant society in which they had to function." As a matter of fact, the nisei—constituting the second generation of the Japanese immigrants—were characterised by a much stronger inclination towards American culture, its language and customs. The process of identification with the United States occurred naturally, since it was their birthplace and a surrounding cultural background. When her daughter reaches the age of a prospective bride, Hana realises that she no longer belongs to Japanese culture. The only child of the Takedas, Mary Yukari, whose double name of American and Japanese origin also indicates a double identity, testifies to the fact that her mental attitude is completely disparate from her parents' expectations and she no longer resembles an image of a Japanese subservient female:

> She looked at her daughter and wondered what would happen if they went back to Japan now. Would it be too late to make a Japanese woman of Mary? She pictured her kneeling gracefully in a silk kimono, preparing ceremonial tea or arranging flowers. She saw her dressed in the finery of a Japanese bride, her face made up with thick white paste. But even in her imagining, Mary slithered quickly out of the stiff strictures of Japanese clothing, and Hana knew that her daughter was already too free and self-willed to become a submissive Japanese wife. She already possessed the same independent spirit that had caused Hana herself to leave her home so many years ago. (Uchida 1997: 128)

Undoubtedly, the Japanese set of values based on mental stamina and sacrifice has helped Hana survive the most arduous hardships of her life. Even her stay at two internment camps during World War II, first at the Tanforan Assembly Center in California and then at the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah, and the death of Taro, accidentally shot by a guard on the camp premises, do not scar her endurance and a strong will to prevail. Uchida, through the words of Reverend Nishima, reaffirms that the two former picture brides, Hana and Kiku, despite their advanced age, still possess the same energy and forcefulness that enabled them to travel to an unknown country a few decades earlier: "They're strong, ... both of them. They each crossed an ocean alone to come to this country, and they are going to survive the future with the same strength and spirit" (216). After 1924, the arrival of picture brides into the United States was eventually halted. Even then the harshest restrictions turned out to be targeted at the immigrants of Asian origin, who were still refused to be granted the right for citizenship. Kessler (1994: 78-79) remarks that the annual quotas for immigrants from European countries

were in stark contrast to the ones provided for the Japanese, which resulted in a significant decline of immigration from the Asian continent:

> In 1924 Congress passed an immigration quota bill, the National Origins Act, the purpose of which was to restrict immigrants from 'undesirable' areas while encouraging 'good' immigrants. The bill set annual quotas from various countries. From Ireland (in 'good' northwestern Europe), 17, 853 immigrants would be allowed; but from Poland (in less desirable eastern Europe), the limit was 6,524. The annual allowable quota from Japan: 0. Wives of Japanese citizens already in America were no longer permitted to enter (as they had been through a 'loophole' in the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement). Even U.S. citizens could not bring into the country their Asian spouses, who were classified as 'aliens ineligible for citizenship.'

The picture bride arrangement has been amply explored in Asian American literature. It constitutes a significant and recurrent theme of Asian American prose and poetry. Uchida's novel which has been chosen to portray the character and specificity of this phenomenon, was followed by a number of other works. Over the subsequent decades, it has received much publicity and engendered numerous publications—to name just a few: *Passage of a Picture Bride* (1990) by Won Kil Yoon, *Picture Brides: Japanese Women in Canada* (1995) by Tomoko Makabe, *Korean Picture Brides* (2002) by Sonia Shinn Sunoo, *Picture Bride* (2014) by C. Fong Hsiung, *Picture Bride* (2016) by Mike Malaghan and *Picture Bride Stories* (2016) by Barbara F. Kawakami—which present the life stories of the Asian picture brides of various descent who at the turn of the twentieth century arrive in the United States or Canada to challenge their poignant destiny. In their works, the authors strike a similar chord of disillusionment with the depictions of numerous hardships awaiting the newly arrived females. More importantly, they unveil the innermost feelings of the Asian women who, after confronting the harsh reality of their new lives, are able to endure and prevail despite adverse circumstances.

The aforementioned subject matter is also present in Asian-American novels which do not deal with the picture bride system predominantly but interweave it into Japanese-American discourse about the history of the Japanese in America. Thus, one cannot get rid of the impression that this practice constitutes an indispensable and inseparable part of the Japanese cultural heritage. Among the novels reflecting the experiences of the contemporary Japanese picture brides, *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka draws immediate attention with its specific depiction of the inherent feelings and attitudes of the Japanese females. Assuming a plural voice (plural in its form and unity—instead of an individual 'I'), the women speak unanimously about the difficulties they have been suffering, which—with an array of emotive references—makes their emotional vocalisation

even more impactful and reverberating. Their journey from Japan starts with the moments of apprehension and uncertainty interspersed with occasional rays of hope:

> What would become of us, we wondered, in such an alien land? ... Would we be laughed at? Spat on? Or, worse yet, would we not be taken seriously at all? But even the most reluctant of us had to admit that it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village. Because in America the women did not have to work in the fields and there was plenty of rice and firewood for all. And wherever you went the men held open the doors and tipped their hats and called out, "Ladies first" and "After you." (Otsuka 2011:7)

The vision of abundance in every respect, as opposed to the poverty-stricken regions of Japan, and noticeably different male attitudes towards women provoke widespread interest among the young Japanese females. However, already on their arrival, the picture brides are stricken with an increasing number of disappointing events, which eventually makes them sink into despair, since all they encounter seems to surpass their intellective and emotional capacity. The outdated photographs and letters, the latter of which actually do not reflect the personalities of their husbands, due to the fact that they have been written by skilful matchmakers, place the women in front of complete strangers and trigger the first wave of disillusionment in the new land:

> On the boat we could not have known that when we first saw our husbands we would have no idea who they were. That the crowd of men in knit caps and shabby black coats waiting for us down below on the dock would bear no resemblance to the handsome young men in the photographs. That the photographs we had been sent were twenty years old. That the letters we had been written had been written to us by people other than our husbands, professional people with beautiful handwriting whose job it was to tell lies and win hearts. (18)

Otsuka's novel discloses more details about the factual state of matters when the Japanese wives are faced with the necessity to work, as the level of potential affluence of their husbands often transpires to be so low that they are on the verge of destitution. What is more, their place of habitation can hardly be called a proper home, which makes the couple struggle to earn a living for each day of their existence: "Because if our husbands had told us the truth in their letters—they were not silk traders, they were fruit pickers, they did not live in large, many-roomed houses, they lived in tents and in barns and out of doors, in the fields, beneath the sun and the stars—we never would have come to America to do the work that no self-respecting American would do" (28-29). Hence, they end up doing the menial housework in American houses, which seems to be

the only path to career advancement for Asians: “We never talked back or complained. We never asked for a raise. For most of us were simple girls from the country who did not speak any English and in America we knew we had no choice but to scrub sinks and wash floors” (44). Hard labour in the fields constitutes another way of providing financial support for the household by the women: “Some of us worked quickly because our husbands had warned us that if we did not they would send us home on the very next boat. *I asked for a wife who was able and strong*” (28). Nevertheless, all the hardships that the Japanese wives have to endure do not trigger as much resentment as the attitudes of their spouses towards them. Their apparent ‘translucence’ is, in fact, a reflection of their passivity and social inertness, which incurs their husbands’ ignorance and emotional negligence: “Sometimes he looked right through us without seeing us at all, and that was always the worst. *Does anyone even know I am here?*” (30). All in all, the purport of the potent plural vocalisation in the novel becomes an anthem of female strength and coalescence, which resolves into a persuasive image of human endurance and evidence that even Japanese women can speak their own voice.

Among poetic works, *Picture Bride* (1983) by Cathy Song,[2] a poem from a collection under the same title, stands out with its sensual sensitivity and attempts to capture this phenomenon into empirical parentheses. Song’s grandmother, a Korean picture bride herself married to a Chinese labourer, provided first-hand experience and background information concerning the practice. The author, projecting herself into her grandmother’s emotions, employs her curiosity to ask questions about her ancestor’s past ‘predicament.’ Song’s incomprehensibility borders on incredulity, as getting married at the age of twenty-three to a complete stranger, thirteen years her senior, seems to be beyond her comprehension. As Seiwoong Oh (2007: 243) notes, the corporeal subject matter constitutes the focal point of the author’s analysis: “A poet who highly stresses visual body imagery in her works, Cathy Song deals with the mapping of identity by exploring the relationship of body to body and presents such imagery explicitly and symbolically.” The most nagging question that lingers in the end refers to the most intimate plane of human existence where the author wonders whether her grandmother wilfully and immediately engaged not only in an emotional, but also physical relationship with her newly-met husband. A matchmaking practice became a custom of the time where ‘mail order’ brides functioned within the framework of the objectified body and this is accentuated at the end of the poem. In the view of Joseph Jonghyun Jeon (2012: 116), the grandmother’s image evokes alienation which does not translate into a tangible token of representation:

> The final image of the grandmother’s dress billowing in the smoke-filled winds from the

2 Song, Cathy. 1983. *Picture Bride.* New Heaven and London: Yale University Press.

> cane fields marks an arrested moment that cannot be completed and doubles the picture of her as viewed by the grandfather. In both cases, the relationship to the image is not just estranged, it is irreparably so, and the grandmother comes to function not unlike the face of the other ... but a more abstract representation of alterity in general—not a particular other but Otherness writ large. In short, "Picture Bride" bespeaks the limits of the picture.

Another poetic work which draws immediate attention with its poignant reference to the picture bride system is enclosed within eleven lines of a personal account. The poem *Daughter* (1989) in the collection *Air Pocket* by Kimiko Hahn,[3] an American author of Japanese and German descent, refers directly to a generational gap and a problem of translational nature between the present and the past. Through the semantic illustration of the picture bride arrangement and the use of ekphrasis in the portrayal of still life, the author reflects her incapacity to aptly render the crux of this phenomenon. She does not feel competent to translate the events which she has not witnessed herself. From the vantage point of a granddaughter, the author is incapable of a flawless and truthful representation. According to Traise Yamamoto (1999: 241), "Hahn directly associates translation with historicity, exploring the problematics and possibilities of translation understood as a mode of cultural transmission. The poem implicitly relies on an understanding of a specific history to ground its central tension between representation and translation." The generational gap between the grandchild and her grandmother obliges them to speak different languages as they have distinct points of reference in their lives. This lack of convergence in time creates a possibility of misrepresentation, which—as Yamamoto points out—contributes to a failure in a cultural translation of the whole concept. Such an attempt is doomed from the start, as—similarly to a still life—it does not reflect the complexity of the matter and does not retain its multidimensionality:

> Hahn thus calls into question the nature of representation: like the marriage photographs that gave no hint of the subject behind the image, a carefully arranged still life is flat—a unidimensional rendering of its subject. In both cases, the fixity of the picture fails to articulate complexity; its convention of artifice only alludes to representational authenticity by assuming a fixed object. In a similar way, translating the grandmother's language to satisfy the expectation of a seamless transmission of culture presupposes culture as inert. The translating subject herself then becomes, like a still life, a flat representation that elides subjectivity. (242)

3 Hahn, Kimiko. 1989. *Air Pocket.* Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press.

What is more, still life, as its name indicates, is lifeless and devoid of emotional content unless it evokes definable emotions in the observer. Thus, the plane of reference is transferred onto the viewer who reacts to the visual stimuli in an individual way. Similarly, an alien world full of antagonistic attitudes towards the Japanese projected onto the picture bride a set of adverse emotions which made her feel socially isolated and abandoned. As Ghymn (1995: 75) elaborates, this constituted a common course of events, since the female was often left to herself and all she experienced was the initial thrill of hope which subsequently turned into disillusionment: "The discrimination and loneliness that awaited her were not foreseen. The picture bride knew almost nothing of the emotional isolation, the racial prejudice, and the harsh realities to come. The brides came with a great deal of hope only to be met by disappointment. ... There was no turning back after they came here, however; they had no choice but to survive and endure."

A still life can also be viewed from another angle as far as female (non-)responsiveness is concerned. The motionless composition it depicts could be translated as female powerlessness, her passivity and inability to take action, which was characteristic of the picture brides. The Japanese woman, like an inanimate object, accepted a social locus to which she was directed by the male. Her place of belonging could only be compatible with that of her husband or another male member of the family. And again, according to Ghymn's reasoning, the women's weak social position triggered severe reverberations in their lives: "Social reality has meant for centuries male power and female powerlessness. In America these women met discrimination and hardship. ... They also faced prejudice because all quite often the public thought that all Asian women were prostitutes. ... Soon, the women usually had big families and nowhere to turn if they did not get along with their husbands. Alienation, loneliness, rejection—the picture brides were effectively imprisoned" (75-76). Their imprisonment was similar to still life objects enclosed within one framework of perception, notably—the one of the painter or the photographer. The picture brides, fitted into the frames of personal obedience, acquiesced to this imposed passivity. In this case, the role of the imperious demiurge belonged to the Japanese male who arranged the further life of his wife according to his own perception.

Juxtaposed with the conceptualisation of the "philosopher of the photograph" (Brunet 2013: 8), Roland Barthes, who delineated a "cultural matrix for which photography remained something of a novelty, and an intruder of sorts in the older and more serene realm of literature" (8), a conclusion that can be derived from the picture bride phenomenon leads to the conjectural overlapping of literature and photography, which reveals their significant potentials deeply enmeshed in written and printed culture. Not seldom is the former the face of the latter, since each one speaks for the other in an idiosyncratic language characteristic of its particular nature. Thus, reversing the angle of perception enables these two means of expression to influence each other in order to obtain a

'bilingual' plane of communication permeated with a double (but not interchangeable) layer of significance, which facilitates adjusting the lens of interpretation. To recapitulate, photographic criticism lends to literary criticism a (non-)obvious tinge of signification as the photograph becomes a stylus with which the author may give a favourable, and—most importantly—meaningful, touch to his or her subject matter.

References

Brunet, F. 2013 [2009]. *Photography and Literature.* London: Reaktion Books.

Burrows, S. 2010. *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language Photography, 1839-1945.* Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press.

Cunningham, D., Fisher, A. & Mays, S. 2008. Introduction. In: D. Cunningham, A. Fisher and S. Mays (eds.), *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century,* 1-10. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Ghymn, E. M. 1995. *Images of Asian American Women by Asian American Women Writers.* New York: Peter Lang.

Jeon, J. J. 2012. *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Kessler, L. 1994. *Stubborn Twig: Three Generations in the Life of a Japanese American Family.* New York: Plume.

Kim, E. H. 1982. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Li, D. L. 1998. *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent.* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Meehan, S. R. 2008. *Mediating American Autobiography: Photography in Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, and Whitman.* Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press.

Misztal, B. 2003. *Theories of Social Remembering.* Maidenhead, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Mitchell, W.J.T. 1994. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Oh, S. 2007. *Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature*. New York: Facts On File.

Otsuka, J. 2011. *The Buddha in the Attic*. New York: Anchor Books.

Rugg, L. H. 1997. *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Sontag, S. 1973. *On Photography.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Spickard, P. 2009. *Japanese Americans: The Formation and Transformations of an Ethnic Group.* New Jersey: Rudgers University Press.

Taminiaux, P. 2009. *The Paradox of Photography.* Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Uchida, Y. 1997 [1987] *Picture Bride*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.

Wong, S. C. 1993. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Yamamoto, T. 1999. *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Yogi, S. 1997. Japanese American Literature. In: K. Cheung (ed.), *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, 125-155. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zia, H. 2001. *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

***

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska, PhD, is an ESP teacher at the Department of Foreign Languages at the Medical University of Bialystok, Poland. Her major fields of academic interest comprise ecocriticism, postcolonial and cultural studies with a focus on ethnicity and identity formation in the context of immigrant narratives.