

**Maternity in Velina Hasu Houston's Plays: *TEA* (1986),
Kokoro (*True Heart* 1994), and *Calling Aphrodite* (2003).**

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Objectives:

This paper sheds light on Julia Kristeva's concept of Maternity in Houston's plays *TEA*, *Kokoro* (*True Heart*), and *Calling Aphrodite*. It explores three stereotypes of the Japanese women registered in the Post-World War II history: the War Brides in *TEA*, the immigrant Japanese Woman/oyako-shinju mothers in *Kokoro*, and the Hiroshima Maidens in *Calling Aphrodite*. Houston in these plays emphasizes the strong tie between mother and child through all kinds of racial, social, and patriarchal discrimination they are subjected to.

Velina Hasu Houston has been writing plays from her transnational, multiracial point of view since the beginning of her career. Born of a Japanese mother and an African - American father, she questioned the single monoracial identity and the racial black-and-white binary division established in the United States since the days of slavery. Her personal heritage and upbringing naturally placed her in a challenging

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position to a society that is based on multicultural communities. Houston, does not like to be categorized as an Asian American writer preferring the term Amerasian.

Her characters in the selected plays *TEA* (1986), *Kokoro* (1994), and *Calling Aphrodite* (2003).have their own identities that dissolved borders and resisted subjected norms imposed upon them. Houston was able to give her characters double, triple, or even cross-gender roles as in *TEA*, by breaking chronological order, by going back and forth between different geographic spaces, or by passing boundaries between the real and the unreal, between the natural and the supernatural, or between the alive and the dead so that ghosts, spirits, illusions come into real life on earth as in *Kokoro* and *Calling Aphrodite*

1- Locating Velina Hasu Houston:

Velina Hasu Houston is of a Japanese, Blackfoot Pikuni Native American Indian, and African American heritage with historical ties to India, Cuba, and China. She was born on a military ship on international water en route from Japan to the United States in 1957; her birth is registered at the first post-occupation U.S base at which her father was assigned. She is the second daughter of Setsuko Takechi, a native of Matsuyama (Japan) and Lemo Houston, a native of Alabama. They settled in Fort Riley, Kansas which is one of the several army bases where the U.S segregated nearly one hundred thousand war brides. They consisted of Japanese, French, German, Italian, English, and later Korean and Thai women.

They married active-duty American servicemen in the period from 1946 to 1960. ("Velina Hasu Houston")

Houston is an internationally acclaimed playwright of over 60 plays as well as a published poet, essayist and screenwriter. She has published two anthologies of Asian American drama, one of them being the first anthology of plays by Asian American women. Houston is the recipient of fifteen playwriting commissions from distinguished institutions such as Manhattan Theatre Club, Los Angeles Opera, Asia Society, Mark Taper Forum, State of Hawaii Foundation on Culture and the Arts, Jewish Women's Theatre Project, Honolulu Theatre for Youth, and Mixed Blood Theatre Company. ("Velina Hasu Houston")

Houston is named the "Distinguished Professor", currently the Associate Dean of Faculty, Resident Playwright, and Founder/Director of the undergraduate Playwriting Program and Master of Fine Arts in Dramatic Writing at the University of Southern California. She continues to lecture around the world while teaching courses about playwriting and adaptation at the University of Southern California School of Theatre. For several years, she taught master classes in screenwriting at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Theater, Film, and Television.

The term "a female Amerasian" might define Houston's sociocultural identity. However, her strategy in her plays

echoes the Japanese war bride, or Japanese female, more than her own being. This results from her plays' favorite mimetic parody performed under the mask of Japanese immigrant woman . Houston says:

My life defies placement in any singular or traditional category. I am Amerasian, which means that I am neither Asian nor American (and yet both) and that I am neither native Japanese, Blackfoot-Pikuni, nor African American (and yet all three) — truly multiracial and multicultural. My rendering categories useless also is true of my artistic and academic worlds (*The Politics of Life* 3).

Houston evokes in the selected plays *TEA*, *Kokoro*, and *Calling Aphrodite* Julia Kristeva's concept of Maternity. Kristeva describes pregnancy and motherhood as the most sublime human activity compared to other biological functions. Kristeva argues that without motherhood, women remain extraneous and, therefore, most likely depressed or hysterical or both. She indicates that the very structure of maternal experience favors the metabolism of passion into dispassion through the place of the father, time, and the acquisition of language, all three of which provide the distance necessary for detachment required for turning passion into dispassion. (Kristeva 89) Thus, motherhood turns passion into dispassion through sublimation.

2- War Brides and Immigration:

TEA tells the story of five war brides who immigrated to the U.S with their American soldiers husbands Post-World War II following Japan's defeat, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the later occupation of Japan. As a part of the U.S military's resettlement policies, soldiers who were married to Asian women were stationed in remote bases. The play begins with the suicide of Himiko Hamilton, one of the five war brides, who appears as a ghost not seen by the other four women, whose fatal shooting of her abusive husband and the murder of her daughter pushed her to the edge of madness and suicide. The other four war brides gather at her home to clean it and drink tea in honor of her soul. The suicide of their friend forces them to reflect on all what they have endured to live in the U.S trying to set Himiko's spirit on a journey toward peace and resolution; a journey that is meant to be shared by the other four Japanese war brides. Thus, the title of the play implies a symbolic meaning of the ceremony of drinking tea as both a traditional Japanese culture and a successful procedure of serenity and self-restraint. Through those five characters, Houston invokes various stereotypical constructions of Asian American female identity.

Himiko is the heroine who suffered the worst familial, economic, sexual, and even maternal problems. She was illegally pregnant in Japan from Billy and anxious to leave her country. Himiko tells Billy, “You have to take me to America now. There’s no life left for me in Japan. People whisper

‘whore’ in the streets and spit at my feet. You brought the war into my heart” (21). Her bad luck continues after the war’s end when her mother drowns herself . Himiko remembers her mother's suicide after the war:

...Suddenly, she begins filling both sleeves with stones. I try to stop her, but she fights. The same stones I played with as a child sagging in her kimono sleeves, she jumps into the currents. I watch her sink, her long black hair swirling around her neck like a silk noose. Her white face, a fragile lily; the river, a typhoon. I wondered what it felt like to be a flower in a storm. (17)

Himiko watched her mother drowning herself escaping from starvation and inability to raise her little daughters well during the horrible times of World War II. Actually, none of the women seem confused or surprised by Himiko’s suicide. They do not wonder that such end was inevitable to her and her daughter. The women know Himiko’s history as the wife of an abusive American soldier and a mother whose eighteen-year-old daughter was murdered and violently raped. The shrewd Atsuko says, " At least none of our daughters turned out like Meiko Hamilton...Himiko was crazy and she drove her husband crazy"(28). Yet, Setsuko, Chizuye, and Teruko have a more sympathetic point of view of the poor Himiko. They appreciate her being a victim of worse familial, economic, marital, and maternal troubles than others.

The five Japanese war brides are brought by their American husbands to live in the promising America, but only to be broken on the seashore rocks of despair and disappointment in the troubled society of the U.S with all its ethnic and racial prejudices. All the women's feelings and struggles are revealed through the play. Despite the play starts with a deep tragic sense culminating through the events, the play ends with an overwhelming feeling of relief. Houston points out how the death of their husbands and the absence of the Japanese lifestyle which is the central object left them bare "ornaments".

Although their husbands died, they couldn't go back to Japan or assimilate to the American culture. They remained entrapped forever like Himiko between two worlds. By the end of the tea ceremony, they come to the truth of their situation that their hybrid girls are the only bonds which oblige them to stay in the U.S where the girls were born and raised. Again, the five women sacrifice for the sake of love, but it is another kind of love, "maternal". Himiko, as a result, commits suicide only when her daughter died as she realizes that she has no other motives to struggle for in a racist prejudiced society:

TERUKO: The only time we have taken tea together is whenever something bad happened to a Japanese "war bride". We have the best tea and realize how little we understand about each other's choices in husbands, in raising our children, in whether or not

we choose to embrace America. Americans don't want us. Japanese Americans too busy feeling bad themselves. We can't go back to Japan. That's why I say family is the most important thing. What makes us the most happiest? Our children. Our children.
(35)

Feminism in *TEA* reflects Houston's own perspective especially the five heroines and their five children are women. She emphasizes the strong relation between mother and child in *TEA* and in details in *Kokoro*. The social construction of masculinity requires preparing the boy for a future that lies outside the home while femininity requires preparing the girl for her future role as wife and mother. Beauvoir argues that in contrast to the boy, the girl remains more closely tied to the mother and to the body and develops her sense of self, as Singer puts it, "in a context of mirroring,... that is through the refractions of approval, recognition, and affinity with others" (329).

3- Parent-Child Love/Suicide:

Houston's interest in ancient Greek myth and tragedy in her work reflected another way of shaping a new identity that dissolves borders. Using the plot of the myth of Medea, Houston wrote *Kokoro* which was, also, inspired from true story. Yasako, the heroine of *Kokoro*, was abandoned by her Japanese husband who had an affair with another woman. She attempts to drown herself with her child (*oyako-shinju*),

parent-child suicide. She is motivated by her loss of hope concerning her future in the strange America where she failed to assimilate. The play's focus is on the cultural difference between Japan and the U.S. where oyako-shinju was not common and an infanticide was legally treated very severely.

Yasako's sense of being dislocated in the strange America is determined when Fuyo, Yasako's mother, dies after Yasako's departure from Japan. Fuyo's spirit follows Yasako up in a manner that suggests a Japanese Buddhist practice, the ritual of Bon in mid-summer, and in the Japanese folklore. Usui says, "Kokoro embraces the supernatural and transcendent moment of dead souls returning to visit the earth. Bon is one of the most important events in the Buddhist calendar, and it is held in mid-August in order to soothe the spirits of the dead"(181). Trying to motivate Kuniko to love the Bon festival and mourn for Fuyo in San Diego, she tells her that they will dance and have fun. Yasako also explains its spiritual importance to Kuniko in her story of the existence of a world beneath the sea where the mermaids guide lost souls to the next world. Moreover, Yasako's possession of Fuyo's ashes in an urn in her home reveals her strong attachment to Fuyo. Houston wrote:

YASAKO: Mommy tries to kiss, Kuniko, but it feels so strange. Do you remember how my mother taught you how to bow? (bows) Bow like this. Very good, Kuniko! (pause) Kuniko-chan, are you ready? Time

for O-bon festival. Put on your yukata.(O-bon music begins) We will dance under the lanterns and the moon, and welcome back my mother's spirit.

HIRO: (dismissing culture) Bon Festival's just old country folktale stuff. An excuse to eat and drink. Your mother's not here. She's ashes and dust. (11)

Yasako expresses her wish to reunite with Fuyo's spirit within a domestic atmosphere, time and place which are expanded into the supernatural and traditional elements of Bon Festival. Houston again discusses the issue of lost souls like Fuyo in *Kokoro* and Himiko in *TEA*. Both souls fails to adapt with the truth of immigration in different ways and they are depicted as Ghosts. Fuyo died because of her beloved daughter's departure to a foreign land, America.

Through *Kokoro* the readers/audience can obviously feel Fuyo's wish for Yasako and Kuniko to commit suicide in order to be with her. She rejects Hiro's way of American thinking trying to turn his family like him. Houston dramatizes that well without letting Fuyo's character speak, depending only on gestures. Also, Himiko in *TEA* commits suicide because of her failure to assimilate or even accept the truth of her daughter's murder. It is the Japanese belief of the powerful connection between mother and children that no mother can live after the death of her children, consequently oyako-shinju (parent-child suicide) becomes the solution. Houston presents in both plays a

great image of mother/daughter relationship; Himiko/Mieko in *TEA* and Fuyo/Yasako/Kuniko in *Kokoro*.

The tie in *Kokoro* between mother and child evokes Julia Kristeva's concept of maternity which emphasizes the mother/child relationship. Cheon points out, "Houston appropriates the oyako-shinju tradition of Japan to praise the Japanese Confucian culture of filial honor, which is at odds with the western theoretical tradition of father/child relationship... In Houston's plays, familiar or traditional images of the mother/child relationship are related to her appropriation of feminist theories" (38). It is also concerned with her 'homely Asianness' and its implication of longing for nationalism.

Houston invokes Julia Kristeva's maternity in portraying Yasako/Kuniko maternal love relationship. This instinctive love could push a mother to the edge of madness, suicide, or death when losing her child as in Himiko/Meiko relationship in *TEA* and Fuyo/Yasako/Kuniko in *Kokoro*. The gradual communication between Yasako and her American mother attorney proves Yasako's eternal bond with Kuniko and the Japanese parent's strong sense of affection and attachment to their children. Yasako says to her, "...we honor, no, we worship our children. In America, you have Mother's Day, Father's Day. We have Children's Day." (42). Children's Day was established in 1948, when the Japanese government aimed to create new national holidays under the new Constitution

with a wish that Japan would become a cultural nation through the setting up a holiday just for children. Yasako gave her daughter the name 'Kuniko' because it means 'child of the country'. She hoped Kuniko would feel like a child of Japan even while in America. Yasako's sense of obligation to her child is too strong to yield to separation by death.

Kristeva has supported maternity represented in pregnancy and motherhood as ways of working through the passion which makes people human rather than animals. Maternal passion, she argues, is a prototype of all human passion. She speaks of mother's side and explains how Mother is completely absorbed by emotions invested in her own body during pregnancy as the 'hollow' habitation of a future love-object that she will have to allow to become a subject. Kristeva describes this maternal progression as the 'miracle' of love. According to her, then, it is not primarily passion that is uniquely human but rather dispassion or the sublimation of passion, which is essential to maternal passion as successful mothering. (86)

Also, Kristeva claims that the good enough mother loves no one except her children because her passion is eclipsed by her detachment, which leads to her 'serenity'. Although such examples of good enough mothers, according to Kristeva, may be impossibility, this is why societies end up with some crazy mothers. A good example of this is Yasako in *Kokoro* who is preoccupied only with her daughter's issues. When she lost her

daughter, she becomes a victim of severe depression and seeks to end her life by any way. Hence, Yasako can be classified as a good enough mother according to Kristeva's concept and Houston's feminine stereotyping.

3- Hiroshima Maidens and the Dream of Maternity:

Calling Aphrodite tells the story of two sisters, Keiko and Shizuko, who are Hiroshima maidens victimized by an atomic bomb and they went to the United States to undergo plastic surgery operations. Keiko was the human goddess and flattered by men until she was disfigured and completely depressed by the atomic bomb. Shizuko, who was in every sense inferior to her sister, was also disfigured but saved by Christian faith and positive thinking. Shizuko, however, died at the end of the play by an overdose of anesthetic during her operation. A fictional Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, whom Keiko used to admire as her source of inspiration and faith, appears after the war to tell her the meaning of beauty, that is, in other words to foster hope from despair. Responding to this advice of Aphrodite, the play ended with optimistic words from Keiko who survived the war and the surgery, finally accepting the abominable scars on her body as a symbol of her hope. This sounded an optimistic message to the Japanese audience/readers who often consider the Hiroshima maidens' plastic surgery as U.S. propaganda to compensate for their actions in Hiroshima while many Americans think it a heroic and humanistic act rendered to the enemy.

Houston in this play evokes Julia Kristeva's concept of maternity which she focuses on in *TEA* through Himiko/Meiko relationship and in details in *Kokoro* through Yasako/Kuniko relationship. Kristeva's descriptions and interpretations of such theories do not depend on anatomic or psychological theories, but they deal with the feminine body concerning such issues as a lived experienced reality constituted in sensibility, emphatic-intuition, and movement. Keiko's realization of her idleness of being a real woman could be loved and bring children intensifies her war with people around her and even with herself. As Judith Butler identifies, "Kristeva understands the desire to give birth as a species-desire, part of a collective and archaic female libidinal drive that constitutes an ever-recurring metaphysical reality"(qtd. in Zerilli 117).

Kristeva celebrates maternity as an affirmation of the woman's subjectivity. Butler adds, "Kristeva indicates that as the female body has a material reality but no intrinsic and essential meaning apart from discourses of gender, so does the maternal body has a biological reality, but no cultural significance apart from discourses of motherhood" (qtd. in Zerilli 120). Both Keiko and Shizuko were haunted by the dreams of marriage and children before their disfigurement. After their infection with the nuclear radiance, Keiko realizes that she will never be able to achieve such simple intrinsic feminine dreams.

The deprivation of maternity decreases the feelings of her femininity according to the natural standards and people's concepts. Shizuko rebels against everything such as her parent's discrimination, her bad luck of ugliness, and even gods. She keeps mocking from Keiko's belief in Aphrodite and admiration of the western myths and movies, "...western myths are like Chinese water torture to me. Why don't you and Mother ever tire of them?" She blames Keiko (12). However, Houston portrays Shizuko as a hard worker girl who believes powerfully in Japan's victory in the war. Her feminine desires of love and maternity evokes Kristeva's maternity. She tells Keiko, "I want to be a good wife, the best wife and mother in all of Japan"(15). This dream of maternity never leaves her even after her disfigurement and infection with the radiance of the nuclear bomb. She says to Keiko just before her death during the operation:

SHIZUKO: If Dr. Everett can heal me, maybe someone I meet in the church will marry me...

KEIKO: I hope you find a nice husband.

SHIZUKO: And we will have children and they'll be healthy.(59)

Houston evokes' Kristeva call for the female's important and unique role in life in bringing species which constitutes a great part of her subjectivity. Hence, Keiko's deprivation of her beauty and possibility of maternity disintegrates her feeling with her femininity and subjectivity.

Houston presents in *TEA* and *Kokoro* two models of feminine suicide which appeared as a cultural and universal phenomenon in the twentieth century especially among young women. Both Himiko in *TEA* and Yasako in *Kokoro* resort to suicide as imposed solution to their maternal, marital failure as well as their inability to adapt with the painful truth of their immigration. Likewise, Keiko decides to commit suicide to escape from blaming herself for unforgiving her sister before her death, losing her beauty and her family, her inability to be a wife or mother in the future, and losing faith in any god, "I've had enough of my destiny. It's burned my skin, eaten my insides, and taken my entire family from me. What's left? What other gifts do the gods have waiting for me?"(65).She is like Himiko and Yasako who could find neither returning to Japan nor accepting their destinies solutions. Houston depicts through Keiko's character people's misconception of life, beauty, and even love. Aphrodite, who plays the role of counselor and an interpreter to Houston herself in the play, tries to get Keiko closer to forgiveness in order to understand the real meaning of life which will be unbearable if hatred and war controlled it:

APHRODITE: You're still at war, Keiko. With yourself.

KEIKO: I just want to go home.

APHRODITE: Killing yourself doesn't take you home. Going back to Japan isn't an answer either. There's no home for you until you stop fighting Fate.

The war's changed Hiroshima and it's changed you.
It's up to you to accept that and carry on.

....

KEIKO: I don't want anything to do with war.

APHRODITE: But that's why you were spared.

KEIKO: People can't even look at me. How can I help anybody?

APHRODITE: Through your beauty.

KEIKO: But I'm not beautiful anymore.

APHRODITE: You're more beautiful than you once were.

KEIKO :Don't. Please don't lie to me. I need the truth.

APHRODITE: Then stop thinking of beauty as if it's a painting you put on your face. Stop thinking about it as something tied to romantic and sexual love. By Zeus, I've had to live with that curse throughout time. Goddesses of love stand for maternal love more than any other kind of beauty. Though most don't understand that, it's that way with me and your own goddess Benzaiten and all the rest. That's the kind of love we all need in order to heal. You've been through so much. You have even more to give to others who've suffered because of war. (64-66)

Aphrodite's last words in this dialogue reflect the play's moral lesson of the real meaning of love and beauty. They are not connected to sexuality or the female/male relationship which

limits their broad meaning to physical issues. Houston points out that beauty lies "in the eye of the beholder", Dr. Everett says to Keiko, and love is not symbolized only in the sexual relation between male and female. Beauty lies in the feeling of helping others and love could expand to encompass all people.

Houston here evokes again Kristeva's maternity celebrating woman's essential role of bringing species and how mother/child relationship represents the most sublime form of beauty and love. She emphasizes that Aphrodite is a symbol of maternal love more than the sexual one people misunderstand and that beauty could be a curse more than a blessing if it is limited to sexuality. The ugly Shizuko realizes her inner beauty and love of helping the orphanages only after her disfigurement. On the other hand, Keiko has always narrowed her scoping of beauty and love to physical and sexual issues which with their loss, she lost the desire of living and co-existence.

Thus, *Calling Aphrodite* reveals Houston's attempt to find an ethical solution to such a difficult controversial issue by looking at it from an angle of how people can overcome atrocious memories of war and heal pain. She entrusts healing power as equal to hope as with that power, humans may be able to erase feelings of hate and hostility. It may then lead to dissolve gendered and cultural barriers, and avoid confrontations or battles.

Calling Aphrodite was the last cycle in the series of the long experience of the Japanese woman. Through a long journey of suffering both spiritually and physically, as pointed out in the selected plays, the Japanese woman and humanity, in general, could reach out to and placidly to forgiveness as the ultimate solution. This paper tends to indicate three stereotypes of the Japanese woman: the War Brides, the Homely Asian immigrants/ Oyako-shinju mothers, and the Hiroshima Maidens with their different experiences. Each model proved to be stronger and more resistant, not compared to each other, than the hard racial, cultural, patriarchal, and physical antagonisms they were subjected to.

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