

The Time Being and Its Disidentification With the Modern Liberal Order

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The Time Being is a concept that is rooted in the here and now, cognizant of the importance of every action in a moment that can prevent harm and promote goodness. Such moments have the power to leave enduring impressions that transcend time and location. This idea of a time being is one that Ozeki uses to emphasize the historical ties and influence of her characters. It also assists readers in recognizing the similarities between historical oppressive systems and the ways in which they can endure. Kandice Chuh also addresses the notion of applying anti-Western philosophies to better understand oneself in order to disassociate and dismantle contemporary structures that have the potential to damage and skew the perception of our shared humanity. Through Buddhist philosophy, Dogen Zenji's concept of a time being, and disidentification with demanding neoliberal structures, the novel's characters are able to discover new perspectives on life and develop a new sense of self that enables them to want to live. Ozeki finds ways to give her characters a stronger sense of self by drawing on Buddhist teachings. Through Zenji's teachings, Nao, her father, and great-uncle, find peace and consolation in worlds that are too focused on future comforts that can be destructive to the present self.

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Introduction

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki incorporates teachings of Buddhist philosophy to showcase her characters' progressions in developing their sense of self. A sense of self that is grounded in the present and aware of the significance of each action in a moment that can spread goodness and avoid harm. Such moments can cut across time and space, leaving lasting imprints. This is the concept of a time being and it is a concept used by Ozeki to highlight her characters' connections and influence through history. It also helps readers acknowledge the parallels between oppressive systems of the past and how such structures can permeate through time. Kandice Chuh's excerpt, entitled "Making Sense Otherwise," also grapples with the idea of using anti-Western philosophies to better make sense of the self to deconstruct and disidentify with modern structures that can harm and distort the idea of our common humanity. In this excerpt, Chuh uses characters from *A Tale for the Time Being* to share her views on the need to redefine the modern concept of humanism. Through the teachings of Dogen Zenji's notion of a time being, through the lens of Buddhist philosophy, and the disidentification with demanding neoliberal structures, characters in the novel, specifically Nao and her father, are able to find new

ways of looking at life where they are able to derive a new sense of self that allows them to want to continue living.

Ozeki illustrates the philosophy of the time being throughout the novel to emphasize the connections of her characters through time, space, and history. At the start of the book, a time being is defined as “someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 3). In other words, a being who has or had, or will exist in time. It is a view of time that encompasses all beings of all times and places living simultaneously. It is a view that rejects the linear progression of time that distracts us from appreciating the current moment. According to scholar Rein Raud, this is the Western perception of time that comes from Aristotle’s *Physics*. Aristotle defines time as, “the numerical expression of movement in respect to ‘before’ and ‘after,’ and it is continuous, because it is the derivative of a continuum” (Raud, 2012, p. 153). This definition presents time as a linear progression, it is in opposition to the now, in opposition to the moment. The moment, as Raud points out, is not durational, it exists outside of this linear perception. Buddhist philosophers have historically rejected the Western view and have continually embraced immediate existence. Chuh also sets out to reject the Western view of time that leads people to devalue the present to prioritize future gains. According to Chuh, modern liberalism has sought to emphasize and maximize the freedom of the individual, such as the individual’s right to property, happiness, prosperity, etc. However, Chuh points out that this thought has been abused where people’s growing concerns over their future success and freedoms have created a world in which we are increasingly indifferent to each other and the present moment in pursuit of our own success. For instance, “The affirmation of meritocracy as a neutral metric and corollary disavowal of the sociality and historicity of the individual is part of the ideological support accompanying and subtending the upward distribution of capital and resources in the neoliberal era” (Chuh, 2019, p. 76). In other words, the more we grow concerned over our individual capability to bring about our own success, the more we forget our origins as social beings living in harmony with each other and our environment. Today, we view the Earth’s resources as potential products to exploit and make money off of with little regard to how these actions may affect others. In the neoliberal era, such actions are praised and seen as deserving of riches because you as an individual were able to use your prowess to gain wealth for yourself, taking charge of your freedom.

The protagonist of *A Tale for the Time Being*, Nao, first learns of the term, time being, through a poem her great-grandmother Jiko, a Buddhist nun, had sent to her when Nao questioned the idea of lost time. The poem goes, “For the time being, words scatter... Are they fallen leaves?” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 24). The idea of a time being comes from Dogen Zenji, an ancient Zen master who wrote about this philosophy about eight hundred years ago. He is also one of Jiko’s favorite authors. Jiko insinuates that there may not be such a thing as lost time. After all, fallen leaves don’t necessarily disappear, they travel with the wind through space and time before decomposing back into the Earth, never truly losing their mark on the planet. Raud quotes Zenji in a translation by scholars Abe and Waddell to help clearly state his view of the time being, “There is only the immediate present, in which all time and being is encompassed. This is true of me and of all other dharmas as well” (Raud, 2012, p. 161). Hence, emphasis is placed on the momentary, rather than the durational.

Chuh praises Ozeki’s notion of a time being, “This is a condition of simultaneity; it is every time at once, and the presence of every place in every other. And it is, I will suggest, this sense of time and its cognate onto-epistemologies that allows us to reckon with the foundational and ongoing violence rationalized by

liberalism” (Chuh, 2019, p. 77). Here, Chuh acknowledges that the idea of time being can be something that helps us understand the faults of Western rationalism that view time as a resource to be exploited for future gains. Chuh uses Ozeki’s notion of a time being as a tool to develop her own philosophy of disidentifying with modern rationalism, she calls it “illberral humanism.” In the preface to the excerpt, Chuh explains that illberral humanism is a philosophy that seeks to “bring forward an understanding of human beingness to be defined not by discrete and self-possessed individuality but instead by constitutive relationality” (Chuh, 2019). Furthermore, she uses the term reckon as a way for us to grapple with the idea of humans as beings “not in but of time” (Chuh, 2019, p. 78), in other words, imagine ourselves as time beings. As such, the idea of time being can make us more aware with how we connect to each other as humans and through our environment, where we can slowly disidentify with the notion that we must prioritize our individuality and individual gains at the expense of others.

The notion of time being is one of the central themes of which the protagonist Nao builds her understanding as the novel progresses. Early in the book, Nao describes feeling isolated from her surroundings and those around her, as if she doesn’t exist in time. For instance, “I was unreal and my life was unreal, and Sunnyvale, which was real, was a jillion miles away in time and space, like the beautiful Earth from outer space, and me and my dad were astronauts, living in a spaceship, orbiting in the cold blackness” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 79). After moving back to Japan, the country of her ethnic origin, from California after having grown up there, Nao struggles to relate to the new environment. Her dissociation from her environment, bullying from classmates for being too American, and the dire living conditions she finds herself in with her family lead her to want to commit suicide. However, Nao finds solace in Jiko, who is the most important person in her life. Jiko lives a life that is antithetical to the modern neo-liberal mindset that tells you that in order to be successful you must hustle, you must have an active role in improving your country’s economy. Modern Tokyo exemplifies this with its high emphasis on work culture, where everything is about speed and productivity. Nao feels as though she hasn’t done anything productive in her life which makes her feel less worthy of a person. For example, “What am I supposed to do? It’s not like I can fix my dad’s psychological problems, or the dot-com bubble, or the lousy Japanese economy... or getting bullied in school, or terrorism, or war, or global warming, or species extinction, right?” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 169). Here, Nao vents her frustrations to Jiko about how displaced and insignificant she feels, where it’s not only her personal life that overwhelms her, but the greater political conflicts of the time. This is why she’s drawn to Jiko, who is wise and experienced yet lives a purposefully slow life.

Nao feels as though her lack of productivity and her poor performance in school will mean that she will lack future economic success. The idea that she may not have a successful career is something that she feels would lessen her self worth as a human. Chuh says that such an idea of failure comes from modern rationalism. For instance, “Dominant rationalism serves as the explanation for, rather than being understood as a condition of, the success of a few and the failure of most: failure is rationalized by asserting freedom of individual choice and behavior, evidence of which is found in the success of those few who heroically surmount history to achieve individual success” (Chuh, 2019, p. 76). Hence, dominant rationalism tells us that if we are not productive at generating wealth then our impoverishment is justified and there will be no other way to find success. For Nao, this thought is deeply troubling, leaving her feeling stuck and having strong senses of despair over her future, enabling suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, this thinking ignores the complex structural inequalities that they may be vulnerable to that hinders our capability to achieve economic success. For Nao, her public school does not

provide a safe environment for her to succeed in; she faces harsh bullying, neglect from teachers which prompt her attendance problems and is not able to afford better schooling or move to a new home. Despite her being intelligent, this environment lets her feel lesser than. As such, Chuh notes of neoliberalism, “violence and devastation of and against the well-being of both people and the planet are its logical conclusions” (Chuh, 2019, p. 77). Accordingly, Ozeki’s work highlights how modern ideas of success can negatively affect one’s well being when they are faced with barriers towards their economic success.

Through Jiko’s Buddhist teachings, Nao gains a new appreciation for her sense of self and identity. After learning about Nao’s anger at the world and her abuse from classmates, Jiko gives her instructions to develop her superpower, or as she says *SUPAPAWA*. Jiko teaches her the primary ritual of Buddhism which is the meditative practice of *Zazen*. According to Jiko, Nao has to do it every day to develop her *SUPAPAWA*. Nao learns that *Zazen* can help ground herself and become more in tune with the nature of her being and to find peace with her surroundings. For instance, she describes *Zazen* as a feeling of coming home no matter where you are, “*Zazen* is better than a home. *Zazen* is a home that you can’t ever lose, and I keep doing it because I like that feeling, and I trust old Jiko, and it wouldn’t hurt for me to try to see the world a little more optimistically like she does” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 183). By the end of the summer with Jiko, Nao admits that because of *Zazen* she became stronger, not just physically but mentally as well. Days before Nao was supposed to leave back to Tokyo, Jiko and Muji threw her a going away party where she experienced a tender moment with Jiko that made her acknowledge her changing attitudes. Jiko sings along with the song “Impossible Dream” from an old Broadway musical that strikes a chord with Nao. For instance, “It’s a sentimental song about how it’s okay to have impossible goals, because if you follow your unreachable star no matter how hopeless or far, your heart will be peaceful when you’re dead, even though you might be scorned and covered with scars like I am while you’re still alive” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 243). Nao identifies with this message and realizes that Jiko sang it specifically for her. Later on in the story, when Nao is back at school, she still experiences bullying and harassment. In an unfortunate event, she gets attacked in the restroom after school. Before they could abuse her sexually, Nao summoned her superpower and they then scurried away. For example, “They were only shadows, and as I listened to them arguing, I felt my face relax into a gentle smile. I summoned up my supapawa, and soon the shadows were just mosquitoes, buzzing in the distance and bothersome only if you let them be” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 277). Thinking she had fainted or died, the attackers didn’t want to be found associated and ran off. For the first time, she didn’t feel like she had to belittle herself and found a way to take some power away from her bullies.

Despite gaining a greater sense of self from Jiko’s teachings, the letters of Haruki #1 truly shifts not only Nao’s perspective on life but her father’s as well. Initially, Nao had the assumption that Haruki #1, her great-uncle, was a brave soldier who purposefully died for the good of his country. In questioning whether Haruki hated Americans as a World War II fighter pilot, Jiko responded by saying, “Haruki never hated Americans. He hated war. He hated fascism. He hated the government and its bullying politics of imperialism and capitalism and exploitation. He hated the idea of killing people he could not hate” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 244). Nao finds this fascinating and immediately Haruki becomes her new hero. Jiko tells her that Haruki would’ve liked her as she’s smart like him. When hearing this, Nao is taken aback as she realizes no one ever called her smart or likable, allowing her to see herself in a new light. Nao could see herself in Haruki as he was a young college student who liked to write. However, Haruki was studious and appreciative of academics. It is not until Nao and her father

read his secret French letters that they get a true sense of who he was and what he died for. For instance Haruki writes in addressing his mother, “I am more grateful now than ever for the way you raised us, teaching us the value of kind-ness, of education, of independent thinking and liberal ideals, in the face of the fascism that is sweeping our country” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 320). Nao and her father realize that he truly did hate being in the military; hated its culture of intimidation. He was forced into becoming a kamikaze pilot to fulfill imperial desires that were absurd to him but he had to do it to protect his family. Chuh acknowledges modern rationalism justifies war and the imperial project as a means to expropriate foreign land and find ways to turn it into property to fulfill self-proclaimed ideas of a nation’s “manifest destiny” (Chuh, 2019, p. 79). With this thinking, modern rationalism can be used to justify settler colonialism and modern nationalism where individual citizens are judged not on their human qualities but on how much they can contribute to the realization of such imperial, capitalist goals; individuals are turned into dispensable cogs in a machine, operating to fulfill the goals of the greater nation. As Chuh notes, “Beaten severely and daily by his training officer, Haruki #1’s experience of military patriotism exemplifies the violence of exclusionary nationalism’s reliance on turning persons into the machinery of war” (Chuh, 2019, p. 92). Such a divorce of self from one’s body and environment is antithetical to Zenji’s teachings. Zenji would view such nationalistic ideals as false ideological fallacies as goals of conquest go against living practices that embrace immediate existence, distorting our relationship with others where we justify their subjugation and death, justifying their dehumanization. Hence, Chuh pinpoints that a refusal of such logic is necessary to reject inhumane practices that operate in the name of the liberal order. This is exactly the struggles that Haruki is dealing with in the military, specifically the conflict between his desire to reject imperialism and his desire to protect his family.

What strikes Nao and her father the most from the letters is the fact that Haruki did not want to die. To help find peace in the face of imminent death, Haruki turned to the teachings of Zenji. For example, he writes in speaking of time and being, “They are not separate. They are one thing, and in even a fraction of a second, we have the opportunity to choose, and to turn the course of our action either toward the attainment of truth or away from it” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 324). This is a key passage that teaches how critical each moment is, and how each action can lead us closer to the truth. Despite his circumstances, he finds peace in the thought that even after death, many instances will arise providing an opportunity to do good because this is what the world needs to counteract all the misspent moments that lead to war. In the end, he lived by his truth. He steered his plane away from the enemy plane and flew into the sea. Here, Ozeki’s theme of rejecting the possessive individuality of Western culture is illuminated. Haruki is a figure who sacrificed himself in rejection of such ideals in service of relationality over rugged individualism. Chuh writes that relationality is irrevocable, it contradicts the liberalist perception of individual autonomy and posits the individual as being part of the historic conditions that leads to the “figuration of the plural singularities that is time itself” (Chuh, 2019, p. 87). In other words, relationality acknowledges that our connectedness to each other and our environment is fundamental to our nature and our origins on the Earth.

Upon reading this passage, Nao’s father gets emotional. He realizes how similar he is to his uncle. Both men have had to deal with choosing between being complicit in war or destroying their life. Additionally, Nao, her father, and her great-uncle have and are living under demanding systems that penalize you if you do not conform. Through learning more about her father and great-uncle, Nao experiences further change in her sense of self. For

instance, “I felt so stupid and young, and at the same time something was cracking open inside me, or maybe it was the world cracking open to show me something really important underneath. I knew I was only seeing a tiny bit of it, but it was bigger than anything I’d ever seen or felt” (Ozeki, 2013, p. 387). Learning more about the truth of her father and of her family’s history allows Nao to acknowledge that there is so much about the world that she is yet to understand; that there is so much about history that has shaped her world and continues to influence it. Despite the lack of economic opportunities, through his uncle’s words of finding the significance of each moment, Nao’s father is able to find new inspiration to get back into programming. Nao is also inspired to continue her passion for writing as she admires her great-uncle’s dedication to knowledge as a means to find hope under an oppressive structure. As Haruki #1 writes, “Forget the clock. It has no power over time, but words do” (Ozeki, 2013, pp. 322-323). Hence, his character, through his long-lasting influence that transcends time, exemplifies what it means to be a time-being.

Moreover, Haruki’s emphasis on how critical each moment is helps further the notion of a time being. As Chuh writes of the entanglement between Haruki and Nao’s stories, “They serve as ways of providing an understanding of being as constituted by moments upon moments, each of which represents a possibility, a decision, an orientation, and each of which is at once not-one and not-two, not-same, not-different, in that they exist infinitely, in every possible relation” (Chuh, 2019, p. 93). Nao and her father learning of Haruki’s true story changes the trajectory of their characters where they are able to find a greater sense of peace in relation to their inner selves and their environment. Hence, each moment we have has the ability to create profound change, Haruki’s momentary actions have created a lasting mark in time, forever influencing past and future.

Conclusion

Overall, through Buddhist teachings, Ozeki is able to find methods to allow her characters to develop a greater sense of self. Through Zenji’s teachings, Nao, her father, and great-uncle, find solace in worlds that are too focused on future comforts that bring detriment to the present self. Thus, by acknowledging their place in relation to time and space, Nao and her father realize that the world needs more examples of peaceful beings to restrain the influence of obstructive influences. It would be a moment misspent if we did not try to be such an example. Chuh points out that Ozeki wants us to reckon with the idea of a time being not in the sense of seeking justice under capitalism but in working towards bettering collective life and living despite it. To create meaningful change, we first need to start changing the way we view ourselves in relation to others and the planet; to take charge of moments to spread goodness, having a knock-on effect on the time-space continuum, influencing generations to come to disidentify with the damaging ideals of the modern liberal order.

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