# Diasporic Subjectivities: A Study of the Second-generation Immigrant in Hiromi Goto’s *Chorous of Mushrooms*

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**Abstract**

This article analyses the formation of the hybrid and multiple subjectivities of the second-generation immigrant Murasaki in Hiromi Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms. In diaspora, Murasaki simultaneously vacillates in the cultural spaces of her homeland Japan and host land Canada. She follows cultural practices of both cultural spaces in her cultural negotiation in the diaspora. Her simultaneous vacillations in two cultural spaces render hybridity and multiplicities in her subjectivities that deconstruct bipolar notion of home and host culture. Moreover, her subjectivities involve in a constant process of formation and reformation undermining the notion of stability and consistency.Murasaki’s evolving subjectivity is analyzed through Stuart Hall’s notion of cultural identity and Homi Bhabha’s postulation of third space in this study.

**Keywords**: Being, Becoming, Cultural Identity, Third Space, Migration

Japanese American writer Hiromi Goto explores the cultural negotiation of different generations of Japanese immigrants in her novel*Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994). She depicts Japanese immigrants’ responses to the life in Canada experienced by the young Murasaki, her mother Keiko and grandmother Naoe.Murasaki, a second-generation immigrant, shows her fondness to her native Japanese cultural origin although she is brought up in Canadian diaspora under the assimilationist mother Keiko. In fact, her grandmother Naoe persistently exposes her granddaughter with her Japanese origin along with its rich folktales and myths. At the same time, Murasaki imbibes various cultural practices of her host country Canada. As an immigrant, her vacillations in her native and host cultures problematize her cultural identity. In such context, critics analyse the novel exploring thevarious aspects of Japanese immigrants’ lives in the diaspora.

Critics have analyzed various facets of diasporic existence in Goto’s *Chorus of Mushroom*. Problem of cultural identity, fluidity and inconsistencies inherent in human identity and difficulties of assimilating in the host country are some pertinent issues of critical debate. Besides, critics have also explored issues of food, cooking, and eating in relation with diasporic cultural identity. Similarly, the intergenerational relationship in immigrant family, the role of memory and use and revision of native myths are some other issues explored by the critics. Likewise, the novel’s narrative techniques especially use of second person pronoun “You” and multiple narrators, use of Japanese expressions without English translation also draw critical attention.

Smith explains that by addressing readers with second person pronounce “you” Goto positions readers in “a position of interpretive power” (265). Likewise, Eva Pich Ponce focuses on the uses of linguistic codes to construct cultural identities and representation of Japanese Canadian minorities. Ponce elaborates that the novel includes many words in Japanese and does not provide their translation into English. The English readers are unable to have access to the content of these words. Goto highlights that difference exists and all cannot be understood. In the same way, Beautell examines the cultural differences in association with the construction of cultural identities. Beautell argues that the novel depicts the “asymmetries in the condition of cultural identities” and condemns “the power of the codes of visibility in the production of cultural difference” (6). Moreover, it “recognizes, appropriates and reverses the functioning of cultural stereotypes, unveiling in the process their arbitrary nature” (Beautell 6). Acknowledging the cultural differences, the novel deconstructs the imposition of cultural codes of the dominant cultural on the immigrants.

Guy Beauregard analyses the exploitation and revision of traditional myth in relation with fluidities of cultural identities. Beauregard explains that *Chorus of Mushroom* interweaves myths, folk legends and fictional antecedents into a tale of Japanese Canadians living on a mushroom farm in Alberta. Likewise, Fabio Jarbeson da Silva Trajano analyzes the exploitation and appropriation of past which can be “empowering for the racialised female subject as the process of identity construction” (Trajano 48) in diaspora. He explains that Naoe and Murasaki take advantage of their capacity to occupy multiple subject positions to appropriate the past and recreate immigrants’ identities.

Whitlock argues that the categories of ‘race’‘gender’‘ethnicity’‘sexuality’ fails to maintain a coherence and separate categories of self and other. Whitlock opines that the novel is “situated at the point where boundaries between self and other are at their most fragile and able to be breached” (39). They are caught up in each other. Texts bring them together as vehicles to move across boundaries to explore connections and intersections. In the same way, Steve McCullough views the text as a deconstruction of unity, coherence and authenticity and an exploration of plurality and contingency. It exemplifies postmodern vision of fiction in which issues of “reality and facticity take second place to hermeneutic or experiential truth values” (McCullough 149). He asserts that polysemic and contingent textuality of the novel underscores’ contingent selves and truths.

Unlike them, in Mari Sasano’s opinion *Chorus of Mushroom* marks the departure of the internment experiences to voluntary immigration of Japanese immigrants. Yet they continue to deal with both subtle and obvious forms of racism in diasporic settlement. So, Pavlina Radia considers *Chorus of Mushroom* as a trauma narrative “a restless body of communal (hi)stories that simultaneously live and die, die and live, but also reveals that, even when coaxed from its phantom haunts into textually embodied forms” (197). The three generations of Japanese immigrants: Neo, the grandmother, Kekio, mother and Murasaki/ Muriel, the daughter have undergone their own distinct process of mourning. In fact, their grief refuses to adhere to any specific, socially prescribed norms.

Latimer Heather associates cultural semiotics food with a social, cultural and psychological act tied to both gender and race. *Chorus of* *Mushroom* explores links between “memory, race and eating by writingabout the experience of being identified by and “othered” through food” (Heather 4). In the same way, Stephanie Oliver suggests that there is a particular relationship between diasporic settlement and smell in *Chorus* *of Mushroom*. The smell of a “mushroom farm – an odorous byproductof cultivation – represents the repressed traces of their attempt to indigenize and assimilate on the prairies by concealing their diasporic connections to Japan” (Oliver 158). Oliver elaborates that smell becomes a key mode through which diasporic subjects relate to the Canadian landscape. The characters’ relationships to scent reflect how they engage with their new site of settlement.

**Conceptualizing Immigrants’ Cultural Identity**

The article basically foregrounds Hall’s concepts of cultural identity to explicate the experiences of the second-generation immigrant characters in the novel. Hall emphasizes on the notion of being and becoming in the formation of human subjectivity. Thesimilarities and the oneness and the underlying essence of people, Hall avers. Hall explains:

Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (223)

The oneness is understood as fixed reference and meaning which reflects the general shared cultural codes and common historical experiences. This definition emphasizes that the authentic cultural identity is hidden underneath the more superficial or artificially imposed selves.Hall’s second definition of “cultural identity” emphasizes the similarities and the differences amongst an imagined cultural group.

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. (225)

Hall explicates that identity is contingent and not ahistorical or immutable. Identity is an ongoing process of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It equally belongs to both the future and the past. Depending on the pre-given and pre-determined aspects only partially define identity. It transcends time and place. Although it is historical, it changes in and through power relations that are spatial and cultural. In the same way, Bhabha postulates the third space of cultural encounter in which immigrants’ cultural identity evolves negotiating with their past and present in the diaspora.

Deconstructing the bipolar notion of home and host country, the conceptualization of the third space assumes that the subjectivity of immigrants evolves out of the interaction in the third space. Bhabha postulates the third space as cultural encounters in contradictory and ambivalent spaces. In the cultural encounter, cultural identities are negotiated and contested undermining stability, consistency and originality. In fact, the third space “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 37). As a result, cultural meanings and sings are reviewed, revised and reread with new perspectives and prospects. In this hybrid and interactive third space of diaspora, the second-generation immigrant Murasaki’s subjectivity evolves negotiating between host and home cultural spaces in Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*.

**Cultural Negotiation: Hybrid Upbringing**

Murasaki simultaneously vacillates between her being that is native Japanese culture and her becoming process of adopting the Western cultural practices of her host country Canada while negotiating her cultural identity. Her mother Keiko persistently tries to raise her according to the Western way whereas her grandmother recurrently exposes her with her native Japanese cultural tradition. Consequently, she moves “between her grandmother’s homeland Japanese space and her mother’s “actual homeland” space (Beautell 31). Her bicultural affiliation is reflected in her two names: one in Japanese Murasaki and the other in English Muriel.She manages her life in Canadian diaspora moving between Japanese and Canadian cultural spaces. She is raised in such bicultural space since her childhood.

Murasaki has confusion about her cultural root due to her mother Keiko’s avoidance of Japanese cultural practices in her childhood. Her mother thinks that “it is too confusing for a child to juggle two cultures. Two sets of ideals. If you want a child to have a normal and accepted lifestyle, you have to live like everyone else” (Goto189). However, Murasaki’s experiences counter her mother’s perspective:

I wasn’t given the chance to choose. I feel a lot of bitterness about how I was raised, how I was taught to behave. I had a lot of questions about my heritage, but they were never answered. The place where we lived didn’t foster cultural difference. It only had room for cultural integration. If you didn’t abide by the unwritten rules of conduct, you were alienated as an*other*, subject to suspicion and mistrust (189).

Following Canadian lifestyle does not qualify her to be a genuine Canadian. She feels that “people think certain things of you just because your hair is black” (189). People often questions about her biological features. Consequently, she becomes confused about her sense of belonging and begins to explore her heritages.

Despite her mother’s persistent attempts of raising her child in the Western manner, Murasaki explores her Japanese cultural root through her grandmother Naoe. Naoe adamantly follows her Japanese cultural practices living in the Canadian diaspora. Murasaki develops a close relationship with her grandmother and enjoys in the secret nocturnal feasts with her. She listens the stories and folklores recounted by her grandmother. Naoe familiarizes her with rich storehouse of native Japanese fairy tales and myths. Gradually, she begins to shop, cook and eat Japanese food. Naoe helps her supplying linguistic and cultural heritage of her Japanese origin that her parents hide from her. By learning Japanese language and eating Japanese cousins, she refuses to homogenize herself with the mainstream community of her host land. Her resistance results hybridity in her cultural identity.

Herhybridity manifests in her use ofthe English and Japanese language in her adult life. She is able to use both English and Japanese, and she shifts freely between the languages in her conversations and storytelling. The recurrent use of untranslated Japanese words and phrases enable her assert her Japanese identity in dominant English discourse. Moreover, the use of Japanese language deconstructs the cultural and linguistic homogenization rendering marginal position to unilingual English readers. At the same time, she primarily uses English languages in both her private and public spheres. Her own knowledge of Japanese language is also limited.She begins her story by admitting her limited knowledge of Japanese language: “Sure, but bear with my language, won’t you? My Japanese isn’t as good as myEnglish, and you might not get everything I say. But that doesn’t mean the story’s not there to understand (1).” Hence vacillating between Japanese and English languages, she explores her own hybrid cultural spaces.

Travelling between two linguistic spaces, she takes benefits from the richness of both languages without relying on translation. Different languages do not have exact equivalents for some concepts. In course of learning Japanese, she realizes that there is no word to express love “exceptto a spouse or lover” (54).She thinks that learning both languages enables to fill up the gap, “when there isn’t one word in English, it will be there in Japanese and if there’s something lacking in your tongue, I’ll reach for it in English. So, I say to you in English. I love you, Obachan” (54). As Sasano explicates that “[r]ather than being suspended half- in-half- out of two cultures, Murasaki actually has an edge over either: she slips between them as easily as a salamander inhabits water and land . . .

Murasaki benefits from, instead of being confused by, the juggling of two cultures” (42). In this sense, the hybrid position enriches Murasaki with knowledge of both linguistic traditions. However, she suffers sense of uprootedness in either cultural space.

Murasaki often questions about her sense of belonging in both Canadian and Japanese cultural spaces. Living in Canadian diaspora as a Japanese immigrant, Murasaki experiences, “life is hard in Canada”

(189). She describes Canada as a place where “if you didn’t abide by the unwritten rules of conduct, you were alienated as an other” (189). As a result, she expresses her bitterness to “her mother’s decision to acculturate to white” (Salter 191). She is not given chance to choose rather her mother impose Canadian cultural practices upon her in her childhood. Consequently, she feels as an outsider in Canada as she is subjected to racial remarks for her physical complexion. In fact, “she is alienated from a Canadian culture which considers her as foreign” (Ponce 74). At the same time, she does not feel totally an integral part of her Japanese origin. She manifests such sense in her admission of having limited knowledge about Japanese language. She admits: “Sure, but bear with my language, won’t you? My Japanese isn’t as good as my English, and you might not get everything I say.” (Goto1). She renegotiates her position as an outsider in both cultural space rendering multiplicities and pluralities in her cultural identity.

**Multiple Subjectivities**

Murasaki’s participation in the multiple narrations of the novel exemplifies her dynamic subjectivity showing gradual changes of her consciousness and attitudes. In fact, there are two narrators; grandmother Naoe and granddaughter Murasaki. However, Naoe’s narration is mediated to readers through Murasaki.Through this process, “she learns that understandings of identity, of self and others, can shift depending upon the story one chooses to tell or listen to. Stories and ‘truth’ thus coexist in an interdependent relationship” (Salter 116). She can no longer “separate the stories from our real lives” (Goto 186) because “stories construct truth(s) and truth(s) inform representations and understandings of social relations” (Salter 116). In fact, truths and stories are inextricably tied together and mutually constructed.As Ben Okri explains “[o]ne way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves … If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (46). Evidently, Murasaki’s constant revision of the stories either told by her grandmother or created by her reflects her changing subjectivities.

Grandmother’s stories are integral to the emotional and psychological development of Murasaki, and “her storytelling practice provides meta-narrative instruction on the importance of an active listening and telling engagement” (Salter 85). While telling stories, Murasaki shows a reciprocal engagement between teller and listener “who not only tell stories to each other but also conceptualize and narrate each other’s stories (85) .Murasaki learns that there is “a partnership in the telling and listening that is of equal importance” that “[l]istening becomes telling” (Goto 172), and that “if the one who speaks should tire, the other is there to finish” (20). As a story teller, she crafts and transforms her and grandmother’s stories into one dynamic interwoven narrative. Herstorytelling“challenge[s] the static, self-contained roles of teller and listener” (Beauregard 51), and reveals her evolving multiple subjectivities as well.

The notion of multiplicities alsoreflects on her double names. Her mother who insists on assimilation gives her English name Muriel whereas her grandmother who follows Japanese cultural practices gives her Japanese name Murasaki. The multiple names “refuses to attach a fixed meaning to …identities” (Sasano 4). The Japanese name Muraski also deconstructs single referent of linguistic and cultural origin.Naoe claims that Murasaki means purple in Japanese. She herself takes this translated name Purple on her escape.At the end of the text, “this translated and redoubled system of names is translated again, reappearing in the single form of the Purple Mask, and with its final translation,the name becomes a sign whose referent is unknown” (McCullough159).

Behind the name of Purple Mask,Naoe maintains her anonymity in later part of the novel. Hence, Murasaki/ Purple is, “redeployed as paradox: it is both an unmistakable sign of identity and a guarantor of anonymity” (160). The proper name Mursaki proliferates her identities and problematizes the idea of textual origin referring to coherent self in cultural linguistic realm. Consequently, it undermines the notion of fixity and stability.

**Deconstructing the Authenticity**

Murasaki questions the concept of cultural fixity and purity by constantly revising the folk tales and legends in her every telling and retelling. By explicitly adopting and adapting the “myths and legends, Goto refuses to accept the ‘fixed tablet of tradition’ offered to her by hegemonic groups; she refuses their imperative to reproduce ‘Japanese culture’” (Beauregard 48). In this sense, Murasaki often revises the folktales which she has learned as a child and makes them new and fresh in her every telling. The creation of “new spaces for growth out of the old stories, the unhappy immigrant stories---this is the “repetition that will not return the same (Sasano 48). Instead of sharing the same old stories, she says that she is “not erasing. [She’s] re-telling and re-creating” (Goto185).In her retelling of the folktales, legends, or myth, she also delivers her voices and rewrites the ending of most of the immigrant stories which is all the time conceived as an unhappy one. Precisely, she destabilizes the concept of originality and fixity of these narratives, which implicitly corresponds her own shifting cultural identity.

Murasaki undermines the authenticity of fact and truth while narrating and recountingher personal stories. As a narrator, she is not trustworthy as she frequently revises and recreates her stories. She affirms “*I’m making up the truth as I go along*” (12). She is uncertain about the authenticity of what she is telling. She wonders, “did I just make that up or is it true? I don’t even know anymore. Saying it out loud can make it so” (53). Moreover, she deliberately lies sometimes: “That’s a lie. One of many, I suppose” (98). Besides, Murasaki entwines memories and legends with her stories (Ponce 83). Murasaki explains the “It’s funny how you can sift your memories, braid them with other stories. Come up with a single strand and call it truth” (Goto 93). Mixing facts and fictions, Murasaki emphasizes the processes of hybridizing and transformation, which conjointly recreates the stories and her subjectivity.

Murasaki emphasizes on mobility and transformation challenging fixity and rigidity. Her focuses on spatialmovement also underscores her emotional and psychological transformation. When her mother asks her where she is about to go, she answers “you can’t move on until you’ve arrived. I’ve finally arrived and now I can go” (Goto 198). The emphasis of ‘arrive’ and ‘go’ highlights the motion and process deconstructing stagnation. Similarly, in the end, shesays: “It’s a funny thing and you can never be sure if you’re here or there. I carry my home in the cup of my palms, in the small hollows of my mouth. This is no place for a woman like me to stay. Let me travel from story to story” (203). Her emphasis on “keep on moving is the only way to combat the attempts others who try to freeze her up” (Sasano 47). As a result, she encompasses fluidity and mobility in her identities formation challenging the stereotypes of dominant discourse to essentialize her ethnic identity.

The interposition of Japanese languages in the English narratives of the novel deconstructs the fixity and boundary of both language and culture. Such use of languages calls into question of the taken for granted of English language.Indeed “the certainty of any kind ofcommunication, be it verbal or relying solely on gestures, becomes deconstructedin Goto’s text through the events experienced by her protagonists”(Bodal 240).Murasaki’sinitial lack of knowledge of Japanese does not obstruct her to learn from hergrandmother about her ethnic identity. Later on, she learns about Japanese language and culture that widens both her perceptions and experiences. She simultaneously travels to both cultural and linguistic spaces. As Anna Branach-Kallassuggests”*Chorus of* *Mushrooms* interrogates the fixity of cultural boundaries, eroding themsubtly and tactically” (100). In fact, Murasaki embodies a hybrid cultural identity that “remains to a large degree a work inprogress, never quite finalised in the novel” (Bodal 240). Moreover, she enjoys her fluid and dynamic subjectivity negotiating in the third space of diaspora.

Straddling between two cultural spaces, her subjectivity evolves transcending both cultural spaces.Sasano explains that Murasaki understands that she does not need to measure up to anyone else’s standards. She needs not to be worry about her differences from the White. Besides, being a Japanese immigrant in Canadian diaspora, she slips from one culture to the other, performing a kind of “cultural amphibianism” (43). She leads both lives: a Canadian and Japanese simultaneously. She switches between these two identities according to time and context. She and her lover sometimes order pizza or Chinese food (Goto 57), and at times, they cook sekihan (182), a typical Japanese dish. In the same way, she refuses the total assimilation as per her mother Kekio’s expectation: “be rooted down in self-conscious conformity” (Sasano 47). However, she opposes “a rigid preservation of the culture of her ancestors” (48) at the same time. In this sense, she encompasses hybrid, multiple and unstable subjectivity deconstructing the bipolar notion of the host and native cultures.

**Conclusion**

As a second-generation immigrant Murasaki negotiates her cultural identity in the interaction of her being that is Japanese culture and becoming process of adopting the Western cultural practices of her host land Canada. In her becoming process, she adopts the Western dress up, food habits and English language. She imbibes Canadian ways of life particularly from her mother’s insistence on assimilation into the host country. Moreover, she admits having limited knowledge about Japanese culture and language. At the same time, her grandmother exposes her with her Japanese ancestries and heritages. She enjoys listening Japanese folk tales and legends from her grandmother, and shares Japanese food with her. Besides, she learns Japanese language which she interposes in her story telling. With such multiple cultural expositions, she oscillates between two cultural spaces developing hybrid cultural identity in the third space of diaspora. Moreover, her subjectivity encompasses multiplicities undermining the fixity and authenticity while negotiating in the diaspora. In this process, sheblurs the distinction between truth, memory and fiction in course of telling and retelling her own and her grandmother’s stories. These constant revisions of the stories deconstruct notion of originality and stability of narratives which also reflect the shifting subjectivities of the narrator. Her subjectivity undergoes in the constant process of formation and reformation in the cultural negotiation of the third space of diaspora. This process renders the diasporic subjectivity which embodies fluidities and multiplicities by deconstructing the bipolar notion of home and host culture.

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