

"talking to the dead"



Talking to the Dead is a short story cycle that is set in Maui during the period between the end of World War II and Hawaii's transformation from an agricultural to a tourist-based economy during the 1970s. The book paints a picture of the Japanese community in Luhi, a fictional coastal town reflecting Hawaii's unique physical environment and intermingling of indigenous and immigrant cultures. The novel alternates its focus among the different age groups, sex, and race of the villagers. It incorporates various ethnic groups, among which are Chinese, Hawaiian, Japanese, and Caucasian. The main aim of diversified races is to demarcate the concept of discrimination among individuals from developed and less-developed regions.

The story is admired for its balance and subtle, yet passionate handling of the subject matter, particularly in regard to the themes of progress versus preservation and Hawaii's local and indigenous cultures. Watanabe's treatment of conflict between old and young is identified as a central strength in the story. In addition, the story's insightful depiction of the older generation and women's struggles to balance the demands of traditional culture against the 20th century's American is clear.

The author uses the character, Aunty Talking to the Dead, to demonstrate the traditional belief in the society. She is old, wrinkled, and has little body, an evidence that she has outlived other characters in the story. Therefore, she is endowed with traditional beliefs in the society. The author describes the character's physical appearance to show the age difference and experience between her and other characters:

" She was little—way under five feet—and wrinkled, and everything about her seemed the same color—her skin, her lips, her dress—everything just a slight different shade of the same brown-grey, except her hair, which was absolutely white, and her tiny eyes, which glinted like metal....." (Watanabe 2)

Positioned as a protagonist, she takes on major roles in the story. She is stoical and unsusceptible in the whole story. In addition, she is exemplified by the author as a traditionalist, as she undertakes to treat the dead body in a traditional way. Her son, Cinton, demonstrates modernity by initiating the development of a modern Paradise Mortuary. Though Aunty perceives that it is against the traditional customs, Clinton retorts that "... Damn it, Mama! You're making yourself a laughingstock!" (Watanabe 4) This implied that traditional customs were outdated and uncivilized, especially in the case of treating the dead body.

The name, Aunty Talking to Dead, denotes the activity that the character undertakes in the story. Ideally, when reading the character traits, one can speculate on her activities and prompts for the reader to read the whole story. When undertaking her activities, she threatens the society on the need to resort to the traditional customs in order to mitigate shortcomings. As such, individuals are motivated to support her, as they fear that the worst may befall them. Her authoritative nature is prone to win supporters of her claim—one of the victim being Yuri. Aunty Talking to Dead is not soft-spoken; and when she utters something, people tend to comply with what she tells them.

Another character who exemplifies the traditional customs and beliefs is Yuri. She was loved by Aunty Talking to Dead due to her nature of supporting her traditional ways. Yuri is taught by Aunty Talking to Dead on the steps and procedures to be followed when treating a corpse. The author posits, " She reached up and grasped my arm, her grip still strong. ' You'll do okay, Yuri,' the old woman whispered hoarsely, and squeezed...." (Watanabe 4). Yuri embodies a society that is isolated and cocooned in the traditional belief. The society that has refused to be enlightened on the significance of the modern living and that believes that change is inevitable.

The story is set in a serene atmosphere where both the traditional and modern instincts can be felt. As the story is set in Maui, it is clear that the author's intention is to demonstrate the change that is needed in the society—from the traditional to modern society. The readers understand the transformation in Hawaii during that period; therefore, they expect to encounter the tragic experiences and fight against changing traditional belief to modernity. In normal circumstances, change can only be harnessed through conflicting ideas. The traditional setting, employed by the author, is aimed at cultivating the character traits of Aunty Talking to Dead. On the other hand, traces of modernity, exemplified by Paradise Mortuary and the modern building, ensured that the character traits of Clinton were upheld. Ideally, the setting of the story expressed the themes of modernity and traditional beliefs.

The point of view of the story is to show the transformation from traditional belief to modernity. The Hawaiian did not believe in any economic or political change that can affect their lives immensely. Indeed, in moving from an

agricultural country to a tourist-based economy, the author exemplifies the importance of economic change. The events, especially those undertaken by Aunty Talking to Dead, demonstrate how a society finds it hard to achieve change. In the society, there are both conservatives and liberals, and they undertake strategies to counter the motives of each group. In the case where the story shifted its focus from transformation, the setting would change, and the author would undertake the story in a different setting. For instance, where the author aims at demonstrating gender imbalance and male chauvinism in the society, the setting will shift to an environment where the role of women is defined in a traditional and modern way.

The title of the story, Talking to the Dead, demonstrates the main aim of the story, i. e., pursuing the theme of enlightenment and change from traditional belief to modernity. In addition, marriage and memory themes run subtly, yet insistently, through the entire novel, weaving stories into a larger narrative of a local community in constant clash between development and preservation. The story is built around a dilemma faced by a female character at a critical point in her life. In my opinion, I would argue for the theme of enlightenment, as it cuts across all aspects in the society. Aunty Talking to Dead is a significant character in the story in demonstrating the preservation of traditional culture and belief.

In conclusion, the story demonstrates a cynical perception of the current society. Individuals are adamant to change. However, it is to the betterment of the society, as both the conservatives and liberals coexist. The story outlines the strategies that the society needs to enact in order to realize change. I will recommend everybody to buy and read this book.