

Flávia Rodrigues Monteiro¹

¹Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brasil

Voices that Matter: The Attic Echoes Through the House

Abstract: *In The Buddha in the Attic, Julie Otsuka explores two main topics: the Picture Bride practice and the internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. An analysis of the development of both topics in the narrative reveals parallels with potential issues faced by women and diasporic subjects in contemporaneity, connecting with theoretical approaches on these topics. It is interesting to note that the narrative is mainly developed in first person plural with occasional expansion to other subjects such as "I", "she", "he", and even "you". The effect of this game between singular and plural is a narrative that describes a collective experience but avoids essentialisms. Even though it focuses on Women's voices, the novel also explores different subjectivities involved in the diasporic experience. Thus, Otsuka's narrative gives voice to disempowered subjects long locked in the attic of history and makes their voices echo through the houses of contemporaneity.*

Keywords: *Women's Literature; Subjectivity; Feminist Criticism; Diaspora*

1. Introduction

In *The Buddha in the Attic*, the two main topics explored by Julie OTSUKA (2011) are the experiences related to the Picture Bride practice and the internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. In the same fashion James Joyce and Virginia Woolf use the "stream of consciousness" device, Otsuka uses a "stream of voices" through her narrative. The main plot, the life of Japanese immigrants and their descendants in the United States, is permeated by glimpses of minor plots that help enhance the narrative. So, if we compare the experience of reading a novel to observing a picture, we could say that *The Buddha in the Attic* presents us with a colorful mosaic.

This paper intends to explore the narrative structure of Otsuka's novel, considering the formal aspect and its effect in order to show how the plurality of voices walk side by side with contemporary theories on gender and Diaspora. First, the general structure of the book will be presented, especially regarding narrative voices and the construction of characters and



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situations. Second, issues related to gender and the diasporic experience will be analyzed, focusing on the issues of space and agency. Finally, the conclusion will provide an overview and set the final comment on the subjects explored during the work.

2. General structure of the novel

The title of the novel, *The Buddha in the Attic*, makes reference to the religion practiced by Japanese people and also to a book on feminist theory, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, by Sandra GILBERT and Susan GUBAR (1998). The title is very symbolic. The Buddha, in Sanskrit "the enlightened", is how Prince Siddhartha Gautama is known. He is considered to be the founder of Buddhism and "is renowned for his ability to teach what was appropriate for a particular person, for adapting his message for the situation" (Donald S. LOPEZ Jr., 1995, p. 71). Certainly, the narrative of the novel is adapted to provide a plurality of voices with their own messages and situations, also reflecting the ideas of Gilbert and Gubar (1998), who state that "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her" (p. 812). The stream of voices in Otsuka's novel goes in the opposite direction of essentialisms. People and groups cannot be defined in terms of "saints" or "sinners".

The narrative of the novel is basically in first person plural. However, as the narrative progresses, the "we" expands to other subjects such as "I", "she", "he", and even "you". "Some", "one", and "most" of us are the voices that permeate the entire narrative. Titles such as "the boy", "the girl", "the mistress", and "the iceman" are also present. Generic names of characters appear, referring to the Japanese, the American and to other immigrants: "Akiko", "Yumiko", "Mrs. Kondo", "Mr. Ota", "Señora Santos", "Mr. Caldwell", "Dr. Giordano", and so on. This binary game between plural and singular, individual and collective, works to offer a taste of potential life stories. They are the stained glasses of Otsuka's mosaic.

The Buddha in the Attic is divided in eight chapters, each one under a title which provides the main thread that holds that part of the narrative. It is interesting to note that Julie Otsuka seems to have divided the narrative following William Blake's model of *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*. The first four chapters of the narrative have the aura of ignorance, the feeling related to arrival. In the last four chapters, experience has been developed and there is the feeling of departure. Using this division, we can find correspondent chapters in the two halves of the novel. The first chapter, "Come, Japanese!" portrays the situation of the women coming to America on the boat. Its counterpart is the eighth chapter, "A Disappearance", which displays how the Japanese vanish from the space of the town, the way their existence is replaced. The first chapter is dominated by the voices of Japanese women and the last chapter lacks Japanese voices. The second chapter, "First Night" can be related to the seventh chapter, "Last Day". The contrast of the titles is evident and it is interesting to note that both chapters present the same structure: a single block of narrative, like a single long paragraph. The third chapter, "Whites", finds its correspondence in the sixth chapter, "Traitors". The third and the sixth chapter are the two sides of the coin representing the relationship between the Japanese and the Americans: the early trust and the late suspicion. Finally, the fourth chapter, "Babies", and the fifth chapter, "The Children", are the core of the book but reflect a certain degree of detachment from Japan, for they portray the birth and life of the first generation in America. It is ironic that these chapters are in the middle of the book, for they represent the "in between" situation of the first generation.

At first, one can have the impression that the broken poetic style of the narrative will not be enough to grant the readers' empathy. As poetry, there is some demand from the readers' part in order to meet the meaning of the text. However, by abandoning the conventional

narrative, *The Buddha in the Attic* plays with different sensations constructed towards the characters and their situations. The narrative invites readers to consider the multiplicity and the levels of pain and suffering of one's life, especially considering women and diasporic subjects. Hence, the text is directly connected to the Buddhist philosophy, which preaches four truths about life, all related to the first truth that deals with the existence of suffering. As the scholar, expert in Buddhism, Donald S. Lopez, Jr., informs us,

Various forms of suffering are delineated in Buddhist texts, including the fact that beings must separate from friends and meet with enemies, that they encounter what they do not want, and do not find what they want. The fundamental problem is presented as one of a lack of control over future events; a person wanders constantly from situation to situation, from rebirth to rebirth without companions, discarding one body to take on another, with no certainty or satisfaction, sometimes exalted and sometimes debased. Briefly stated, the problem is change or, as more commonly rendered, impermanence (*anitya*) (LOPEZ, 1995, p. 70).

Although talking about Buddhism, the quote above could be read as a description of Otsuka's text, for it presents the features accounted above. The constant change from character to character, from situation to situation, is the expression of the Buddhist voice, trying to extrapolate the attic, the frame of the narrative, and reach the readers with the teachings on the inevitable pains of innocence and of experience. Therefore, we can experience the births and deaths of different voices inside the novel.

3. Gendered voices

The practice of arranged marriages in Asian cultures reached a different level during the early twentieth century with the aid of photography. The matchmaking, once arranged in the local sphere, crossed the borders of countries and became an element of the diasporic experience. On the one hand, Asian men were lured to leave their countries and go to America to search for jobs and escape poverty. On the other hand, the way women had to escape the same poor conditions was by getting married. So, photographs were the glue that brought together these two sides of the diasporic coin: men migrated to America and, later on, women followed their steps through the process of matchmaking by the exchange of their photographs. These women were known as Picture Brides. However, the matchmaking through pictures could be as deceitful as the idea of America as the promised land of opportunities.

The Picture Bride practice is the starting point of the novel. However, the narrative is very careful not to portray the women under any essentialism, even though they are united by the same context. The predominance of first person plural focuses our attention on the plural and personal experiences of these women at the same time. The narrative disproves "essentialist feminism" and "universalist feminisms", which, in sum, assume a similar nature to all women. Instead, as the text reports the situation of these women, it fits the current theories on feminism, which state that there is not one feminism but many feminisms because women have different experiences through life; they come from different backgrounds (economic, cultural, racial, and so on) and face personal challenges. As Alison BLUNT and Gillian ROSE (1994) state, "[t]he central task for many feminists today is to articulate the extraordinary complex and simultaneous interaction of gender, class, race, and sexuality [...] that create differences between women" (p. 6), and continue, "[n]o feminist today can innocently represent all women, and so the position from which any feminist speaks must be continually interrogated and relocated as circumstances change" (1994, p. 7).

The Buddha in the Attic articulates varied voices, conveying the importance of each one of them. The women are not only Japanese who come to America for a husband. The “we” represents different backgrounds:

Some of us on the boat were from Kyoto, and were delicate and fair, and had lived our entire lives in darkened rooms at the back of the house. Some of us were from Nara, and prayed to our ancestors three times a day, and swore we could still hear the temple bells ringing. Some of us were farmers' daughters from Yamaguchi with thick wrists and broad shoulders who had never gone to bed after nine. Some of us were from a small mountain hamlet in Yamanashi and had only recently seen our first train. Some of us were from Tokyo, and had seen everything, and spoke beautiful Japanese, and did not mix much with any of the others (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 8)

These different backgrounds can be social and cultural, as exemplified above, but they can also be related to religion: “one of us, who was Christian and ate meat, and prayed to a different and long-haired god, carried hers [husband's photo] between the pages of a King James Bible” (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 11), or regarding racial impressions, dreams, expectations, and sexuality, “[a] few of us on the boat never did get used to being with a man, and if there has been a way of going to America without marrying one, we would have figured it out” (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 18).

Different cultural practices regarding gender and space are also explored by the book. According to Blunt and Rose (1994),

The social construction of gender difference establishes some spaces as women's and others as men's; those meanings then serve to reconstitute the power relations of gendered identity. However, since the outcome of the decoding process can never be guaranteed, contestation and renegotiation of the meaning of spaces is also always possible (p.3).

The establishment of a certain space as a woman's space or a man's space is under constant negotiation and may vary even according to cultural background. In the novel, we can notice the difference in the attribution of spaces according to the cultural background as some of the Japanese women work in the fields with the men. In the western view, especially considering the historical context, in general, women would exclusively work in the domestic realm while men were the ones who “worked the land”. However, the book shows that some of the Japanese women were or got used to working in the fields and had to be taught the ways of the housewife's environment:

It was their women who taught us the things we most needed to know. How to light a stove. How to make a bed. How to answer a door. [...] How to fry an egg. How to peel a potato. How to set a table. How to prepare a five-course dinner in six hours for a party of twelve. [...] How to wash a lipstick stain out of your husband's favorite white shirt even when that lipstick stain was not yours (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 39).

Along with cultural differences concerning space, the dynamics of proper women's behavior appear in the narrative. When the women are still on the boat, they meet their first “white man”, Charles, and flood him with questions concerning the differences between Americans and Japanese. It is interesting to note how one of the questions portrays the cultural difference between the expected behavior of women and, at the same time, the answer points to the male propensity for dominance even among different cultures: “And was it true that the women in America did not have to kneel down before their husbands or cover their mouths when they laughed? (Charles stared at a passing ship in the horizon and then sighed and said, ‘Sadly, yes.’)” (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 14). This passage points that men, even from different cultures, see as good examples of women the ones who embrace the submissive

role, “the angels”, for “the monsters” must be locked in the attic. However, this literary account, like other examples in women’s literature, makes women’s voices echo from the attic of the literary and social house, a space long dominated by patriarchal values.

In the patriarchal environments explored by the novel, the example of a good woman is the one who accepts male dominance even over her own body. The voices may vary but the lack of agency over their own bodies is taken for granted regarding the Picture Brides. Their bodies are properties to be used by men according to their own needs: a wife, a laborer, a child bearer, a companion, a lover, and so on. In the second chapter, “First Night”, we have one long block of narrative with the repetition of the phrase “they took us”, accentuating the collectiveness of their experiences. Even though the way they are taken varies, they are still “taken” by the men. Female subordination as a tradition, something that passed from one generation to another, also appears in different moments of the narrative. Women do not seem to own their own bodies, which are mainly identified with a reproductive apparatus. The chapter entitled “Babies” follows the same pattern of the second chapter: it is a single block of narrative that brings the repetition of a phrase, “We gave birth”, conveying the impression of an industrial production line. Women’s bodies seem to be machines for making babies. The following passage, extracted from this chapter, illustrates the issues of male dominance over the female body, the tradition of this *modus operandi*, and the body as “a machine” to provide babies and as working force:

We gave birth at five in the morning in the pressing room at the Eagle Hand Laundry and that night our husband began kissing us in bed. I said to him, “Can’t you wait?” We gave birth quietly, like our mothers, who never cried out or complained. She worked in the rice paddies until the day she felt the first pangs. We gave birth weeping, like Nogiku, who came down with fever and could not get out of bed for three months. [...] We gave birth on a Sunday, in a shed in Encinitas, and the next day we tied the baby onto our back and went out to pick berries in the fields. We gave birth to so many children we quickly lost track of the years (OTSUKA, 2011, p.57)

Therefore, women own the status of an asset.

The gendered narrative of the novel, dominated by women’s perspective, ironically, denounces the lack of a female voice if we consider either gender roles or diasporic roles. Codes of behavior such as, “*Hold your teacup with both hands, stay out of the sun, never say more than you have to*” or “*A girl must blend into a room: she must be present without appearing to exist*” (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 6), imprint on women the role of an object, emptied of will and voice. In addition, as diasporic subjects, these women do not master English, which is another element that silences them and imposes diasporic roles: “*Don’t let them discourage you. Be patient. Stay calm. But for now, our husbands told us, please leave the talking to me. For they already spoke the English language. They understood the American ways*” (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 27). Thus, women’s role as diasporic subjects is another aspect that contributes to their “silencing”.

4. Diasporic voices

Disappointment was a potential aspect of the diasporic experience for Japanese men and women who came to America. Three elements contributed to this potential disappointment: first, the working opportunities and conditions could be even harder than that imagined by men as they decided to go to America and for women as they followed the men; second, concerning the Picture Bride practice, photographs were not a trustworthy medium in the matchmaking process, for they could mask age and even the conditions of both parts involved in the process such as physical features and financial situations; finally,

the big picture, the historical context of a Great War that brought severe consequences for some diasporic subjects. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese immigrants were forced to abandon their previous lives and be confined in internment camps.

In the same way the narrative of *The Buddha in the Attic* explores the multiplicity of women's voices, so it does with the diasporic voices, comprehending not only Japanese women but also Japanese men and American people, who are involved in the diasporic experience as they interact with diasporic subjects. Moreover, there are other diasporic subjects as for example, Chinese, Mexicans, Philippines, and Indians. The use of "we" and "they" in certain parts of the narrative works to refer to the separation of the Japanese community, the "native" people of the host country and other diasporic subjects. Readers may note that there is the prevalence of the inferiority feeling of the diasporic subject towards the people from the host country: "We loved them. We hated them. We wanted to be them. [...] They had a confidence that we lacked. And much better hair. So many colors. And we regretted that we could not be more like them" (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 39).

As women have to perform according to their gender, so do diasporic subjects according to their condition. As immigrants, they are expected to behave in a certain fashion. One could say that the objectification of women is extended to the immigrants in general. They are there as working force, machines that should do what Americans are not willing to do. They are there to perform their role and not be noticed; in a certain way, they are not part of the American society:

Most of them took little notice of us at all. We were there when they needed us and when they did not, poof, we were gone. We stayed in the background, quietly mopping their floors, waxing their furniture, bathing their children, cleaning the part of their houses that nobody but us could see (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 44).

The Japanese immigrants occupy their own space in the houses and in the town of Americans: the peripheral space, the space of the invisible: "Whenever we left J-town and wandered through the broad, clean streets of their cities we tried not to draw attention to ourselves" (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 52). We can draw a parallel with Gayatri SPIVAK's (1996) reflections on the maintenance of the diasporic subject out of civil society:

The state can use their labour but must keep them out of civil society. In Marx's terms, capital extends its mode of exploitation but not its mode of social production. In Amin's, the periphery must remain feudalized. In Walter Rodney's, underdevelopment must be developed (SPIVAK, 1996, p. 250).

The "disappearance process" of the diasporic subject starts as language acts. As Americans impose other names to Japanese women, these women seem to be integrated to their new cultural environment but, actually, they have their identities erased; the diasporic subject receives a new identity to live with: "They gave us new names. They called us Helen and Lily. They called us Margaret. They called us Pearl" (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 40). The dominant subject is not interested in acknowledging the identity of the "Other"; instead, they provide a new identity to the subaltern, more suitable to the dynamics of the dominant society.

When they do not occupy an invisible place, diasporic subjects, women in special, occupy the place of the exotic. In the same manner of their "Picture husbands", American men also claim ownership over the Japanese women's bodies. Their bodies are an exotic land to be explored. These women, as diasporic subjects, have to face the claim of American men over their bodies as sexual objects: "Sometimes the boss would approach us from behind while we were bending over his fields and whisper a few words in our ears. And even though we had no idea what he was saying we knew exactly what he meant" (OTSUKA,

2011, p. 32). Sadly, as women, they seem to be so used to having their bodies claimed by men that they do not even need to understand the language to know the men's intentions. On another level of exploitation, these women become modern representations of the "Hottentot Venus", facing men's fascination to explore them as the "unknown", the exotic: "Some of them asked us to speak a few words in Japanese for them just to hear the sound of our voice. *It doesn't matter what you say*. Some of them asked us to put on our finest silk kimonos for them and walk slowly up and down their spines" (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 46). The difference between diasporic subjects and colonial subjects becomes just a matter of geography, for as the narrative shows us, the dynamics of domination and subordination do not cease to exist. In the case of Japanese immigrants in America, they are the ones who move to be dominated instead of receiving the dominant forces in their country.

The eight chapters of Otsuka's novel symbolically follow number eight graphical representation in Arabic: two linked circles. The first four chapters belong to the first circle, which portrays the "cycle of innocence", the gathering of experience regarding America. In the last four chapters, "the cycle of experience", the diasporic experience consolidates as a new generation arrives and the Japanese community has to face severe consequences after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Even though the narrative continues to be presented from the women's point of view, it seems that their experiences gain more the weight of the diasporic influence.

The fifth chapter, "The Children", marks a turning point in the narrative, for there is the insertion of a new "they" inside the Japanese community, referring to the first born generation in American territory. This chapter presents the struggle between the permanence of old traditions and the creation of new traditions. Despite the efforts of the parents, the new generation predominantly embraces a new way of living: "They had their own rules. [...] They had their own rituals. [...] They had their own beliefs" (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 60). Japanese culture is replaced by American culture: "[t]hey forgot how to count. They forgot how to pray. They spend their days now living in the new language, whose twenty-six letters still eluded us even though we had been in America for years" (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 69), and language plays a symbolic role as a change marker: "[t]hey gave themselves new names we had not chosen for them and could barely pronounce" (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 70). A sense of negotiation regarding the new generation born in the U.S. permeates the entire chapter, with the tension between loss and gain concerning cultural aspects. Even though the chapter illustrates multiple situations involving the new generation in contrast to their parent's generation, they work as examples of the following statement of Avtar BRAH (1998), which describes the disjunctions of diasporic subjects and their new settings:

Clearly, the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was recently left behind, and by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to reorientate, to form new social networks, and learns to renegotiate new economic, political and cultural realities (p. 194).

Old generation or new generation, the Japanese met no distinctions when their race represented a threat to American society in the context of World War II. However, racism was not the only factor for the physical internment of these people. There was a growing sentiment of fear towards people of Japanese ancestry, which was based on an association of elements: "Racism, fears generated by the upward economic mobility of Japanese Americans, and the external threat of Japanese militarism all provided preconditions for the government's decision to evacuate this population" (Allan W. Austin, 2001, p. 254). After all, as Brah points out, "fear" is a constituent of the construction of borders. So, new borders effectively reconfigured new spaces for the Japanese community.

The last three chapters of *The Buddha in the Attic* explore the historical context of the internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. The building of new borders involving the Americans, the Japanese, and other diasporic subjects come to scene. The sixth chapter, "Traitors", presents the growing fear of the Japanese community of the "lists", which supposedly contain the names of people to be taken by the government. Mirroring the lack of agency of women over their own bodies, the diasporic subjects, men or women, realize that they do not have agency over themselves; they are at the mercy of the U.S. government. Rumors of people being taken by government officials spread through the community. Fear is the prevailing feeling of both Americans and Japanese. Mostly, men are the ones that start to be taken and, following the plural atmosphere of the novel, the narrative displays varied reactions from the women; some of them miss their husbands and some do not: "Kanuko admitted that she did not miss her husband at all. 'He worked me like a man and kept me pregnant for years'" (OTSUKA, 2011, p. 93). The situation escalates gradually during the chapter culminating in the departure of the Japanese in the next chapter, "Last Day."

Unlike other diasporic communities, the Japanese were treated as dangerous enemies, disregarding their level of connection to the United States. According to Catherine FUNG (2015),

Executive order 9066 authorized the Secretary of War, John I. DeWitt, to designate military areas "from which any and all persons may be excluded as deemed necessary or desirable." Military Areas I and 2 comprised the entire Pacific Coast: the western halves of Washington and Oregon, the southern half of Arizona, and the entire state of California. All persons of Japanese ancestry in these zones were uprooted from their homes, forced to sell their property, and relocated to assembly centers, where they waited assignment to more permanent camps that were hurriedly being built. The internment camps were located in federal land in desolate places [...] Of the more than 120,000 men, women, and children who were interned, nearly two thirds were U.S.-born and American citizens (p.130).

Thus, as we can see, more than half of the people confined in internment camps shared deep connections to the U. S., through birth or citizenship.

"Last Day" is the last chapter of the book that gives voice to the diasporic subjects. In the next chapter, "A Disappearance", the Japanese are no longer "we" and become "they". The "we" represents the American people, who are curious about the fate of the Japanese at first, but soon dismiss their existence and "they" is a reference to conjectures. The narrative does not offer an explanation for the fate of the Japanese and the reader has the impression of open-endedness.

5. Conclusion: the voices' legacy

Avtar Brah (1998) states that "the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (p. 183). A collective experience such as that of the women who were Picture Brides or the immigrants that were submitted to the internment camps is nothing but the sum of individual experiences, the result of the interaction of different and particular elements. Therefore, the narrative style of *The Buddha in the Attic* attempts to respect the multiplicity of experiences through its collective voice. In this way, each voice matters.

The exploration of such experiences in the literary field is an attempt to raise awareness about the historical context, but even more, about the real people that were part of this historical context. It seems that literature is telling us that "yes, we can learn by looking back at history." As Erica HARTH (2001) states,

If you're tempted to see the mass detention of ethnic Japanese after Pearl Harbor as nothing more than history, you might want to think twice. Suddenly the need for historical memory has become more urgent than ever. [...] the USA Patriot Act of 2001, the broadening of the FBI's powers of search and surveillance, and other antiterrorist measures following September 11 constitute what Anthony Romero, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, has called "the greatest challenge to civil liberties since World War II" (p.1).

A narrative such as *The Buddha in the Attic* becomes more than a piece of literature. It becomes a way to reveal and criticize the conditions of women in a patronizing world, the situation of diasporic subjects and their lack of agency. Otsuka's novel teaches, as Buddha taught, different audiences; moreover, it transcends essentialisms. Its legacy is the allowance of the disempowered voices, locked in the attic of history, to be heard through the houses of contemporaneity.

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Vozes que importam: o sótão ecoa pela casa

Resumo: Em *The Buddha in the Attic*, Julie Otsuka explora dois tópicos principais: a prática conhecida como Picture Bride (noivado por foto) e os campos de concentração para nipo-americanos durante a Segunda Guerra. Uma análise do desenvolvimento de ambos os tópicos na narrativa revela paralelos com questões em potencial enfrentadas por mulheres e sujeitos diaspóricos na contemporaneidade, conectando-as com abordagens teóricas sobre esses pontos. É interessante notar que a narrativa é basicamente desenvolvida em primeira pessoa do plural com expansões ocasionais para outros sujeitos como "eu", "ela", "ele" e até mesmo "você". O efeito desse jogo entre singular e plural é uma narrativa que descreve uma experiência coletiva mas evita essencialismos. Mesmo focando em vozes de mulheres, o livro também explora diferentes subjetividades envolvidas na experiência diaspórica. Assim, a narrativa de Otsuka dá voz a sujeitos desempoderados que ficaram trancados no sótão da história por um longo tempo e faz com que essas vozes ecoem pelas casas da contemporaneidade.

Palavras-chave: literatura de autoria feminina; subjetividade; crítica feminista; diáspora

FLÁVIA RODRIGUES MONTEIRO

Flávia Rodrigues Monteiro (flaviarmwork@yahoo.com.br) is a doctoral student in Literatures in English at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.



0000-0002-7024-660X