

Political becomes Personal: Disable Kitamura in Philip Kan Gotanda's *Day standing on its Head*

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Abstract

The present paper aims at exploring Philip Kan Gotanda's hero Kitamura's inclination to evoke the Asian American movement of 1960s by composing a paper on it which problematizes his identity. He is straddling between ethnic and mainstream culture. His self has been splintered into two halves –Id and Ego. Kitamura's ego is being constructed by the core American culture where he has a social prestige being a law professor and he seeks to retain it adhering to the symbolic order. On the other hand the lack which he has to come across is the lack or absence of the student movement in which he was a participant and it leads him to return to his unconscious state or Id where he wants to be the part of it and also tries to repress it with a view to negotiating with mainstream American culture. However, the allegation by Sam belonging to his own Asian American Community regarding Kitamura's wearing of the mask of the middleclass American makes him enervated, distanced from his life and yields to him paranoid stature. This is how political becomes personal that can be felt in the act of his repression and expression that invariably debilitates his personality, though the play ends with regaining of his ability tinged with a bit of optimism.

Key Words: Asian American movement, model minority, psychoanalysis, alienation, [dis]ability

'From Ethnic to Mainstream Theatre' Ann Marie Dunbar contends that Philip Kan Gotanda's handling with Asian American or model minority issue "witness(es) his movement away from the limitations of a hyphenated identity from works which can be read primarily as Asian American to those with more universal themes not restricted by an ethnic tag" (Dunbar 15). Gotanda's attitude is infact a less refutation of ethnicity rather than more engaging to the main stream American society. As an Asian American playwright Gotanda exhibits in *Day Standing on its Head* the in betweenness of the Asian American identity that becomes equally engaging to the non-Asians in the U.S as the play skilfully shows by virtue of being both particular and general. Infact, while all ethnic group and communities organised their civil right movements at that time Asian American movement basically cropped up. Among the last of the ethnic consciousness movement, the Asian American movement has been essentially a middleclass reform movement demanding racial equality, social justice and political empowerment in a culturally pluralistic America. It has functioned as an inter-Asian coalition that embraces the entire spectrum of Asian Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, Japanese Americans and other kinds of Asian Americans, it also affirms their unity with other Americans. The movement has primarily the result of convergence of the two historical developments: the emergence of a generation of college age Asian Americans and public protests surrounding the Vietnam War. Except for a few activists from working class, these Asian American college students made the majority of movement's main driving force. This political aspect has a huge importance to problematise the identity of Kitamura, the protagonist of *Day Standing On Its Head*.

Indeed, "model minority leads us to the history of 1924 Immigration Act, all of which excluded Asian laborers from the United States, even though many Asian Americans have had forebears in this country for several generations, they are still perceived as foreigners, physically and culturally, received whose issues and concerns are therefore irrelevant to the rest of society. Contradictorily, they are also perceived as the country's 'model minority', that is, the one group to have successfully integrated into American society despite seemingly insurmountable racial barrier" (Wei 4). The obscurity of the Asian American Movement is also related to the dichotomous nature of race relations in the United States. Traditionally the question of race has been addressed and understood mainly as a black and white issue, even though the United States has four major racial minorities with similar histories of oppression. Understandably, African Americans have received the most attention because of the wide spread public awareness of their history of exploitation as slaves, their large proportion in the American population, and their long and visible struggle to achieve equality. Because their large numbers seem to threaten the dominant society, a concern that can be traced back to pre-civil war days when the Southern population lived in constant fear of a slave insurrection, African American issues have been taken more seriously than those of other minorities. Asian Americans, in contrast, have been ignored because of their small numbers and little-known history of labour exploitation and resistance to oppression. *Day Standing on its Head* nicely projects the Asian American Movement and how its relevance leaves a profound impact on a law professor which actually disrupts the racial stereotyping and yields importance to the model minority concept. Gotanda's hero Kitamura, third generation Japanese American law Professor though seeks to be the part of his ethnic culture or model minority but still wants to be more like American having the semblance of Emerson's ejaculation "Society is a masked ball where everyone hides his real character and reveals it in hiding" (Emerson 119). Kitamura's engagement more with the American culture and suppress his ethnic tag places his character into trap which proliferates numerous questions. In fact, it leaves a tremendous impact on his psychosomatic sphere. So, Kitamura says at the beginning of the play "I awoke from a deep sleep...I had the strangest feeling. That my arm was disappearing." (DSH 7). Kitamura's condition leads us to the condition of Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis* by Kafka where Gregor on a fine morning becomes a 'monstrous verminous bug', it completely denotes that he has his human consciousness but his body has been metamorphosed or altered. This psychosomatic problem can be judged in terms of Cartesian philosophy of 'Res cogitans' (I think therefore I am) and 'Res Extensa' (extended thing). And Gregor becomes the Cartesian subject as 'res cogitans' i.e. thinking. Likewise Kitamura who also feels the disappearance of his hand on a fine morning after awakening from his bed which can be treated as Cartesian 'res cogitans' or thinking as well. So, it makes clear that a human subject's essence is its soul. As the rational cogitans is not liable to die with the body. In fact, the thinking thing or 'res cogitans' does not extend and extended thing or 'res extensa' does not think according to Descartes. By excluding the body (here in the case of Kitamura exclusion of arm) from the construction of subjectivity, Descartes takes his subjectivity as simply 'I' or 'soul' (res cogitans i.e. I think therefore I am) which utterly indicates Cartesian mind/body conflict. So Kitamura's disappearance of hand can be placed in Cartesian terrain of res extensa as excepting his arm he can think, can retain his existence because he has cogito or consciousness. But on the other hand in the psychological ground he finds his cogito is in trouble as he is unable to write as his disappearance of hand is denoting his writer's block. His inertia is basically stemming from the socio-political background which acts as if a kind of panopticon gaze towards him, so he becomes introvert and it leaves a debilitating impact

on his psychosomatic ground. Being a member of model minority he has to negotiate with Id(the unconscious where he wants to be the part of Asian American movement) and Ego(present American society that demands American attitude),So he is caught in between epitomizing his ambivalent attitude.

Early in the play Harry is heard lecturing on campus unrest throughout the country, with particular references to the Asian American Student Movement in the late sixties and early seventies. He has recently submitted an article to a prestigious law journal on the seminal strikes of the movement he was involved in. "In the early 70s I was part of one of the seminal strikes of the Asian American movement. I had not thought about it in a long time, but for some reasons I decided to write about it"(51).Within Asian American group there were two competing factions vying for power –the Pro-Maoist Yellow Guard, of which Harry was a founding member, and the Asian American For Action (AAFA),which he considered to be an instrument of the administration, while Harry feels a little embarrassed about his present position as a law professor, he is on the other hand challenged by the student's question on the relevance of his 'old war stories' in the nineties. "Isn't your idea of the third world student movement a bit of a dinosaur given the trend toward anti-Asian violence in African American and Latino communities?"(8).

Gotanda uses the early Asian American movement as a context for discussing activism in general. The play depicts inter ethnic coalitions within the Asian American Community. Infact a kind of class war articulated in a racial way like the Vincent Chin Case (in which white Detroit auto workers murdered a Chinese American industrial draftsman in 1982 taking him to be as Japanese as the markers of Toyotas) and the Latasha Harlins Case (in which a Korean American girl for alleged shoplifting exacerbating already existing tension between African American residents and Korean American merchants in South Central Los Angeles. The play depicts the various problems inherent in social movements like factionalism and inter racial coalition ,of them during 1992 LA uprising which is considered as the first multi ethnic riot in America. While Sam defines model minority to assault Kitamura that leaves a great psychological impact on him "They (authority) like people like you. You are just like your parents my parents. We always do what we're told...They love saying to our black and brown brothers and sisters,"Hey, the orientals made it on their own, why can't you people? and secretly our chests swell up...so they accept us for now but at what price? To live like a cowardly mouse ...one day we'll get too good at what we do. We'll make a little too much money, figure out the game a little too well and then we'll see middleclass American's real face. They all hate us, they'll hunt us down, kill us in the streets...."(DSH 22-23).Sam being the representative of the model minority or ethnic tag always assaults Kitamura who is considered in the eyes of his ethnic people a native elite who wears a mask negotiating with mainstream American culture. Kitamura wears as Sam says "frozen mask of middleclass propriety while inside you want to rage, scream at the injustices all around."(DSH 22). Infact, repeated verbal attack on the part of Sam makes him more insular and prick of conscience stirs his innerself but he has to maintain it because outside of his self he is a law professor. Nina's words from one of his dream sequence also testifies his stature "locked up deep down inside"(19).In psychological perspective Kitamura is caught in between Id and Ego. Within his unconscious self he has a dream of his association with Asian American Movement but on the other hand he retains his ego as he is a law professor. However, in accordance with Zizek Master is actually naked in the reality still he wears mask to suppress the real and thus he deceives so. Kitamura is doing the same

in Zizekian ground he is a 'big other' and his continuous suppression and Sam's arguments causing his intra psychological problem.

Kitamura is getting more confused while he attends his father's funeral. At his father's funeral, he witnesses both his mother's relatives subdued, unemotional behaviour (the picture of model minority) and his father's relatives raw, unrestrained display of grief and despair. Harry is torn between two responses "I found myself feeling a strange mixture of emotions. I was at once shocked, painfully uncomfortable at [his father's brother's] overt calling attention to ourselves, the event. At the very same moment, wanting to join him, to wail...unabashedly"(16). This cross cultural assimilation problematizes his identity as well. Infact, Harry's self imposed masking of feelings, common to middleclass Japanese Americans, acquires a new dimension here- herein lies the playwright's deft handling of the identity crisis which the protagonist is caught in.

In Lacanian philosophy a person's entrance into symbolic stage (representing culture or society) and confronting the 'lack' of any incident with which he had a immense accord probably drives him psychologically to be one with the imaginary stage. But his returning according to Lacan is merely a fetishism to relish memory but no way to achieve reality. Kitamura is doing the same which invariably makes him insular, ascerbic in marital life, alienated from life. His wife Lillian alleges him to be cold, 'having no feeling'(12). This coldness leads Lillian to have engaged in extramarital affair and in his reveries he feels himself responsible for it. He cannot take his life in his own arms, let alone any responsibility-for yet another life, even it were his own child. Sometimes it might appear that Kitamura is emasculated due to his effeminate activities which can be a thought provoking ground to judge Kitamura under the feminist eye. However, his sexual repression finds an outlet through his sexual fantasies. An "enigmatic, erotically tantalizing woman with the most beautiful nape"(11) keeps appearing in his dreams, symbolizing for Harry Kitamura-as it were- fuller living. Harry hesitates to touch the nape, though his arm reaches out for it"(14). The woman turned Nina brings the same charges of coldness and indifference against him as Lillian once did. In a poem, Harry wrote on Nina, he desires to die in her 'mysterious fire'(29). But he cannot ever know the woman as he is never ready to pay the "terrible, wonderous, excruciating price" (37) for it. Harry is not capable to plunge to put it in Nina's words, of a "leap into the void with no designer clothes, no point of noise, no make up, no credit cards, no excuse, no lies, no history, no mythology, no trickery or deceit..."(38). Kitamura's continuous repression actually creates anxiety and anxiety makes him enervated, alienated. According to Freud repression produces anxiety but if Kitamura's conscience has been placed in Deleuzian terrain we find that ego has an inbuilt fear of libidinal impulses and it is this fear which necessitates repression in the psyche. So, ego itself is the repressing agency: "It is always the ego's attitude to anxiety which is the primary thing and which sets repression going. Anxiety never arises from repressed libido. If the repressing agency, and not the repressed desire, is the origin of anxiety then repression is given a certain autonomy within the psychic sphere, which is to say that repression is seen to be primarily a matter of intrapsychic conflict rather than an antagonism between desire and social authority. This is the conservative turning point in Freud's theory, which Wilhelm Reich was the first to recognise. For Reich, Freud abandoned the theory of sexuality to take the side of repressive social forces. However, Deleuze and Guattari draw quite different and more far-reaching, conclusions than Reich, for whom desire remained essentially psychosexual, and not directly social or political, in nature. Schizoanalysis makes the more radical claim that desire is both psychosexual and social at once, directly constituting the

social forces of repression at the same time as the object on which they come to bear. In other words, there is no difference in nature, only in regime, between desire and social. In this sense, Reich remains within the sphere of a certain Freudo-Marxist liberalism, in which the political task would involve finding a social form suitable to expressing adequately a set of presupposed psychosexual contents. Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, argue that the antagonism between desire as a pure principle and social forms which give it expression is irresolvable as such, and this is what makes desire a revolutionary force. The conservatism of Freud's theoretical revision, then, is not that he abandons the psychic realm of sexuality to take sides with the social realm of repression, but that he reformulates the antagonism between desire and the social as a struggle taking place within the person." (Tynan 138). Kitamura testifies it undoubtedly which disables him in every spheres of his life. He has desire to be the part of the Asian American Movement typifying his ethnic culture or model minority, on the other hand being a law professor he has to be subservient to the American society. So this twin power (desire versus society) debilitates his personality.

Harry becomes insular, delves deep into his own self being disjointed himself from the society. We see his friend Joe forces him in a phantasmagorical scene to go sky diving with him. The chute will open only while Harry gives the right answer. He is asked to show his face, he does not know how to do so and falls straight down onto the ground. Harry is so tight that Joe's plot fails "You didn't break apart... I figured at least the force of the crash would shatter you, make you see beyond yourself." (DSH27). Actually Harry becomes so distanced from himself that the opening or not opening of the chute has nothing to do with him. Harry's self evasion also explains the disappearing of his arm and his sinking into a chair. The writer's block he is experiencing now symptomatic of his general difficulty of 'getting started' (9) which denotes his lack of self knowledge and initiative. However, Harry wakes up before the play ends. Together characters' appearing in his dreams and hallucination continuously keep him in pressure and mar his complacency. Harry repeats some of Sam's words in the end, suggesting his acceptance of the charges and hence some self realization. "I told the school officials what we were planning to do.. They like people like me... quiet, hard working... not dangerous... not sexual..." (DSH 39). Harry also experiences a sense of fullness as he bites the back of Nina's neck and his arm gets his "muscle back" (41). A Japanese Peggy Lee imposter with whom Harry dances as the light slowly fades is revealed to be Lillian beneath the blonde wig. Harry's "hand moves to stroke the nape of her neck" (42), suggesting the collapse of two identities (Lillian and Nina) in the secret recess of desire. Gotanda's innovative handling of mask as being inseparable from one's person, the doubling of roles and fusion of identities, costumes with an ambiguity of era. The dream sequences are peopled by surreal figures from past and present, hallucinations spilling over into waking life—all these perfectly build up the atmosphere of German expressionistic film which makes it difficult to label it merely an Asian American play. Gotanda's dramatic material hardly blurs the concrete Asian American issues taken up in the play that achieves in fact a fine balance between an abstract style and a concrete socio-cultural concern.

In fact, the entire play is the play of self assertion of the introvert Harry Kitamura whom the playwright has furnished with great debt revealing his morbidity amidst the question asked by his students about the propriety of referring the student movement of 1960s during 90s. So, his oscillating position which he is now confronting propels him for self scrutiny which results in his upside down condition. The entire act is being situated in the psyche of the protagonist, the political incident with which he was associated at that time repeated again in 90s that makes him disable to communicate with the society, he is straddling

between repression and expression which causes his anxiety and it becomes prominent while he says to Nina "What's happening to me? I am lost,...I am nothing...I no longer exist..."(37). But finally his emotional numbness is redeemed and again he becomes able to retain his former stature and gradually attains his existence: " I awoke from a deep sleep. I had the strangest feeling. That I had been asleep for a very long time.[Looks around, inhales deeply.] Fresh air has a flavour, did you know that? Peaches? And Night...[Thinking] Night is...[surprised at his own thought.]...day standing on its head...[quietly laughs at the thought.] I awoke with a sense of fullness. Yes, fullness. And the one thing I knew. Was that I would dance.Yes, dance.Dance any chance I could get"(41).The term [dis]able has strategically been utilised to coalesce both ability and disability both and thus to unveil Kitamura's character because at the outset of the play he becomes disable rather paranoid or to say belongs to the world of unconscious by dint of the political issues asked by the law student but finally he regains his consciousness and ability.

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