

Time, Optimism, and Perseverance in Toshio Mori's "Tomorrow is Coming, Children"

Karen OSHIMA

(Received October 28, 2011)

Toshio Mori is considered the first Japanese American writer to ever have a book of fiction published. He writes about the Japanese American experience and his stories show the "inherent resilience and integrity of the human heart" (Kim 165). Mori, a Nisei born in Oakland, California in 1910 to Japanese parents from Hiroshima, considered becoming a baseball player, a Buddhist monk, and an artist. From his reading of dime store novels, he became aware of the stereotype of Japanese Americans in American popular fiction. At 22, he began writing in the hope of breaking the stereotype by showing the universality of the human spirit. He was inspired by his mother and by the short stories of such writers as Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Guy de Maupassant, and Anton Chekhov. Although he worked long hours at his parents' nursery, he reserved his last 4 hours each day to write stories about the Japanese American community he knew. After many rejection slips, he published his first story "The Brothers" in *Coast* magazine. In 1942, he and his family were sent to the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah where he continued writing and contributed stories to the camp literary journal, *Trek*.

His first collection of short stories, *Yokohama, California*¹, survived a long journey to publication. He wrote some of the stories prior to his internment and also following it. The book had been accepted for publication in 1941 but Pearl Harbor hindered its publication and it was not published until 1949. At this time, the story "Tomorrow is Coming, Children" written in 1943 was chosen as the lead story because, as Lawson Fusao Inada points out in his 1985 Introduction, Caxton Publishers wanted to "soften history, to start with by-gones and get into the book in a positive way" (xx). In other words, it was an attempt to make the book more palatable to an American public that still harbored feelings of distrust toward Japanese Americans even after the war. In addition, William Saroyan, in the original edition's introduction, praised Mori as "one of the most important new writers in the country at the moment" and commented on the universality of the characters—that they are men and women first before they are Japanese. Despite these efforts, the book fell into obscurity until a group of young Asian American writers discovered it in a second-hand bookstore in 1970. This rebirth for the book and for Mori's career echoes what Inada asserts about "Tomorrow is Coming, Children"—that it is a story about remembering and perseverance: the story teaches "history, interpretation, survival tactics, strategy—in the guise of a bedtime story" (xxii). Remembering prior struggles and the strength that helped them to survive along with the idea of time as an ally play a significant role in the telling of the story and convey the narrator's intended message to her grandchildren. From her conscious point of view, the passage of time in "Tomorrow is Coming, Children" holds the key to the past, present and future for the Japanese Americans in the U.S. The optimism she verbally expresses, however, unexpectedly reveals the underlying psychological wounds caused by the internment and a history of frustrated dreams.

To start with, the very title "Tomorrow is Coming, Children" shows a concern with the future and the people who represent the future, the narrator's grandchildren. Johnny and Annabelle belong to the third generation (Sansei) and are, like their Nisei father, American citizens by law. Their grandmother, however, is an Issei and, as a non-white resident alien, she is ineligible for citizenship. Regardless of generation and citizenship status, they are interned in a concentration camp because of their race, no longer able to have normal lives in Oakland, nor go to school with neighborhood friends. This disruption in their lives is especially traumatic for the children. Thus, the grandmother tells the story of her past, her own journey from doubt to

acceptance, in order to help them cope with an unbearable present and an uncertain future². She begins the story with "Long ago....," a phrase that is often used at the beginning of fairy tales and perhaps appropriate since she will be talking about a faraway and foreign land.

The narrator transports her grandchildren to the past, when she herself is a young woman getting ready to leave Japan. Her husband lives in San Francisco and sends her money for her passage. Her family and friends fear for her to be going to an unknown place on the other side of the world, particularly in light of strained relations between the two countries. Predicting war, they also attempt to dissuade her from leaving by speaking of the loneliness of immigrants but her husband's vivid descriptions of San Francisco spur her determination to go forward toward an unknown future :

(I)n my dreams I saw the San Francisco your grandpa wrote about : San Francisco, the city with strange enticing food ; the city with gold coins ; the city with many strange faces and music ; the city with great buildings and ships. (15)

His description harks back to the gold rush days in California when people believed that fortunes could be easily won. In addition, the practical reality of having "bought (her) ticket and (her) things (being) packed" makes her feel that there is no turning back. Instead, she says that she "was looking ahead, thinking of your grandpa and San Francisco" and dreaming of a bright future (16).

However, she then recalls her doubts about the future when she is seasick on the ship heading to America. Her illness and that of those around her make her wonder if she has made a mistake and that she should have stayed in her village. She begins to imagine that the ship turned back for her but then remembers that "(a) steamer never turns back for an individual. Not for death or birth or storm. No more does life" (16). Her attention is drawn back to her grandchildren and to the present. She tells them that once things are set in motion one can only move forward and that there is no turning back.

At this point, her mind returns to the present and she speaks of her old age and impending death. This upsets the children who have already lost their grandfather but she tells them again that life goes on. As such philosophical musings are difficult for children to understand, she speaks of loss by referring to Annabelle's experience of losing a quarter as an example. The grandmother has borne the loss of her husband, a son, her parents, and her friends in Japan. Despite such heavy losses, one must go on, she tells her grandchildren. She speaks to them of a future without her, further clouding the already dark present.

The grandmother then returns to the past and tells them of when she first sees the "golden city of dreams" and finds the reality quite different from what she expected. Unlike the green hills of Japan, she sees "dirty, brown hills" but she tries to encourage herself by reminding herself this is *her* San Francisco. Remembering Japan, which is now her past, makes her sad so she makes an effort to embrace the present and her new country. She is soon forced to relinquish another symbol of her past, her lovely kimono, when her husband shakes his head at the sight of her Japanese clothes. He makes her dress like an American, telling her that "You belong here" (17). Her immediate adoption of Western clothes again signifies her willingness to accept a present very different from her past³.

These initial sacrifices are easy compared to the experiences she must face in her new life. Far from being a place of gold coins, her life in San Francisco, the city of her dreams, does not show much promise. In spite of her husband's rosy descriptions, she finds that her husband has no money and an empty, small house without furniture. Even worse than their living conditions, she and her husband find themselves victims of racial attacks with people yelling at them, throwing rocks, and smashing their windows⁴. Hiding in the house, she is again assaulted with doubts and regrets, fearing for the future. Her husband's only response to her is a look that "seemed to say, 'Just a little more time....a little more time'" (18). In the face of financial difficulties and racial violence, waiting for hardships to pass is seen as the only solution.

Things change for the better when the narrator befriends the white American wife of a Japanese acrobat. Mixed marriages between Asians and whites were rare and actually illegal in many states, including California⁵. Therefore, this couple, like the Japanese immigrants, is on the fringe of American society, unable to be part of the American mainstream. The white woman is happy to make the acquaintance of the narrator and, despite

the language gap, they can communicate on the basis of both being outsiders. In addition, the American wife, understanding her language difficulties, strives to speak simple English and shows interest in the narrator's native region of Satsuma in Japan. In this way, they enjoy each other's company and alleviate their shared sense of isolation and loneliness. This first friendship along with the birth of her first child, the father of her grandchildren, results in her feeling that she is finally "at home" (18).

For the Issei, their Nisei children strengthened their sense of belonging in the U.S. The narrator's eight children along with the years she has spent in America further enforce her attachment to the country despite being unable to speak English well or be naturalized. Although she remembers her brother and sister in Japan and their desire for her to return, she chooses to stay in America because she feels that "I belong here" (20). Mori shows the shift in her feelings from her husband asserting that she belongs here when she first arrives to her now being able to declare this for herself. She believes that time has enabled her to do this and she comments upon her current feelings about their American hometown :

Yes, time is your friend in America, children. See, my face and hands are wrinkled, my hair gray. My teeth are gone, my figure bent. These are of America. I still cannot speak English too well, but I live among all kinds of people and come and go like the seasons, the bees, and the flowers. Ah, San Francisco, my dream city. My San Francisco is everywhere. I like the dirty brown hills, the black soil and the sandy beaches. I like the tall buildings, the bridges, the parks and the roar of city traffic. They are of me and I feel like humming. (20)

She claims to have fully embraced her adopted country and come to like even things that had initially repelled her like the "dirty brown hills." She speaks of freedom to come and go, as if their present situation is forgotten. Considering that she is in a concentration camp when she tells her story, this unlimited acceptance of the country that has mistreated them is both ironic and rather sad. The hard years she has spent in the U.S. to gain acceptance have brought her old age along with resignation. Though she is trying to boost the spirits of her grandchildren, she seems to also be trying to convince herself of possessing a degree of belonging that she may not actually feel.

Her grandson, Johnny, cannot understand her stoicism and her stubborn sense of belonging inspite of being incarcerated. In an off-handed manner, she attributes this to his youth, assuming that he will understand when he is older. She expresses a wish to be buried in America, which reminds her of the deaths of her brother and sister, the siblings in Japan that she never saw again. She implies that by simply staying in the U.S., she has attained a sense of belonging. Yet, she expresses some divided feelings when she exclaims, "My mother country and my adopted country at war!" This fact is the cause of all they suffer and the one line in the story that rings most true. As she waits for the homecoming of her son, Mamoru, in Europe and having lost one son already, she can only hope for the future of her grandchildren as her own life is drawing to a close.

Her tone continues to be dark as she speaks of life being "harsh" and war "painful." She blames the war for their internment but makes no comment about the role of the U.S. government. Despite their hardships and her understanding of the horrors of war and how it "upsets personal life and hopes," she insists to her grandchildren that war has some "good points" (21). When Johnny questions her about them, she has some ready answers :

Well, you learn your lessons quickly during wartimes. You become positive. You cannot sit on the fence, you must choose sides. War has given your grandmother an opportunity to find where her heart lay. To her surprise her choice had been made long ago, and no war will sway her a bit. For grandma the sky is clear. The sun is shining. (21)

Here Mori has the narrator attempt to voice the "good" aspects of war and what has happened to the Japanese Americans. She speaks of lessons but does not specify what they are. She also says that "You become positive," but "embittered" is a more likely response to what has befallen them. Although she tries to sound optimistic, the expressions she chooses in regard to what war has brought them are either obligatory or passive in nature yet she insists that they have had a choice in what has happened. She seems to be in denial, trying to convince herself that being put into camp has made her more certain of her loyalty to America.

The reality is that Japanese Americans had no choice for they were forced into concentration camps and were forced to choose sides. It was because they shared the same blood as the enemy that they were interned and robbed of their civil rights. As a result of the loyalty questionnaire given to the internees, they literally could not "sit on the fence" as they were forced to declare a willingness to join the army and to forsake loyalty to the Emperor. For the Nisei, if they answered "yes" to the second question, it was as if they were admitting previous allegiance to Japan; for the Issei, it would mean that they would become stateless, people without a country. This was hardly an "opportunity"—it was a heart-rending choice, which tore some families apart. Like the narrator in the story, many Issei were willing to renounce Japan for the sake of their children. Her Nisei sons had replied in the affirmative and were risking their lives in battle. Although she says that "(f)or grandma the sky is clear," it is difficult to reconcile the harsh reality with her overly-optimistic attitude. The fact that she sends the children off to bed before they can reply, seems to further emphasize that she is aware of the inconsistency between her encouraging words and their actual circumstances. Her last words which are the title of the story seem to voice a desire to both tell the children to be prepared for tomorrow and a desperate wish for tomorrow to come soon.

The original intention of "Tomorrow is Coming, Children" was to show that the Japanese Americans managed to get something positive from their internment experience and were looking forward to the future. In having an Issei narrator speak of the attachment she came to have for her adopted country after many years of hardship and encouraging her Sansei grandchildren not to give up hope for the future, Mori expresses a positive message that would not alienate the white reading public. But the advice the grandmother ultimately gives the children is for them to persevere or "gaman" in the best Issei tradition, a concept foreign to Americans. With perseverance as the common thread, the past, present and future blend together seamlessly as the narrator moves back and forth through time. Having struggled for many years, the narrator stubbornly insists that she has become a part of the country in order to show her loyalty to America. Her assertion that there are some "good" points to war seems forced as she goes to great lengths to justify internment. The sudden end of the story also hints that the grandmother has run out of things to say to justify what has happened and can no longer find any more words of encouragement. All she can say to her grandchildren is the reminder that "tomorrow is coming" and with it, perhaps, a better day. Mori, who was in camp when he wrote this story, may have felt that this simple message was the most optimistic thing he could say in such an impossible situation. Although the publication of *Yokohama, California* had been delayed for 8 years, it was still ahead of its time, for those who could understand it were too busy rebuilding their lives and did not want to relive such a traumatic past. Luckily for future generations, however, Mori's stories will help them to understand, remember and honor the past, to persevere in the present, and to look with optimism to the future.

Notes

1. Toshio Mori, "Tomorrow is Coming, Children." In *Yokohama, California* (Seattle : U of Washington P, 1985). Subsequent references to this edition will be made throughout the text.
2. Mori commented in his interview with Russell Leong that he thought "the relationship between the Issei, the first generation, and the Sansei, the third generation, (was) much closer" than that of the Issei and Nisei. Since the Nisei were trying to prove themselves loyal Americans, they disassociated themselves from Japanese culture whereas Mori believed that the Sansei had "more interest in their historical background, Japanese customs and traditions."
3. The Japanese immigrants wanted to avoid exclusion so they tried to conform at least externally to the American way of life. The Japanese believed that Americans discriminated against the Chinese for not wearing American clothes and they wanted to show that *they* could assimilate.
4. Despite their efforts to assimilate, anti-Japanese feelings were common, particularly in California. The 1913 California Alien Land Act, which restricted Japanese from purchasing agricultural land, and the 1924 Immigration Act, which put an end to all Japanese immigration, are two examples of the legal means used against the Japanese. There were also cases of violence in which white men in the tradition of the KKK drove out Japanese workers, threatening them with lynching (Ichioka 251).

5. Anti-miscegenation laws in California dated back from the 1880's. With the increase of Japanese immigration from that time, the law was expanded to make marriages between whites and "Mongolians" unlawful (Yoo 78).

References

- Ichioaka, Yuji. *The Issei : The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924*. New York : Free Press, 1988.
- Inada, Lawson Fusao. "Introduction to the 1985 Edition." *Yokohama, California*. Seattle : U of Washington P, 1985. v- xxvii.
- Kim, Elaine H. *Asian American Literature : An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia : Temple UP, 1982.
- Leong, Russell. "An Interview with Toshio Mori." *Unfinished Message : Selected Works of Toshio Mori*. Berkeley : Heyday Books, 2000. 213-238.
- Mori, Toshio. "Tomorrow is Coming, Children." *Yokohama, California*. Seattle : U of Washington P, 1985. 15-21.
- Yoo, David K. *Growing Up Nisei : Race, Generation, and Culture Among Japanese Americans of California, 1924-49*. Urbana : U of Illinois P, 2000.

This paper was supported by the MEXT Grant-in-Aid for Challenging Exploratory Research (23652064).