



Girl in Translation: The Transnational Mother as Martyr

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Abstract

*Over recent decades, representations of motherhood in U.S. popular culture have proliferated, influenced by media coverage, literature, and advocacy. This paper examines the intersection of literature and social science through an analysis of Jean Kwok's novel *Girl in Translation* (2010), focusing on the character 'Ma' and her experiences as a transnational mother. The narrative portrays Ma's journey alongside her daughter Kimberly from Hong Kong to Brooklyn, navigating cultural dislocation, economic hardship, and language barriers. Through Ma's perspective, the novel illuminates the complexities faced by immigrant mothers striving to provide better opportunities for their children while grappling with identity shifts and societal marginalization. This study integrates insights from literary analysis and social science to explore broader themes of gender, power dynamics, and the immigrant experience, shedding light on the transformative impact of cultural adaptation and resilience in the face of adversity.*

Keywords— *Jean Kwok, Girl in Translation, transnational, assimilation, alienation, isolation, struggle for identity*

Over the last few decades, motherhood has become more prominent in U.S. popular culture. This is due to various factors such as increased media coverage of celebrity moms, targeted marketing strategies, and the rise of "mommy lit" and "mommy memoirs." The prominence of mama bloggers in cyberspace and the growing political advocacy of mothers' rights have propelled increasing numbers of images of motherhood and mothers' voices into the public sphere. Many of the books, magazines, essays, websites, and blogs penned by mothers have reflected the full complexity of mothers' lives and experiences, thus challenging cultural narratives about what it means to be a "good" mother (Hewett 2006a, 2006b).

Pierrette Hondagneu Sotelo and Ernestine Avila (2007) identified the increasing phenomenon of "transnational motherhood", the practice of mothers

living and working in different countries from those of their children, thus resulting in a "care deficit" in many third-world/global South nations (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003,8). These scholars are examining the impact of transnational mothering on families as well as on mothers themselves, asking whether the practice of taking on new duties as breadwinners enables immigrant mothers to break free of oppressive ideologies of motherhood – or whether gendered ideologies remain rigid and unforgiving, demanding performances of "super mothering" across the borders of time and space (Parrenas 2005, 103).

Indeed, the insights provided by social science, on the one hand, and literature, on the other, can prove quite illuminating when considered together. Literary studies remind us that creative texts do not provide transparent windows onto the world but rather

individually crafted frames that require us to ask questions about issues of representation and interpretation – to think about how to see in addition to what to see. Furthermore, literature can help create reality and, as Rita Felski puts it, the “self as a cultural reality” (1989, 78). Thus, a conscientious use of social science research in literary studies can help us think about broader issues of gender and power. In this paper, the author focuses on a novel published in 2010, which offers a fresh perspective on the lives of transnational mothers in the United States. Through a detailed examination, the author seeks to uncover how the novel portrays the multifaceted experiences of these mothers and the broader themes of migration and familial bonds.

In the novel *‘Girl in Transnational’* by Jean Kwok, the role of the protagonist’s mother ‘Ma’, is central to the story. The novel follows the life of Kimberly Chang, a young Chinese immigrant who, along with her mother, moves to Brooklyn, New York, in search of a better life. Ma’s character plays several crucial roles in the narrative. Her immigrant experience is multifaceted, involving challenges with language and culture. Beyond the mere Translation of words, she navigates nuances in personality, behaviour, and lifestyle. She is trapped in two cultures: Chinese culture and American culture. This leads Ma to experience cultural dislocation and changes her cultural identity.

Ma is a beautiful and appealing character primarily defined by her identity as a mother. She is always thinking of her daughter (and she of her). All her life decisions emanate from caring for her daughter and making her life better. Ma’s decision to migrate is driven by the desire to provide Kimberly with opportunities and a higher quality of life, which is a common motivation for every transnational mother. While entering Brooklyn and leaving behind her home country, Ma says, “the only future I could see for us, for you, was here, where you could become whatever you wanted. Even though this isn’t what we’d imagined back home, we will be all right” (25)

Transnational mothers’ disillusioned feelings are different from those of young immigrants. The new land is not as good as their expectation because of their lack of knowledge such as language and culture. They face many different experiences in the new land and also struggle to survive in the new land permanently. This experience creates psychological problems for them. They feel rejected by the new society, which affects their self-esteem and leads them to alienation and confusion in terms of role expectations, values and identity. The

process of changing identities is seen in and identified through observing the behaviour transformation. Hall believes that different environments bring different histories, cultures, and experiences, which emerge with different impacts on identity development; therefore, identity is an unstable product that changes history, culture, and experiences (Hall,1999: 225). In modern times, identity is fractured and never singular, always changing and transforming. In this case, Ma experienced this process.

Kim’s mother is a former music teacher and musician who now works at a sweet shop in New York. She now became a widow at a young age and must rely on her older sister, Aunt Paula. Ma’s remarkable characteristics as a teen were her musical talent and beauty. Immediately upon their arrival in the United States, Chinese immigrants Ma and Kim began working at a garment factory in Chinatown. They perform backbreaking labour, putting finishing touches on garments and hanging them, often staying at the factory until late at night. Ma often goes to bed thinking about life and the grief that connected her to that music. She grieved, “my days being a refined music teacher are over” (47)

Immigrants dream of being successful in their host country. Their expectation for the future is that they want to live happily without suffering poverty. But Ma survives a financial depression and sees her daughter Kimberly become a teenager and suffer to gain financial stability. The American government gives opportunities for the immigrant to take their right to be part of America. They have to take the naturalization test. It is a process of giving American citizenship to immigrants; one of the benefits of naturalization is financial aid. Many financial aid grants, including college scholarships and funds given by the government for specific purposes, are only available to citizens of the United States of America. Therefore, Ma takes the naturalization test but never passes the test. Ma, however, never truly learns English apart from a few words and broken phrases like “please”, “thank you”, and “I’m sorry”. This is notable because she spends her life at a garment factory in Chinatown with other Cantonese-speaking Chinese immigrants. Learning English isn’t nearly as pressing of an issue for her as it is for Kimberly, who navigates the complex social landscape.

Social isolation is yet another complication for mothering in transnational mothers, whether it is self-imposed or societal-imposed. In some of the relationships, isolation is connected to issues of race and

class, as is the oppressive circumstance of family discord. The coping strategies of inner strength, mothering assumptions, mother mentors, and women-centred networks can work together to eliminate some of the negativity of the oppressive circumstances that affect the mother's rearing of their children, especially when rearing daughters. These mothers are strong in their beliefs about how to negotiate one's way through life, and they attempt to protect their children even if it is against the child's wishes. Concerning Ma, who seems to be a predominantly weak mother character, she even has situations in which she displays sheer determination. Ma upholds the Chinese principle of repaying debts, leading her to believe that she and Kim lack the authority to question Aunt Paula's mistreatment of them. When Kimberly openly argues with Ma about the desperate living conditions and the fake address given in school by Aunt Paula, Ma's eyes are determined; she says, "Our debt to her, then? She brought us here, she spent the money to cure me, for our green cards and tickets. It's not a question of what we can get away with it's a question of honour" (74). It could be observed that Ma would have to be a different person before she could renege or something she owed.

Alienation is natural for all immigrants and is a part of the immigrant experience. For Josephson, alienation describes "the untold lives of quiet desperation that mark our age", and a long list of those suffering from alienation includes diverse groups such as women, sexual deviants, drug addicts, young people and artists. Alienation can be understood exclusively as a psychological state, "referring to an extraordinary variety of psycho-social disorders, including loss of field, anxiety states, anomie, despair, personalization, rootlessness, apathy, social organizations, loneliness, atomization, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, pessimism, and loss of beliefs and values". The change for the immigrant comes as a big displacement, as they cannot easily adapt and comprehend the ways of the new country. Both Ma and her daughter Kim find it hard to adjust and settle in the cold winter of America. Ma is used to the heat of Hong Kong, and so the bitter cold of New York is especially jarring. When she tries to play her violin, it's too cold for her to move her fingers properly. She often brings clothing from a Sweat Factory to her home and sleeps under the clothes to stay warm. Ma struggles through the cold winter, but fortunately, her tuberculosis does not return. "Ma tried to play her violin, but it soon became impossible due to the cold, and she couldn't play with her gloves on" (51)

Racial discrimination is also an important part of the immigrant experience. This discrimination results in treating someone less favourably because he or she comes from a particular place, because of his or her ethnicity or accent, or because it's believed that he or she has a particular ethnic background. In *Girl in Translation*, Ma also undergoes racial discrimination in America. It has been clearly mentioned and explained by various critics: "psychologically, they are unwilling to organize themselves as permanent residents, and when they do so, they become marginal men". While waiting in the queue at an ice cream shop, the man behind the counter behaved rudely. When Ma take time to order the ice cream, the man shouts terribly, "I ask got all day. You gonna buy something or not" (22); his tone is aggressive, and he also cheats her awfully. He charges Ma three times as much as the price listed, but Ma cannot revolt because her English is limited.

Ma is always silent and speechless when Kim complains about the ill-treatment by her teacher, Mr. Bogart, who is openly sexist and does not accept that female students are capable of doing well in math or science. He remains unimpressed with Kim, even though she proves herself a whiz at math and science. He assigns things that are nearly impossible for Kim as she cannot afford a collection of magazines to make collages out of it.

Girl in Translation follows Kim and Ma's journeys; it pays special attention to the ways in which both of them handle their status as Chinese immigrants. For Ma, the difficulty and foreignness of life in America justify clinging to Chinese customs and language as much as possible. The experience of being an immigrant is isolating and, in Ma, makes her feel alone in both her very Chinese life and American life. Another consequence of not knowing English is more damaging to Ma is the social price she pays for not knowing the slang, social customs, or etiquette rules of her new home. Ma wholeheartedly believes that Kim's education is the only way that they will escape their poverty. Later, Kim became a cardiac surgeon, and now Ma lives in a big house and is able to buy a piano. This is a testament to the power of openness about her conflicting identities to remedy some of the struggles she experiences as a result.

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