

Saudade as the Recurring Theme in Ruth Ozeki's
A Tale for the Time Being and *The Book of Form and Emptiness*

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ABSTRACT

Ruth Ozeki herself, being a third culture kid, portrays her third novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* and the fourth novel, *The Book of Form and Emptiness's* from the perspective of third culture kids. Ozeki brings out the sufferings like identity crises and alienation they face in society for being a third culture kid. In *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, she explores the theme of grief through the characters Benny Oh and Annabelle with the sudden death of Kenji Oh and in *A Tale for the Time Being*, through Nao's character with the death of Jiko, a Buddhist nun and Nao's grandmother. Ozeki, with the help of Nao and Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being* and in *The Book of Form and Emptiness* through Benny Oh, Annabelle, Aleph/Alice and

Bottleman explores nostalgia. This paper explores the theme of *saudade*, identity crisis and its effects in the life of the specific third culture kids of Ozeki's novels.

Keywords: Saudade, Identity crisis, Third culture kid, Death, Nostalgia, Alienation, Grief.

Saudade, is a Portuguese/ Galician term with the meaning, "in Portuguese folk culture a deep emotional state of melancholic longing for a person or thing that is absent" (*Definition of Saudade*). It is a term that represents nostalgia, alienation and grief. The usage of the word *Saudade* in dictionary.com, "...is described as a kind of melancholy yearning. Melancholy means sad, and yearning is a strong, persistent longing or desire, especially for something unattainable" and its origin is "from Portuguese literally, "yearning," from Latin *solitat* -stem of *solitas* means "loneliness, solitude" (*Definition of Saudade*).

Ozeki uses *saudade* as the recurrent theme in her novels, *A Tale for the Time Being* and *The Book of Form and Emptiness* through the death of characters who are the most essential in the life of the protagonists. Along with that, to explore the theme of alienation and nostalgia she portrays her main characters as a Third Culture Kids.

"A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a child who has spent a significant part of their formative years living in a culture different from their parents' homeland and their birthplace" (Harmon, "Third Culture Kid (TCK)"). Third culture kids often have identity crisis as they always suffer to fit themselves in another culture. The culture they are living differs from their parent's culture which becomes the reason for their struggle to fit themselves in a particular culture. This makes them the outsider in their own homeland.

Ozeki, characterizes both Nao and Ruth in her novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* as third culture kids. Nao, after moving from Sunnyvale to Japan struggles to accept her identity as Japanese because she is brought up as an American till the displacement and also because her spoken Japanese is poor, this becomes the reason for her identity crisis. The constant bullying of her classmates pushes her further away from being a Japanese kid and makes her nostalgic toward her life in the USA. In addition, Nao's schoolmates never called her Naoko or Nao Yasutani. They call her, only as Transfer Student Yasutani or just Transfer student, as if she doesn't have a name, which changes Nao's identity into just a Transfer student. While Ruth, whose father is an American and mother a Japanese feel dejected about her life in the Coast Island after migrating from America and feels herself as a person alienated from her Japanese culture especially when she reads about the funeral procedure of Jiko. Thus, Ozeki explains the identity crisis of third culture kids and their struggles to fit in different cultural and social environment.

Again, in *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, Kenji Oh is a Korean Japanese father of Benny Oh, and Annabelle is an American mother. This makes Benny a third cultural or a multicultural kid whose identity is often multicultural with a complex identity. Though Kenji is a Japanese he never teaches anything about Japan to Benny. He is born and brought up as an American by both Kenji and Annabelle. Even when Benny plays with little boys whom Kenji brings along with Benny from school, Annabelle would worry because "...Benny was always the one getting massacred or obliterated..." (Ozeki, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, 20) because of his mixed-race features. Thus, identity crisis is used by Ozeki to portray racism and bullying in Ozeki's novels. She further uses the character Aleph/ Alice and Bottleman in her fourth novel to portray identity crisis as both the characters don't have clarity in their name. Bottleman's name Slavoj is never used by anyone except Aleph in the novel and Aleph is also adopted identity of her while her name remains mystery between Athena, Aleph and Alice in the whole novel as she likes to be called as Aleph.

A Tale for the Time Being, explores the sense of displacement through the characters Nao and Ruth. Ruth is portrayed as a writer who is in a long-term writing block and living in an island town in British Columbia called Whaletown with her husband. She finds a diary of a young girl named Nao. Both Ruth and Nao long for the past life they lived in America. Ruth has left Connecticut to look after her chronically ill husband along with her demented mother. While Nao, left Sunnyvale because her father lost his job and money and move to Japan. The theme of alienation and nostalgia is used by Ozeki through this displacement. This creates lots of struggles in Nao's life that she became suicidal.

Nao, after moving to Japan struggles to adapt the lifestyle of Japanese people especially with the distance she must maintain from her father as she and her father has much restriction in Japanese culture than that of the American lifestyle. Even in her school she is being bullied physically and sexually. Through this the bullying culture in Japanese and digital bullying is exposed. The bullying, her depressed father and his failed suicide attempts create more issues in Nao's life and makes her feel alienated in school and her own family. Her grandmother Jiko and her Buddhist preaching bring her out of her misery and guides her in life. Nao's feeling of loneliness while her schoolmates bully her is described by Ozeki through Nao and her words about her schoolmates and her daily routine after returning home.

... if Dad had happened to turn around to wave to me, it would have looked like good-natured fun, like I had lots of fun friends, gathering around me singing out greetings in terrible English-Guddo moningu, dear Transfer Student Yasutani! Hello! Hello! - and Dad would have been reassured to see me so popular and everyone making an effort to be nice to me....by the time we got through the doors of the school, I was usually covered with fresh cuts and pinching bruises... (Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 51)

To quote further, “Once I got home, my dad usually made me a snack, and I sat with him and did my homework or just surfed around on the internet, killing time or texting with my best friend in Sunnyvale, Kayla, who still liked me enough to hang out with me online” (Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 82).

On the other hand, Ruth after selling her home in Manhattan buys two houses and some acres of rain forest in Whaletown. Though the island she moves to is called as town it is just a locality where even electricity and internet connection are hard to get. A person who lived a city life in Connecticut finds it hard to adapt the lifestyle of island.

Through Nao and Ruth’s loneliness and longing for their past days in USA and Nao’s sufferings which she couldn’t share with anyone shows their alienation even after being with several people around them. Ozeki further explores alienation through isolated life of Jiko, self-isolation of Haruki#2 and Nao from each other and outer world. On the other hand, Ruth experiences alienation through social distance from outer world and because of network and electricity issues in the island which often makes her feel distanced from the world.

Displacement also makes the characters to compare their old lifestyle with the new and create nostalgia in them. In Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*, Nao often becomes nostalgic when she chats with Kayla. She constantly thinks about their life in America and the way they used to live there with their rental apartment life with a suicidal father who once used to be all dressed up and the breadwinner of the whole family. Even during the time when her father drops her at school, he checks the surroundings and pecks her a quick hug and head kiss which makes her think about how freely they can do that in Sunnyvale. She often thinks about her father, who used to be happy and relaxed in Sunnyvale while talking about his depression and self-isolation. While Ruth, often thinks about the way she used to walk in the New York city as she drives

in Canada where there are no coffee shops, restaurants and bookshops as she says how vivid and lively her life was there and the boring life she is leading here makes her feel aged. (Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 101)

Another character that is nostalgic in *A Tale for the Time Being* is Jiko, a Zen Buddhist nun and Nao's grandmother. She becomes nostalgic whenever she thinks or talks about her son Haruki#1, a *Kamikaze* pilot. She recalls about the war and its effect on people and her family situation for which her son lost his life and gone through strict training and severe bullying.

Nostalgia is explored through Benny and Annabelle in *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. Both often relives their time with Kenji through things or music which has a close contact with him. Especially his clarinet, music records, moon globe and his father's studio headphones to Benny and through Kenji's flannel shirts to Annabelle. Another way in which Benny comes to know about his parent's life is through the talking book, which becomes a tool to nostalgia. For Annabelle Kenji's dress becomes a tool to relive her life with him. To Benny the smells like hot chocolate, baked items and the talking book forces him to remember his father and the way he treated and helped him in everything. And to Annabelle hoarding things that makes her remember about Kenji becomes the key to nostalgia. In this novel nostalgia comes from grief of Kenji's death. Ozeki further provides life to books by making them talk with Benny and gives the nostalgic view of books as well in this novel where the books explain its deteriorating faith in their makers as they have made the books not only to record their thoughts but also give them short life as with technological development the books have lost their value as in the past.

In both the novels Ozeki uses death as the tool to evoke grief in the characters along with bullying, and war. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, the death of Haruki#1 and Jiko's death in Nao's life and the death of

Ruth's parents along with the dangers of island where death can come anytime and in anyway. Thus, Ozeki puts importance to the Zen Buddhist concept of Impermanence. Nao's grief doesn't end with death of her loved one, as even as a teenager she has to endure the sufferings caused by her schoolmates, constant fear and worry about her suicidal father and the Japanese society where teenage girl's safety is a question. As Ozeki's picture about Japanese life is filled with rape, bullying, murder, suicide and depression.

Ozeki uses Jiko and Haruki#1 to expose war and the forced recruitment of teenagers as soldiers by the Japanese government and their death in the war. Through war Ozeki gives us a vivid description of the effects of war through Jiko who becomes the voice of all those mothers who lost their sons, which becomes Jiko's Traumatic grief and Collective grief of the mothers who have lost their sons in war. Apart from war disasters like tsunami, Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown and garbage patches brings forth collective grief of everyone in the world.

Another type of grief that Ozeki shows through war and bullying is traumatic grief. Both the novel's protagonists Nao and Benny go through school bullying, which makes them to give up studies. The bullying Nao go through in the Japanese school makes her suicidal. This not only deprives them from education, but also creates sadness, fear, anxiety and makes them yearn their happy life in past. This yearning creates nostalgia and isolates them from their society. Annabelle is another character who experiences traumatic grief as a child because of sexual harassed by her own stepfather when her mother is in dead bed.

Ruth in contrast to Nao's words, "...Canada is safe" (Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*,46), gives an account of Island life as, "Rural life was perilous. Every year, someone on the island died or drowned or seriously injured...dangers were rife" (Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*,68). This constant fear causes Ruth to worry about her life in island and make her long for her city life which she thinks as a reason for her writing

block in her career. This writing block and her isolated life cause grief in her life. This loss of social contact becomes disenfranchised grief or social loneliness.

Apart from these Ozeki uses Ecological grief as a major aspect in both the novels. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, through Oliver and in *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, it is through B-man, Aleph and Annabelle's newspaper article collection about climate change. Oliver is an environmental artist who often talks about ocean gyre, garbage patches and reforestation which shows his concern for environment which leads to ecological grief. B-man is characterized as a differently abled person who collects waste bottles. Through his character Ozeki symbolically portrays him as a cleaner of the clutter that people create because of their attachment towards material things. Aleph through her snow globe series which Benny calls as "miniaturized global catastrophes" (Ozeki, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*,249), which represent Fukushima nuclear power plant melt down, 9/11 Twin Tower attack, New Orleans hurricane and about the world clutter. She even talks about global warming. Further the mention of earthquake and tsunami creates Ecological grief. It can be seen more clearly when she says she is going to stop making these snow balls as she says, "It's just more stuff. More junk, cluttering up the world.... but there is enough useless crap already without me adding more" (Ozeki, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*,251).

Ruth Ozeki uses *saudade* as her theme to portray the emotions of individual characters, their sufferings, and effects of cultural changes in her novels. Through these aspects Ozeki creates social and environmental awareness in readers. Theme of alienation becomes the restricting point of the characters which makes it difficult for them to find an identity in different cultural and social setting. Being the third culture kids Ruth, Nao and Kenji struggle to fit them in particular culture. Displacement, bullying and lack of attention from parents cause suffering in Nao, Ruth and Kenji's life. Benny on the other hand goes through bullying because of his mixed race and psychological issues.

Ozeki further makes her characters overcome their issues with the help of Zen Buddhist preaching. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki with the help of Nao's diary and metafictional writing help Ruth overcome her writer's block by bridging the parallel worlds of Nao and Ruth. To understand the content of the French diary of Haruki^{#1} and his watch, which she finds in the Hello Kitty box of Nao, Ruth communicates with several people which cures her social isolation. In *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, by making Annabelle understand the effects of material attachment and through the book *Tidy Magic*, by a Zen Buddhist nun makes her give up her habit of hoarding. With the help of Aleph, Bottleman and Dr. Melanie, Benny becomes better and leaves the psychiatry ward.

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