

Contemporary Literature

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Good morning. So, our topic for the day is Asian American literature with particular reference to Asian American fiction or novels. So, tell me what do you understand when I say something like Asian American community. What comes to mind? Good, Asians settled in America and who are those Asians? How do you define Asianness? Indians, Chinese, Koreans, who else? Indonesia, Japanese, Vietnam, Philippines. People who come from the South Asian part of the world. So, that includes Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalis, Bhutanis, Sri Lanka etcetera.

this is Asian American. So, the scope is extremely vast. when we start talking about the construct, the idea of Asian American, then it is not just Japanese and Chinese as it is traditionally understood. It also encompasses several other nationalities.

It is extremely vast and you can see that all these communities when they come together, it is not a very homogenous group. that is the quality of Asian American literature. Now the keywords that we are going to focus on are race, ethnicity, identity. What are those tropes or marks of identities that define this particular group called Asian Americans and even among Asian Americans, there is no unity as we are going to see soon. The ideas, the efforts to assimilate and to integrate and to acculturate with the host country.

This is also extremely important and it lies at the core of all Asian American literature. The idea to get integrated and acculturated with the host country, host culture and of course, actually this should come right at the top citizenship because citizenship at the beginning for these people, this community called Asian American was not something easily accessible or available. So, we will begin with talking about the immigration process in America. I am going, I am taking you very back in time. I am taking you to something earlier part of the 20th century, last century.

So, that is when the immigration process actually began. the idea of Asian Americans in Asian people in America is not very old, just 100 years or so. So, America had a law called naturalization act. You should know that. Now, naturalization act, what does it

mean If you are born in America, you are an American, but if you are a naturalized American, how does that happen? Good, you are born somewhere else in the world, but you become a naturalized citizenship.

We also have something like this in India as far as I understand. So, this was an act which was in practice 1790, 1906. And this was a very interesting law 1790 to 1906. It existed during that period and it said that only those people can become naturalized citizens who were white people. So, now, how do you define whiteness? Can anyone tell me what is white? Only whites can become citizens perhaps, but whiteness of skin was one of the necessary factors.

By 1917, something interesting happened. The United States of America barred entry to those people who came from the so called Asiatic region. That was in 1917, not so long ago. And then, there is another interesting year 1922 and 23, where something very interesting happened. Two men of Asian descent in America, they went to the Supreme Court in America and they had their cases heard regarding citizenship.

They wanted to become the so called naturalized citizens of America. So, one was Takeo Ozawa, a man of Japanese descent. Now, his case was the way he presented his case in front of the US Supreme Court. He said that he has gone to the best of American schools and colleges, although he is a Japanese, but his family shifted and he has been exposed to the mainstream US culture and education. He also said that he is immersed in American culture.

Now, this is also very important when we talk about intercultural relationships. There is an idea of immersion. Now, what do you understand? I mean I would like to know your opinion on the definition of immersion. It is a very controversial topic. It is acculturation and immersion.

What do you understand? I am immersed in American culture. And how do you become immersed in some culture? Exactly, you live or you know more or less it means that I am living the way an average American or general American would live. So, that becomes a very positive in your life. I mean I do not know how many of us would be very proud to say that we are completely acculturated. I do not know what is this kind of position differs from person to person, would not it? What would you say? That some people would like to maintain their racial identity, some people, certain people would like to get immersed completely in the host culture.

Now, what would the native people prefer? What would the so called host country people from? Immersion. So, they do not want a small pockets of you know where

people claim their racial identities. They want people who would be completely immersed. So, that is how. So, when Ozawa projected or submitted his case before the Supreme Court in 1922, this was one of the defenses.

This was one of the reasons he put up before the court that he should be granted naturalized citizenship because he has immersed himself in the US culture, in the mainstream US culture. Then he gave evidence that he goes to the American churches and not to any Japanese place of religion. That became one thing. We are talking about what constitutes immersion going to the places of religious ethnicities. So, we go to the churches.

Our family goes to the churches. Our children go to American schools where English is the predominant language and we have nothing to do with our own language and culture. So, this was the way he presented his case before the court. He also said that we not only that, we also use English at home and we do not talk in Japanese at all. So, all these things are a big positive in our favor.

He also produced, alongside he also produced sufficient evidence that culturally and socially he interacts more with the American people and he has successfully distanced himself from people of his own country, that is the Japanese people in America. I do not know what would be your feelings towards this, but his lawyer also said that Ozawa should be granted citizenship because the color of his skin is white. He is whiter than most Europeans. You see Europe also comprises several communities and several people. So, there are brown Europeans as well, exactly Hispanics, pure turicans in America.

So, let us not, if you are now talking about Europe, then let us talk about South America. So, you have the people from Latin America and people from all these countries, Mexicans, pure turicans, Hispanic people, they are not really as white as an average American, but Ozawa was really white and he said, the lawyer said that this makes for a case, very strong case. What do you think would have been the verdict? No, not granted. He was not granted the citizenship in spite of all this. Now, we will look at the second case.

We were talking about two interesting cases for naturalized citizenship in America. The second person was Bhagat Singh Thind from Punjab. Bhagat Singh also applied for citizenship, that is, a naturalized citizenship during the same time period, 1922 and 1923 and he made a strong case for himself. He said that he has been to the University of Berkeley. Now, University of Berkeley is no ordinary university. It is one of the elite institutes of education in America. Another thing in his favor was that he had

participated as a soldier of higher rank in the First World War and he had fought from the side of the allies. Now, in Ozawa's case, we saw that he made a case for himself on the basis of his skin color. I am very white. Therefore, I should be granted.

Tint said that he comes from a very upper caste, high class Hindu family, Sikhs, but Hindu, of course. So, I come from a very upper class Hindu family from Punjab in India and therefore, I deserve to be assimilated with the whites who are almost like the high class people or high caste people in India. So, you see the analogy, the similarities. We are looking at the case from Tint's point of view. His case was that he is an upper class Hindu and an upper class Hindu should be allowed to mix freely with the whites who are the upper class in America.

So, he said that I am not like the poor black. I am not like your average Hispanic or pure to reckon. You cannot club me along with these people. I have by reasons of my by virtue of being a high class or high caste Hindu, I have every you know reason to hope to become assimilated with your culture and I can trace my linguistic and physical and racial lineage to the so called Aryan community, the Aryan ancestry.

Who are the Aryans? Yes, Naren. When you trace your lineage to the Aryans, what are you saying? Yes. So, I can trace my ancestry to European people because on virtue of being you know an upper class upper caste Hindu. So, I am I can easily seek alignment with the Caucasian's with the Europeans and if citizenship can be granted to the white people to the Europeans, then why not to me who can who claims direct descent from the Aryan lineage and what was the result? The same as Ozawa. No citizenship, no naturalized citizenship. Now, what do these two cases tell us? They tell us, they say a lot, but what on the surface what do they tell us? It is not like everybody can be an American citizen.

Generally, how the American society is, because of the nationalized, the class, the religion concept. charm, the lure of being an American. On one hand, you have on the other hand, you have the Americans resisting this kind of an encroachment on their territories. Things are different now, but we will come to that. I am talking about two major historical events.

So, things may be very different today, but there was a time when getting a citizenship was very difficult and also the grounds on which citizenship was sought was also very interesting. People used to seek citizenship on the grounds of their skin color and their ancestry. Now, things are very different and naturally, the court denied citizenship to both these gentlemen. Now, we come down a few years and then we see what happens. So, during the 40s, that is during the period of the Second World War, one was the fear

of violence in America towards people of Asian descent.

Now, why do you think that people of Asian descent would be fearful of violence against them? Exactly. So, the Japanese were the enemies at that time, Japan was the enemy and Asian Americans especially from that part of the world, they look quite alike. It is like you cannot distinguish between a person of Indian or Bangladeshi or Pakistani birth. When we go outside to a European, to an American, we all look alike, do not we? Even a person from Sri Lanka, so most of us from this part of the world, we look alike. People from Korea, from Vietnam, from Japan, from Chinese, everyone was clubbed in the same category that this is the face of the enemy.

So, all of them looked like Japanese to an average American eye and there was lot of violence against them. Now, what happens when there is a violence against one section of the community? We are talking about Asian American community. These are the enemies, but that also includes somehow Koreans, Vietnamese and Chinese are also dragged into that. What will happen? What would be their reaction? Protective or defensive? Take a guess. Would they be? Yeah, they became extremely defensive.

So, what they did was a complete disavowing of the Japanese people. So, this is an important term that you should know. The disavowal of the Japanese people by the Vietnamese, Koreans and Chinese people because they did not want to get involved. There were lots of racial attacks, physical attacks on them and they did not want to get into the Japanese people were completely isolated during the time.

Now, there is a cultural practitioner. I am sure you have heard of this name Raymond Williams. If you have not, then you should know Raymond Williams is a key cultural practitioners of the last century and he gives us a term called emergent cultural practices. Now, emergent cultural practices, he means that when a society gives birth, gives rise to new structures, then those new structures militate against the dominant structures present in the society.

So, that is the idea. It is not a rebellion. It does not constitute a rebellion against the dominant society. It becomes according to Raymond Williams, a very legitimate narrative of identity and a sense of belonging. So, Raymond Williams idea of emergent cultural practices that whenever a group is extremely dominant, there is always the birth of new structures which in a way militate against the dominant groups and it is not really a fight, but it is a struggle to make themselves visible and to make their legitimate narratives be heard. It is nothing but having a voice in a culture which is dominated by the forces of majority. Ask me any question if you have any at this point.

So, we were talking about the cases of Ozawa and Bhagas Singh Thind. That was in 1922. Now, by 1960s, there was a change. I am sure you have heard of President Lyndon Johnson.

Who did you follow? President Kennedy. You know he succeeded President John F. Kennedy. President Lyndon Johnson. Now, in 1965, Lyndon Johnson's congress enacted and passed a law that selection of immigrants thereafter will be based on. Now, remember we were also talking about a period when naturalized citizenship was denied to people.

People who were extremely eligible, but they were denied. Then, there was also a period when there was a total ban on the entry of people of the Asiatic origin from the Asian parts of the world. We have seen that also. Now, during the reign of President Lyndon Johnson, the congress enacted a law, passed a law which said that from here onwards, the selection of immigration of the immigrants will be based on three choices, three categories.

One was employment needs and preferences of the US. Second factor would be that would determine the selection of immigrants would be family reunification. And third and most important, see first and second are economics and social. Third was political people who flee communist countries. So, selection of immigrants would be based on the kind of profession you are in. For example, what kind of professions do you think? I mean it has not changed much.

People especially in the science bracket, they would be welcomed because that is what we need. Doctors and nurses, engineers perhaps, but not every profession was people from all kinds of professions. It is not like that they would be welcomed as well, but particular experts or professionals in some categories, they were encouraged to come because that became the necessity for the American people. Perhaps, they did not have that kind of those kind of people they were looking for.

Perhaps, there was a scarcity of doctors and nurses. Perhaps, there was some kind of a positive for engineers. So, you need them. Therefore, they will be given preferences. Second family reunification, husband has been working for a long time, wife and children are back home. So, naturally they will be called and families reunited that also.

So, citizenship would be based on such factors as well. Third was people who are escaping the communist regimes and countries. So, this is a vast area which we will look at when we look at a couple of novels. So, that is important. Now, this immigration law transformed the landscape of the USA because what do you think would have happened

once this kind of a law was introduced? See, these categories are fluid. You can make use of these conditions and find your way into the United States.

So, earlier it was so difficult to find, to gain employment or to get citizenship, to get any sort of recognition. But now, it seems that the USA had opened its doors and so more and more people started going. So, this is the period of the 60s. This is the 60s we are talking about. This was the peak period when people of Asian origin started flowing into the US.

Now, because of their hard work, because of their professional qualifications and education and background, the Asians became a new kind of a role model in the USA. So, there are lots of reasons why they were welcomed, but this is also because they kind of liked being there and they also assimilated well there. Now, let us consider a term like Asian American. So, the term itself was coined by someone called Ugi Ichiyoka.

Ugi Ichiyoka, I c h i o k a. So, this is the man who first coined, who originated the term Asian American and this was established. This center called Asian American center was established at UCLA, University of California, Berkeley in 1969 and this man of Japanese origins was responsible for creating this particular center, center for Asian American studies. So, he was not just a great academician. He was also a social activist and imagine we are talking about 1969. So, in American history, what does that remind you? What period was that? The late 60s.

What was happening in America? Yes Ravi. Civil rights movement. Civil rights movement, good. That is a good example. Anything else? Counterculture movement.

Counterculture movement, yes. Vietnam War. Good, the Vietnam War. So, now, Ichiyoka was especially interested in the counterculture movement as well as in mobilizing student protest against the Vietnam War. You should remember that Asian American community itself was such a minority that there was no way that they could have been very active in civil rights movement which was dominated by the black people. So, the black people had their own leaders. They had their own religious affinities.

That was also a very distinctive group. Asian American community on the other hand, they wanted to assimilate seamlessly and live very peacefully. So, they kept themselves quite detached or distanced from the black movement, but when the war against Vietnam started, when America was on the brink with the war against Vietnam, then there was a sense of solidarity and people like Ichiyoka, they organized student, mobilized student movements to protest against the Vietnam War. So, along with that, Ichiyoka also helped

in the formation of a group called the Asian American Political Alliance, AAPA, Asian American Political Alliance. Now, this was one of the first movements or one of the first efforts to give some kind of a political identity to this group called Asian Americans. Earlier, it was just like a struggle for survival, a struggle for gaining recognition and acceptance and some to get acculturated and assimilated in the mainstream.

That was the idea, but now they started behaving more and more like Americans. When you form political alliances and groups and launch protests against something which the government is doing, then that means the assimilation is more or less complete. They started identifying themselves with the mainstream. So, they felt they had every right to do these things. Earlier, they would not have, I mean just think one or two decades earlier, they would not have dreamt of doing or launching a very visible kind of protest against the government.

They needed the government to give them the citizenship, but by the late 1960s, things started changing. Now, contrary to whatever Ichiyoka was doing, there was an American called Todd Gitlin. Todd Gitlin in 1968, he gave us a term called days of rage, R A G E and this term is quite pivotal in the development of US cultural politics and political culture. People like Gitlin, they sort of contributed to the decline of the new left. However, there were other scholars who celebrate 1968, the year 1968 as a watershed year in the development of the historical self-consciousness among its non-white people.

So, 1968 is a year of much political turmoil. On one hand, you had people who are calling for going back to the old ways of life. On the other hand, you had the people from Asian American origins who wanted to assert their identities and their self-consciousness. At the same time, you had the president Nixon. This is also a period politically, you had Nixon as the president and how did he come into ascendance? How did president Nixon come into prominence? What did he talk about? Now, we are not talking about his impeachment and Watergate that happened later, but how did he win the American people over? No idea. He won the election on the basis of a slogan called and this you will find very interesting, the silent majority.

And who are the silent majority according to Nixon? The white people. They say we have become silent in our own country in spite of being in majority. Why? Because you have Asian Americans asserting their dominance, you have the black people making their presence felt. And what happens to the majority? The president has become silent. So, it was a very reactionary, very radical right wing kind of a political system that Nixon was endorsing. So, Nixon's political leadership in a way caused the so-called death of the new left.

He embodied everything that was right wing. So, it was in during this period that we talk about people like Yuji Ishioka. So, people like Ishioka, they were concerned. Let me get back to what I have been saying all along. First concern was the United States of America's involvement in Vietnam. Now it was believed that Vietnam was an extremely weak country, a very poor country, one of the poorest countries in Asia at that time.

And an attack on Vietnam caused strong waves of sympathy among the people of Asian origins. That was one thing. And then, there was a constant intervention of the US in Asian territories. So, you think of Pearl Harbor, Second World War.

You also think of America's defense of South Korea against North Korea. So, there were several conditions that encouraged or promoted the birth of people like Ishioka and this desire to create a distinct political identity, a cultural identity like Asian Americans. So, there was a need to assert themselves because they felt that US is getting too imperialistic, US is getting too domineering and interfering too much and there is a need to stop them. So, Ishioka and his groups, they created groups and Asian American groups particularly. There were debates, there were classroom discussions and from classrooms, they came out in the streets and they were the people who organized several war rallies, the so called anti-war rallies in America.

So, it all began with this creation of the Asian American center at UCLA. Now, what was happening in to literature all this while? We started the class talking about Asian American literature and then, we talked about citizenship and race and political identities. Now, a very interesting development was happening during the middle part of the last century as far as literature was concerned, literature of Asian writings by the Asian American people. Now, there is one autobiography called *The Fifth Chinese Daughter* which was published in 1945, *The Fifth Chinese Daughter* published in 1945 by a woman writer Jade Snow Wong. Now, the novel published in 1945, it gained instant acclaim because the author talks about accepting Americanism as a way of life, as the only way of life and what she argued for was that the Americans and the American culture is an extremely benign culture and the only way one can find true happiness in America is by completely immersing ourselves in the American mainstream culture. So, that was *The Fifth Chinese Daughter* and US government was naturally very happy, extremely pleased with the publication of this novel and in order to promote this kind of writing, they got it translated in several languages of the world and distributed it all across the world, you know, and it was a best seller.

And the US government also encouraged miss Wong, Jade Snow Wong to travel to major Asian countries, you know, now we have writers travelling far and wide for book promotional activities. So, that is what this, so she was one of the first, you know,

literary person to be sponsored by the government, to go on a book promotional visit, you know, promoting the book because they were so happy with the kind of contents and with the, especially the kind of ideology that the book was promoting. And America used that book as a document to illustrate how well they treat their racial minorities. So, it is just a myth that there is racism in America. You see, we have an author, an author of Asian American descent who is writing her autobiography where she praises the treatment of the minorities at the hands of the American people and American government in particular.

Then there was another author called, a Japanese author this time, Daniel Okimoto. Daniel Okimoto, who wrote an autobiography called *An American in Disguise*. It was published in 1971 and this is another extension of the fifth Chinese daughter where the writer claims an affinity between Japanese Americans and the white Americans. So, there are a lot of things which are common between us and therefore, the only way we can seek harmony is by living peacefully together and by assimilating ourselves completely into the American culture and this book also became a major best seller. Now something else happened at the same time. There was a writer called Frank Chin and he despised writers like Jade Snow Wong and Daniel Okimoto for writing books of such, which were so clearly propagandist in nature, so accommodative in nature and he deeply resented the ideological contents of these books.

So, Frank Chin felt that there was a deep chasm between America's claim to democracy and its imperial march through Asia. So, Frank Chin wrote a seminal essay called *50 years of our whole race*, which was published in 1974. *50 years of our whole race* is an essay and it was published in an anthology of Asian American writings, *Asian American writers*, an anthology of Asian American writers, first book of its kind published in 1974 and this is what it is called.

I do not know how to pronounce it. Yes, so it has a couple of vowels running through it. It is called *I* anthology of Asian American writers edited by Frank Chin who contributed the seminal essay *50 years of our whole race*. He challenges the notion of which has been popularized by the Americans that Asian Americans suffer from this dual identity complex. He said that Asian Americans are actually treated badly and they are treated as emasculated citizens who are in popular culture. He must have come across this term called little yellow man.

The Chinese are treated like as if they do not have any courage or strength or anything. They do not know how to talk. They do not know how to, you know, they are not familiar with the sophisticated way of life. So, he criticized and condemned the popular American notions which supported such beliefs. He also lashes out against the white

American supremacy in this essay and he presents his culture, the Asian American culture as being extremely and this has become another very controversial idea.

Asian American is promoted, the culture is promoted as extremely masculine and heteronormative. I will read you an extract and that will give you the idea of what is masculine according to Frank Chin. This is the medium of culture and the people sensibility including the style of manhood. Language coheres the people into a community by organizing and codifying the symbols of the people's common experience. It has turned the tongue and you have lobbed off the culture and sensibility.

On the simplest level, a man in any culture speaks for himself without a language of his own. He is no longer a man. So, look at the repetitious use of man. So, Asian culture is masculine culture and Asian men are highly masculine as well as heteronormative and remember this comes in the wake of the famous stone wall gayroids. Do you know this that particular incident you did counterculture movement? Are you aware of this stone wall gay rights? There was a police raid in a gay club called stone wall inn in New York City and because there was a raid, the gay people fought back. So, it is famously known in history as stone wall rights, but it is not to say that there are no gays in the Asian American community, but they were not accepting.

The Asian Americans were highly reluctant to accept or admit to the presence of these people, the gay people in their community. The idea was to project themselves as highly heterosexual and highly masculine. We will continue with the lecture in next class. Thank you so much. Thank you.