Tropic of Orange as a New Direction of Ethnic American Literature

Songwut Jullanan[1] and Chusak Pattrakulvanit[1]
[1]Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University

Abstract

A number of Asian American writers in the past seek to subvert the stereotype imposed on them by Anglo-American through the assertion of new identity. In contrast, a Japanese American writer Karen Tei Yamashita, in her fiction *Tropic of Orange,* does not attempt to assert unidirectional identity of ethnic American. Instead, she diversifies identities of Asian American characters as well as combining several literary conventions. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to read the fiction against the backdrop of Asian American literary history and explore how the fiction follows Asian American literary convention. The result shows that through the use of hybridity and diversity, Yamashita manages to pave a new way not only for Asian American literary movement but also ethnic American movement as a whole.

Keywords: Ethnic American Literature, Tropic of Orange, Heterogeneity, Hybridity

ก้าวใหม่ของวรรณกรรมชนกลุ่มน้อยอเมริกันในโทรปิค ออฟ ออเรนจ์

ทรงวุฒิ จุลละนันท์[1] และ ชูศักดิ์ ภัทรกุลวณิชย์[1]
[1]คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์

บทคัดย่อ

นักเขียนเอเชียนอเมริกันในอดีตพยายามลบอัตลักษณ์ของชาวเอเชียที่ถูกสร้างโดยชาวอเมริกันผิวขาวโดยการนำเสนออัตลักษณ์ใหม่ให้แตกต่างออกไป นวนิยายเรื่องโทรปิค ออฟ ออเรนจ์ของนักเขียนชาวญี่ปุ่นอเมริกัน คาเรน เท ยามาชิตะกลับไม่มีลักษณะความพยายามที่จะลบภาพดังกล่าว ในทางตรงกันข้าม ยามาชิตะสร้างความหลากหลายให้กับอัตลักษณ์ของตัวละครเอเชียนอเมริกัน นอกจากนี้ วรรณกรรมชิ้นนี้ยังมีการผสมผสานระหว่างขนบการเขียนแบบเอเชียนอเมริกันและวรรณกรรมรูปแบบอื่นที่ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้จึงหันกลับมาอ่านตัวบทวรรณกรรมเทียบกับบริบทและประวัติศาสตร์การเขียนงานในขนบเอเชียนอเมริกัน ผลการศึกษาพบว่ายามาชิตะใช้ลูกผสม: (hybridity) และความหลากหลาย: (diversity) ในการสร้างวรรณกรรมชิ้นนี้ขึ้นผ่านทางการสร้างตัวละครและรูปแบบของวรรณกรรม ซึ่งทำให้โทรปิค ออฟ ออเรนจ์ มิเพียงสร้างงานแนวใหม่ให้กับการเขียนงานแบบเอเชียนอเมริกันแต่ยังรวมไปถึงวรรณกรรมชนกลุ่มน้อยอเมริกันด้วย

คำสำคัญ: วรรณกรรมชนกลุ่มน้อยอเมริกัน โทรปิค ออฟ ออเรนจ์ ความหลากหลาย ลูกผสม

> *"At home, Emi had a set with its own screening boxes. 'Look at this,' she had announced to Gabriel when she bought the thing. 'I can watch four stations at once if necessary.' This feature had almost finished the relationship. It was taking things to the edge when Emi tried it in conjunction with one of Gabriel's classic black and whites. He came back from the kitchen with Does Equis, salsa, and chips only to find Murder, My Sweet in the lower left quarter of the screen, competing with Hard Copy, CNN, and The Three Tenors..."*
>
> (Yamashita, 1997, p. 109)

The picture of a high technology television with an ability to feature several channels at once portrays a combination and interaction of several cultural products across time and space. The 1944 American film noir *Murder, My Sweet* is projected on the screen along with operatic singing group of the 1990s *The Three Tenors* which consisted of Spanish and Italian singers and famous American news outlet *CNN*. Projected on the screen of the television are thus different genres of medias from different places and times, moving across border, travelling in time and having been compressed into small space of the TV screen. This passage gives us a glimpse of the world of *Tropic of Orange* Yamashita created.

Tropic of Orange is a combination of several literary conventions and genres. The novel has an element of postmodernism, magical realism, and detective film noir. At the beginning of the book, Yamashita introduces HyperContexts which operates as the backbone of the book, combining messy elements and different ethnic characters (Pooch, 2016, p. 55): Gabriel Balboa, an American-born Chicano who works as a reporter in Los Angeles, Emi a fifth generation Japanese American, Buzzworm, an African American veteran, Bobby Ngu "a Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown" (Yamashita, p. 16), Rafaela Cortes, Gabriel's housekeeper in Mazatlan, Mexico, Manzanar Murakami, a Sansei or third generation Japanese American who quits being a surgeon and become a homeless conducting music out of the noise from freeway in Los Angeles, and Arcangel, a Latin American artist and poet. Through the HyperContext, these characters, despite different in their background, experience, nationality, and identities, are organized and compressed into the space of the book.

In term of narrative, the main plot of the story is that of Gabriel telling story of himself seeking news story from Manzanar and his attempt to build a house in Mazatlan,

Mexico. Along with Gabriel's story line run six other stories told by six different ethnic characters. Different though these characters seem to be, they are connected and the stories they told are also interrelated. Gabriel is in a relationship with Japanese-American Emi who turns out to be a niece of Manzanar, and he is a friend of Buzzworm, who is also his news source and who recommends him to interview Manzanar for the news story he is seeking, while Buzzworm himself consequently works with Emi for the *Newsnow.* Rafaela tells the story back and forth between her past when she lives with Bobby Ngu, her husband, in America and the present when she lives in Mazatlan with her son Sol as Gabriel's housekeeper during her separation from her husband. Rafaela later becomes friend with a magical character Arcangel who travels across border with a mysterious orange that distorts time and space in Los Angeles and wrestles SUPERNAFTA. This interaction between different ethnic characters creates what seems to be a network of multiculturalist characters within the space of global city Los Angeles and across border to Mexico. With the characterization of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural characters and the display of their interaction throughout the story, the inclusion of border-crossing, mass migration, an elastic border line dividing north and south attached to a mysterious orange, the events of drug trafficking, and illegal organ implantation, it comes as no surprise that *Tropic of Orange* are mostly not studied within the scope of Asian American literature.

Rachel Adams, for example, compares Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Tropic of Orange* to show the development of American literature beyond American literary postmodernism into what she calls "American literary globalism" because of the latter's inclusion of the issue of border and border-crossing, the ongoing context of globalizing process, the interrelation of the US and Mexico, the reference to non-European influential figures and Latin culture and language, as well as the author's employment of polyvocality as a means to tell the stories. Similarly, Melanie U. Pooch opines that *Tropic of Orange* manages to capture the fragmentation and ongoing process of globalization in Los Angeles, yet including criticisms of globalization, border, and identity through the creation of the network of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural characters, while Sue-Im Lee proposes that the novel offers a critique of the First World's unidirectional universalism. Although Yamashita identifies herself as Asian American writer, because the fiction features the interconnection between multi-ethnic characters and contextual event involving the

globalization such as telecommunication technology, the crossing of border, and the combination of several literary genres, critics have placed their focus more on the characteristics of globalization that the novel manages to capture. However, there are certain critics who emphasize the experience of Asian American in the novel, for instance Chiyo Crawford in her article "From Desert Dust to City Soot: Environmental Justice and Japanese American Internment in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange.*" Her main emphasis, however, is not to explore the whole novel as a part of Asian American literary movement but lies on the link between the text and context. She proposes that Manzanar's experience portrays the context of Japanese displacement during the World War II and demonstrates that several elements in the text that Yamashita uses signify the resistance against American oppression and racial discrimination. Therefore, in this article, I take a step back and look at the fiction in broader view against the backdrop of Asian American literary convention and discourse and proposes that the fiction has paved a way not just for Asian American Movement but for the ethnic literary movement as a whole.

In American culture, Asian immigrants were seen according to stereotypical representation of bad Asian, "a sinister villains and brute hordes, neither of which can be controlled by the Anglos and both of which must therefore be destroyed" (Kim, 1983, p.4) and good Asian or model minority, the subservient figure who succumb to dominant American in order to be accepted in American society. So, Asian immigrant writers from the early period tried to subvert stereitypes by asserting the new identity through the representation of Asian American apart from the picture imposed by dominant American culture. This attempt, however, lies on the essentialization of race and binary logic dividing Asian and American, as Youngsuk Chae notes, "most literary works presented by Asian American writers have been understood within hierarchical binaries of us/them, Self/Other, First world/Third world, and familiar/exotic. The hierarchical perspective in effect differentiates "Americans" internally into colored races (p. 13). The long-standing attempt of Asian American writers to assert the new identity of Asian American is challenged by the more recent theorist and critics, especially in the late 20th century which saw the emergence of postcolonial theory that celebrates such terms as hybridity, heterogeneity, and diversity. According to Bella Adams, heterogeneity emerges as a new, important theme of Asian American literature because of several reasons, for instance, the effect of Asian American

identity politics, other minority movements, the emergence of minority theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak and novelists such as Salman Rushdie, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan (pp. 143-6). Lisa Lowe in 1991 published an influential article "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences" in which she introduces a new approach to writing and reading of Asian American literature. She points out that, in the past, Asian American literature has been written and studied based on the binary logic of Asian and American and the essentialization of Asian Americans. The assertion of Asian American identity destroys the diversity among Asian Americans and Asian immigrants, as she says:

> *I want to suggest that essentializing Asian American identity and suppressing our differences—of national origin, generation, gender, party, class—risks particular dangers: not only does it underestimate the differences and hybridities among Asians, but it also inadvertently supports the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogeneous group, that implies we are "all alike" and conform to "types"; in this respect, a politics based exclusively on ethnic identity willingly accepts the terms of the dominant logic that organizes the heterogeneous picture of racial and ethnic diversity into a binary schema of "the one" and "the other* (p. 30).

According to Lowe, binary logic dividing American and Asian operates two ways based on "difference" and "sameness." The "difference" is to exclude Asian American because they are different from Anglo-American, while the "sameness" is to essentialize and unify Asian Americans (p.31). Drawing on Franz Fanon's proposal that binarism is the legacies of colonialism and in order to subvert it, one needs new order, Lowe cautions against politics of nationalism and separatism, while promoting heterogeneity and hybridity among Asian American as the site of resistance to dominant American ideology.

Yamashita utilizes this writing approach in *Tropic of Orange,* especially in terms of characterization. In the fiction, there are three Asian-American characters: Emi, Bobby Ngu, and Manzanar Murakami. In lieu of characterizing these characters as un-stereotyped and asserting the new identity, Yamashita diversifies them instead. In contemporary Asian American literature, readers definitely expect the representation of Asian Americans to be different from the old Asian American picture of them as subservient low-paid hard-workers. Surprisingly, in *Tropic of Orange*, Bobby is depicted just as that. Bobby is a character who

concerns very much about assimilation into American society. He works hard to buy material stuff for his wife, his son, and to pay for educational fee of his cousin. Nevertheless, he does all low-paid jobs, yet never complain about the discrimination or unfair payment. When someone tells him he can go back to Vietnam, "he don't say nothing. Pretends he was too little to remember," and when someone exaggerate about his cleaning work which implies that without him no one would do the job, "Bobby don't hold nothing by it" (137). It is no doubt that Bobby represents the stereotypical character of model minority. Nonetheless, Bobby is still connected to his root and his family back home: "Gonna fly back to Singapore and see his dad. Gonna see his sisters. See his nephews and nieces. Gonna bring the kid bro and the family along... "(Yamashita, p. 19. This remark clearly demonstrates that Bobby's identity is rooted Asian American.

Unlike Bobby who has rooted Asian American identity, Emi severs the connection quite harshly. "Maybe I'm not Japanese American," she says to her mother after being told that she does not behave and talk like Japanese American, and later in the story she refuses to accept Manzanar as her grandfather, the act which indicates her negligence of the Japanese American past. Instead Emi is depicted more as a modern American woman who is very much interested in technology and electronic devices. In sharp contrast to his niece, Manzanar does not care about material stuff, neither does he care about his position in American society as he gives up being a respectable surgeon to become a homeless who conducts music on a concrete podium above a freeway of Los Angeles, the place where people "most likely never noticed him" (Yamashita, p. 33). Yamashita employs a stereotyped character, Bobby, into the narrative as well as creating un-stereotypyped characters: Emi and Manzanar. Essentially, these characters are Asian American, but the juxtaposition between these three characters in terms of lifestyle, background, class, and gender highlights the diversity among Asian American rather than unify them.

Emi, Bobby Ngu, and Manzanar are represented differently with regard to background, gender, lifestyle, and more importantly the perception of their own identity. Though refusing to be Asian as I have stated earlier, it does not mean that Emi wants to integrate into American society. She even refuses being either Asian or American. The scene in which Emi is dining with Gabriel in a sushi restaurant, she said "cultural diversity is bullshit," adding later that "I hate being multicultural" (Yamashita, p. 111). Similarly, as

Crawford noted, Manzana's identity is blurring: "He may or may not be an ex-surgeon. Manzanar may or may not be his real name, and he may not have been born at Manzana" (Yamashita, pp. 88-89) Manzanar chose to walk away from being a respectable surgeon in America to be on the concrete podium that no one notices. And although the Japanese American community tried to get him down, the attempt was fruitless. Manzanar does not consider himself a part of Japanese community anymore. Manzanar becomes a man with no identity. Thus, Emi and Manzanar are not either Asian or American but neither Asian nor American. Their identity creates the third space that does not lie in the confinement of the binary logic. Although the narrator describes Bobby as a hybrid character: "a Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown" (Yamashita, p. 16), how Bobby perceives himself is different. He considers himself a rooted Asian American as he always thinks of one day he will return to his homeland. Emi and Manzanar's identities are different. Manzana and Emi's identity is the opposite. Furthermore, Manzana's decision to walk away from a comfortable life to be nobody implies a resistance to American and Japanese American ideology that defines a person by means of biology, language, or accommodation. Asian American characters' different perception of identity demonstrates that Asian American identity is not unidirectional.

Reading these characters against the backdrop of Asian American literature, it also seems that the three Asian American characters represent the different attempts of Asian American writers in their search for the new identities. The earliest Asian immigrant writers assert identity by linking Asian American to Asian root. Later, they seek assimilation by succumbing to the stereotype of model minority. The more recent attempts see Asian American identity severed from Asian root. Bobby seems to follow the convention of early Asian American literature, while Emi and Manzanar go after the latter. Yamashita manages to insert within the narrative both the diversity in terms of identities and literary conventions through the characterization of Asian American characters.

Other than Asian American characters, there are other minority characters, three of which – Gabriel, Rafaela, and Arcangel - are Latin American, with Buzzworm the only African American in the story. Yamashita does not only portray the diversity within Asian American but also in other minority. The identity of Latin American characters, like that of Asian American characters, is diverse. Several critics agree that Arcangel represents the history of

Latin American. Anne Mai Yee Jansen, for instance, states that Arcangel "represents Latin America from the moment of 'discovery,' embodying the complex history of contact zone resulting from European colonization, and is less human man... than the physical embodiment of Latin American culture and revolutionary politics" (114). A mystical figure who travels across border to fight SUPERNAFTA, Arcangel perceives himself as Latin American and feels the urge to fight against oppressive force from the North that comes with the North American Free Trade Agreement. Therefore, it is probable to state that Arcangel represents the rooted Latin American identity. In contrast, Gabriel is a hybrid character whose identity is unstable and does not root in Mexico. Originally from Mexico, Gabriel is an American-educated reporter who lives and works in Los Angeles. At the same time, he tries to build a house in Mexico in the hope that once it finishes he will move there. The house he is trying to build symbolically represents his hybridity. It is being constructed on the land of Mexico with "a kind of old-style ranchero, circa 1800, with rustic touches, thick adobelike walls and beams, but with modern appliances" (Yamashita, p. 9) while several trees around the house were brought down from the North. The combination between Mexican-style house, modern appliances and trees sent from the North makes the house hybrid, like Gabriel's identity. Gabriel's desire to relocate to Mexico is equivalent to attempting to reconnect with his own root, but as a hybrid, he is unable to do so without bump. Much as he wants to return, he is unable to abandon the fast-paced and vibrant life in Los Angeles "for the endless lull of a private paradise" (Yamashita, p. 41). Gabriel is wavering either to reconnect with his root or being American. In other words, he is unable to reconcile the two identities. His identity is thus unstable, so is the house he tried to build. If the house in Mazatlan symbolically stands for his attempt to reconnect with Mexican identity, the fact that it will never finish demonstrates Gabriel's endless process of trying to reconcile the two identities within him. Similar to Emi and Manzanar whose identity are neither Asian nor American, Gabriel's identity got stuck in the middle. It is not either Mexican or American but both at the same time.

In *Tropic of Orange*, the identity of minority characters as I have demonstrated, be they Asian American or Mexican American, breaks away from the binary logic and creates the third space. Therefore, unlike the past when there is either Asian American or Mexican American against American hegemony, Yamashita creates the space in which American

minorities coexist. In this sense, Sol can be a metaphorical representative of the new direction of ethnic literature. Son of Asian immigrant Bobby and Mexican Rafaela, he is Asian-Mexican. His identity cuts across the identity between ethnic minority and American and becomes the hybrid that destabilizes the binary logic having long upheld dominant American hegemony.

In terms of genre, *Tropic of Orange* does not follow single literary convention. Instead, it is an embodiment of several literary styles of writing, with its inclusion of such a dominant writing technique of modernist Western writers in the early twentieth century as stream of consciousness which she applies in the part of Bobby and magical realism that emerges in the mid-twentieth century in Latin America. Her use of magical realism is worth noting. To explain the history and characteristic of the term very roughly, magical realism originated from Franz Roh and later became a major characteristic of Latin American literature especially after the so-called Latin American Boom. Ben Holgate explains that Magical Realism is a genre that "presents the supernatural as an ordinary, everyday occurrence, integrated with realism" (p. 636), and several Latin American writers regarded it as the genre that represents the reality of Latin America. However, Jansen argues that celebrating magical realism as the sole reality of Latin America "exoticize(s) Latin American literature and ignore or, in some case, undermine the more political aspects of text" (p. 103). Yamashita must be well-aware of the problematic use of magical realism to the extent that she decided to diverse the reality within Latin America instead. In *Tropic of Orange*, magical realism is not the sole reality within Latin American space. Magical realist elements are present, most eminent in the part of Rafaela. In the opening of the book, Rafaela sweeps animals - an iguana, a crab, a mouse, scorpion, or even a snake – from Gabriel's house in Mazatlan, and "there was no explanation of any of it. It made no difference if she closed the doors and shutter at the first sign of dusk or if she left the house unoccupied and tightly shut for several days" (Yamashita, p. 7). Rafaela treats it as if it were something ordinary. She sweeps them with a broom or sometimes even uses a vacuum. However, her reality is not the only reality in Mexico. When Rafaela asks Rodriguez whether the crabs are normal in the neighborhood, he replies "Of course not. Who ever Heard of such at thing? It would take a man many hours to walk to the beach. But a crab!" (Yamashita, p. 58). Rafaela and Rodriguez's contrasting opinion towards magical moment creates the diversity of reality

among Latin American. Nevertheless, the term magical realism itself can be regarded as hybrid literary genre because it escapes from binary logic of either magic which has the connotation to uncivilization of the Third World or empiricism of the West. Rather, it is a combination of both. The genre thus refuses to establish the hierarchical position and creates the in-betweeness which is a fundamental characteristic of hybridity. The blend of several writing styles and genre therefore pushes the novel beyond binary of whether the book is Asian American or Latin American.

Several critics note that, despite identifying herself as Asian American writer and her works being included in Asian American literature anthologies, Yamashita does not write her work according to Asian American literary convention. However, it is noticeable that in *Tropic of Orange*, there are elements and themes that reflect the history of Asian American literature such as generational conflict and history of Japanese Internment. However, Yamashita does not focus solely on Asian American. She also gives voices to other ethnic minorities and blend in the narrative several literary conventions. As a result, *Tropic of Orange* became a space that Asian American connect with other ethnic minorities, erasing the binary dividing ethnic minority and American, be they Asian American and American or Mexican American and American. If the fact that Yamashita diversifies Asian American identity pushes its identity away from sameness to difference, her inclusion of other ethnic characters and the interaction among races are likely to be the force that unifies difference into sameness, demonstrating that all humans are the same. It is probable to state that Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* moves beyond Asian American writing and redefines ethnic American literature by breaking away from binarism that have long divided American minorities through the use of hybridity and diversity in the fiction's form, writing technique and characterization.

References

Adams, B. (2008). *Asian American Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

Adams, R. (2007). The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism. *Twentieth Century Literature, 53*(3), 248-272.

Chae, Y. (2008). *Politicizing Asian American Literature: Toward a Critical Multiculturalism*. New York: Routledge

Crawford, C. (2013). From Desert Dust to City Soot: Environmental Justice and Japanese American Internment in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. *MELUS, 38*(3), 86-106.

Holgate, B. (2015). Unsettling Narrative: Re-evaluating Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse through Alexis Wright's Carpentaria and The Swan Book. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 51:6,* 634-647.

Jansen, A. M. Y. (2017). (Dis)Integrating Borders: Crossing Literal/Literary Boundaries in Tropic of Orange and The People of Paper. *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S. 42(3),* 102-128. Oxford University Press.

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

Lee, S. (2007). "We Are Not the World": Global Village, Universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 53(3), 501-527.

Lowe, L. (1991). Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies 1(1),* 24-44.

Pooch, M. (2016). Karen Tei Yamashita's Los Angeles, *Tropic of Orange*. In *DiverCity – Global Cities as a Literary Phenomenon: Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles in a Globalizing Age* (pp. 165-204).

Yamashita, K.T. (1997). *Tropic of Orange*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.