

## Original Paper

# Ugly Feelings in Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Wash*

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### Abstract

*As a contemporary Japanese American playwright, Philip Kan Gotanda is noted for his realistic family dramas. The Wash, as his pivotal work, explores the perpetual impacts of racial discrimination and internment camp experience on Japanese immigrants. Although The Wash (1987) has been the object of intense critical study, there are more focus on identity formation, characterization and thematic concerns. This paper uses Sianne Ngai's theory in her perspicacious book Ugly Feelings in which Ngai systematically proposes seven ugly feelings, namely, animatedness, envy, irritation, anxiety, stuplime, paranoia, and disgust to interpret predicaments implied in the affect signs. By analyzing the reasons and aftermath of Nobu's three ugly feelings, paranoia, stuplime, and disgust, the author of this paper argues that Nobu is both the victim and victimizer of racial discrimination. As a victim, the protagonist's negativity is originated from Camp trauma, racism, and traditional Japanese ideology. As a victimizer, his negative feelings inflict in her kinsfolk and intergroup. By writing the collapse of a small family, Gotanda creates a miniature while hints continuous and detrimental influences of systemic racism and interminority racism.*

### Keywords

*The Wash, ugly feelings, Philip Kan Gotanda, racism, Sianne Ngai*

### 1. Introduction

Philip Kan Gotanda (1951-) enjoys a great reputation in play writing. He is a Sansei who was born in Stockton, California. Most of his literary creations deal with family issues and the traumatic writings of the Camp during and after World War II, such as *A Song of Nisei Women* (1980), *Ballad of Yachiyo* (1981), *The Wash* (1987), and *Fish Head Soup* (1991). Gotanda has utilized his understanding of the historical context of racism on the Japanese American community to investigate its current implications. His plays have also expanded to investigate other tensions within the Japanese American community. *The Wash* is the first Gotanda's work to attract mainstream attention. It depicts a collapse of a Nisei family. Nobu, the male protagonist in this play, is a Nisei in his 68 years. Masi is his wife and Marsha

and Judy are their daughters. The whole play begins with a troublesome relationship within this family community. Nobu and Masi are in trouble and the wife chooses to separate after 42 years of marriage because her husband always treats her as a woman of ignorance. The Sansei daughter Judy also irritated Nobu by virtue of her disobedient marital affair with an African American and gave birth to a hybrid baby. Nobu's emotion is intricate and imbued with the whole conflicts. In the beginning, he presents his indifference towards his wife and daughter. After bitterly disappointed, Masi meets a Japanese widower Sadao and finally chooses to remarry. But this remarriage vexed Nobu who insistently reckoned Masi wouldn't leave him. Then he carries a gun and intends to kill Sadao so as to persuade and beg his wife to stay. But all his efforts are too late and in vain. This play is not only a typical ethnic work, but damages the limitations of the genre, reaching out to reveal marital dilemmas and some social issues. On the one hand, this play deals with some traditional themes of Asian American writing: the marital plight, and the assimilation versus traditionalism. On the other, this play copes with unfamiliar topics like old characters' desire and inter-minority racism. With the concerns of all-encompassing themes, *The Wash* not only breaks the iceberg and digs out the universal memory shared by all Japanese Americans, but also glance at the inner world of the elder Japanese Americans for the mainstream audiences.

Internment Camp, the forced resettlement by the U.S. government of thousands of Japanese Americans to camps during World War II, is an essential context shaped in *The Wash*. After American president signed Executive Order 9066 in 1942, the U.S. military possessed the authority to exclude Japanese Americans from designated areas. They were given few days to settle their affairs and gather as many belongings as they could. Many individuals and families lost almost everything because they were forced to sell their property, including estates and businesses within that period. Internment Camp is a painful experience and complex event that cannot be fully understood except through multiple political, social, and psychological issues for all Japanese Americans, especially for Nisei and Sansei. The Camp experience sets the historical context in most of Gotanda's works. In an interview, Gotanda has claimed that the camp experience of his parents is a psychic scar that continues to inform his works and life on a "conscious and on an unconscious level" (Ito, 2000, p. 175). Considering the fringe position that Asian Americans still remain, his purpose in writing plays is to break the silence and speak out. Thus, Gotanda's literary creations are political and cultural statements, as well as an exploration of Japanese American identity.

## 2. Literature Review

Generally regarded as a typical realistic family play in late-twentieth-century, Gotanda's *The Wash* has been the object of intense critical study both abroad and at home. To date, several studies have investigated identity formation, female characterization, and thematic concerns of the camp experience abroad. Besides, domestic studies mainly include two master theses focusing on trauma writings and ethnic identity.

At abroad, Muthana (2016) provides a multilevel exploration of the play. This article analyzes the character's different attitudes towards Japanese and American cultural values. By analyzing such differences, this article divides the main characters into three groups. By investigating the contexts, the author first interprets Nobu's and Masi embraced different Japanese American identities. Furthermore, it delves into the dramatist's intention of creating such differences among characters. The author reveals that Gotanda wants to claim full integration and isolation from the mainstream may result in the loss of identity. Ismail (2021) has a detailed interpretation of the themes and characters of *The Wash*. The author explains the inner thoughts of Nobu and Masi and the different attitudes towards the traditional Japanese cultural between Nisei and Sansei. Thus reveals a ineradicable conflicts of assimilation and traditionalism within ethnic groups and their offspring.

The domestic study of *The Wash* contains two aspects. Two master thesis, Hsiao-Mei Hsieh (2019) and Tse-Hsuan Lo (2020) focus on the trauma writings and ethnic identity. The former argues that Gotanda's family plays transcend the trauma of the time and space of World War II, and present the struggle of national identity issues and contradiction under the impact of different eras. The latter thesis uses Jean Kim's theory to explore the identity stages of the different characters.

Preview studies are enlightening to understand characters and thematic concerns but with more focus on the ethnic identity and Camp trauma from different perspectives. This paper shifts the focus from the identity to microscopic affect signs and adopts Siaane Ngai's discussion of ugly feelings to analyze the ethnic character's predicaments suspended in the play and to find the root causes of such family dilemmas.

### 3. Method

Sianne Ngai (1971-), whose theory of ugly feelings was included in the third edition of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* in 2018, is acclaimed as the "insightful and inventive theorist of the turn to affect" (qtd Lefan, p. 5). *Ugly Feelings* is her first book in which Sianne Ngai systematically proposes seven negative feelings: animatedness, envy, irritation, anxiety, stuplime, paranoia, and disgust. The whole book includes seven chapters and each one illustrates an ugly feeling through Ngai's interpretation of many "emotional negativity in literature, film, and theoretical writing" (p. 1).

Emotion and literature share some interrelations. Date back to Greece, Aristotle discusses literature's capacity to arouse emotion in his *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, the aesthetic feature of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear and thus to achieve eventual catharsis. But until 2000, some theorists turned to theorizing emotion, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Brian Massumi and Ngai. Different from the vehement or grander passions like anger and fear, minor and disreputable feelings are favored in Ngai's study. Ngai uses a metaphor of bestiary. She claims that ugly affects are rats and possums rather than lions, and its categories of feeling are weaker and nastier. And unlike rage, ugly feelings have something in common. First, they cannot be sustained indefinitely; And they are less dramatic but have a remarkable capacity for duration. According to Ngai, "negativity" of the feelings includes three levels: experientially negative, semantically negative, and syntactically negative (2005, p. 11). Thus these

feelings conjoin predicaments from multiple registers, showing “sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas” (Ngai, 2005, p. 12). However, ugly feelings are antisentimental aesthetic, in contrast to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sentimental politics. It is precisely these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action that magnifies their power to diagnose situations, including those marked by “blocked or thwarted action.” (Ngai, 2005, p. 27). Thus the strength of Ngai’s theory resides not in the historical detail it will supply, but in mobilizing affective concepts to investigate a wide range of dilemmas.

#### **4. Paranoia, Stuplime: Nobu’s Experiential Negativity towards Family**

In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai distinguishes three levels of negativity, all of which pervade ugly feelings: experiential negativity, semantical negativity, and syntactical negativity. Experiential negativity because it evokes displeasure, semantic negativity because they are “saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values,” and syntactic negativity because they are “organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction” (2005, p. 11). The explanation for why the ugly feelings work so well to connect predicaments from other registers, showing how formal or representational ones are created by sociohistorical and ideological predicaments, is because of these multiple levels of negativity.

Throughout the drama, there are two unresolved predicaments between the husband-and-wife relationship and the father-daughter relationship, which can be condensed into Nobu’s two ugly feelings, namely, paranoia and stuplime. These two feelings contain experiential negativity or dysphoric negativity that evokes pain or displeasure.

##### *4.1 Marital Predicament*

Firstly, through Masi’s memory sequences and his behaviors, Nobu is a man of paranoia. He rejects trying a different design of the kite, always sit in the same seat of the restaurant with the same dishes. He also rejects to stop blaming Masi’s different hook size and rejects admitting his fault for treating his wife badly. He is adherent to traditional patriarchal ideology. In one word, he is a self-centered man. In chapter seven, Nagi discusses paranoia, a species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a “holistic and all-encompassing system rather than a mental illness” (p. 299). The all-encompassing system in Nobu’s heart is the traditional patriarchy. Nobu is fear of losing Masi, but he is still obstinate to traditional Japanese ideology. Iga proposes six fundamentals of traditional Japanese ideology in “The Japanese Social Structure and the Source of Mental Strains of Japanese Immigrants in the United States”. According to Iga, two important values are authoritarianism and traditionalism. That means “patriarchal relationships have been stressed more strongly than the family council” and they “cling tenaciously to the old patterns of civilization” (1957, p. 274). Unlike dramatic feelings, paranoia has a remarkable capacity for duration. It is prone to producing the confusion between subject and object, obscuring the “subjective-objective boundary” (Iga, 1957, p. 335). Nobu’s paranoia seems to perpetuate his whole life. Like Masi says: “You and Papa. Proud. Stubborn” (Gotanda, 1990, p. 62).

Secondly, Nobu also possesses stuplime towards Masi. Stuplime means a “strange amalgamation of shock and boredom” (Ngai, 2005, p. 2). In chapter six, Nagi argues that stuplime provides a liminal position in which one is paralyzed concerning conventional ways of making sense, and utter receptivity in which difference is “perceived before its qualification or conceptualization” (p. 261). Different from terror, stuplime involves exhaustion. When Nobu rushes into Sadao’s house with a gun, he finally gets the answer about Masi’s absence from the dance in the Camp. He “suddenly has no desire to meet Sadao” (Gotanda, 1990, p. 72). Besides, instead of accepting the divorce, Nobu just feels exhausted after the shock of Masi’s “betray”. Although stuplime offers no transcendence, it does offer a feeling of distinction that allows for some resistance to the general systems that drive social life. At the end of the play, Nobu has “never turned around to look at Masi” (Gotanda, 1990, p. 73). He just watches his noisy TV like what he has done at the beginning of the play.

Both Nobu’s paranoia and stuplime provoke experiential negativity of displeasure, and the root causes are related to the lifelong impacts of the adherence to traditional Japanese ideology and Camp trauma.

#### *4.2 Father-daughter Predicament*

What’s more, Nobu also has a predicament with his daughter Judy of her “disobedient” marriage to an African American husband and bred a hybrid son. As a traditional Japanese father, Nobu’s paranoia is not only towards his wife but also towards his daughter Judy.

In Iga’s article about the Japanese social structure, the author categorizes six traditional Japanese ideologies. According to, collectivity-orientation and authoritarianism emphasize kinship ties. In other words, “no children should rebel against their patriarch” (1957, p. 274). In the play, Nobu and Judy have a very direct quarrel. Nobu insists that every Sansei must marry a Sansei by saying: “Tak’s son married a Nihonjin (Japanese), Shig’s daughter did, your cousin Patsy”. But Judy says: “Sanseis don’t like Sanseis” (Gotanda, 1990, p. 63).

Thus, on the one hand, the father-daughter predicament can be seen as the conflict of the generation gap between Nisei and Sansei. On the other hand, it is also a tension of Nobu’s paranoia towards old Japanese ideology.

### **5. Disgust: Nobu’s Semantical Negativity towards Society**

Different from the other six feelings, Ngai pinpoints that disgust is the most intentional and dynamic feeling of the seven types. This suggests that disgust has a concrete object and has semantic negativity, in contrast to paranoia or stuplime, which have a suspense agency and have experience negativity. This kind of negativity has a direction and it is “saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values” (Ngai, 2005, p. 11).

In this play, it is obvious that “socially stigmatizing meanings and values” are represented by American systemic racism and Nobu’s inter-minority racism. As both a victim and a victimizer of racism, Nobu shows his disgust not only towards other races but his own race. Although the latter is weaker, it is also detrimental to Nobu’s integration with the Japanese community.

### *5.1 Disgust towards Other Races*

Disgust, according to Ngai, does not solve the dilemma of social powerlessness but “diagnose it powerfully” (p. 353). More specifically, disgust is never prone to producing the confusion between subject and object that are integral to most of the feelings discussed in this book. Whereas the obscuring of the subjective-objective boundary becomes internal to the nature of feelings like paranoia, disgust strengthens and polices this boundary.

Nobu’s disgust has a very obvious object—the other colored races. He is both a victim of systemic racism and a victimizer of inter-minority racism. In the play, Nobu doesn’t like “white people”, “black people”, or “Mexicans” (Gotanda, 1990, p. 60). Because of his disgust towards black, he refuses to admit his daughter’s husband and their hybrid son Timothy as his family members. And thus he makes a mess of kinship. He is alienated from the other races and only connects with the Japanese. His disgust towards other races results in his loneliness at the end.

### *5.2 Disgust towards His Own Race*

Compared with other races, Nobu’s disgust towards the Japanese is very implicit. But he still has disgust towards Shig, the boss of a store. During the war, the Japanese were forced to sell their property within a short period. Masi’s father lost all of it at that time. And Nobu should have to work in a store. In the play, Nobu says: “Shig, all day long ordering me around, ‘Do this, do that.’ I even gotta get up five o’clock this morning to pick up the produce...and he yells at me if it doesn’t look good in the cases” (1990, p. 53). He is disgusted with his work and his boss because of the disrespect. But the economic condition determines that he must continue his work with a negative feeling. Thus, the root causes of his disgust towards Shig are the economic condition and his dignity. What’s more, Kiyoko, a restaurant owner and a widow, shows affection to him. Nobu’s attitude towards her is imbued with slight disgust. When Kiyoko tries to give an embrace to him, he pushes her away. When Kiyoko prepares a birthday surprise for Nobu, he reluctantly blows the candles and shows his upset because of his daughter’s presence. The root reasons not only originate from his traditional Japanese ideologies but lie in the Camp trauma. After the unpleasant and awkward birthday party prepared by Kiyoko, Blackie, Kiyoko’s friend, pinpoints the reason of Nobu’s behaviour: “You buggas from the mainland all the time too serious” (Gotanda, 1990, p. 59). In “Japanese American Internment”, the author points out that there is “different treatment of Japanese Americans in Hawaii and on the West Coast” (Gayle, 2009, p. 452). During WWII, Japanese from the mainland suffered more mistreating than people from Hawaii. Nobu’s disgust towards Kiyoko is the consequence of the Camp trauma.

## **6. Conclusion**

Nobu’s paranoia and stuplme towards his wife and daughter eventually led to the collapse of the family community. His disgust toward society eventually leads to Nobu’s loneliness. The root causes of such feelings originated from Camp trauma, racism, economic condition, and an entrenched adherence to traditional Japanese ideology. He is both a victim and a victimizer. Besides, in two levels, namely,

experiential negativity and semantical negativity, his paranoia, stuplime, and disgust are a manifestation of the interpretations of predicaments of ethnic groups in American society. Although he comes to recover at the end of the play, the broken relationship cannot be repaired. But at the end of the play, Nobu gives the kite to Judy's son, showing his intention to change the predicament. Kite thus is a kind of symbol of compromising, which reveals the author's yearning for a more inclusive world within ethnic groups.

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