



Original Article

Chinese American Literature Jean Kwok's Girl in Translation: A Diasporic Reading

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Abstract

"A Diaspora" is one who lives in two countries but belongs to none. – Salman Rushdie.

Mobility of animates from one place to other, either forced or willful, is called "migration" and it is an age-old phenomenon. This migrated population is known as Diaspora. Diaspora Studies have become an important topic of concern in the modern era, especially after 1990s. However, it has undergone tremendous changes in the modern times. Diaspora means a man or a group of men living on a land outside their homeland. Dominancy of the natives over the Diaspora is a frequently recorded fact.

Diaspora experience is not limited to the conflict between the natives and the outsiders living on that land. In the course of time, the scenario changed and the old members of the Diaspora, who have spent a considerably longer time on the new land started thinking of the new members of their own community as Diaspora and they think of themselves as the natives at least in front of the new and fresh offs. This thinking gives birth to a new concept Diaspora within Diaspora. Jean Kwok is a new generation American Born Chinese novelist with her novel *Girl in Translation*. It displays Diaspora experiences within the peer groups. This paper explores the same.

Keywords: Migration, Mobility, Diaspora, Natives, Dominancy, Hegemony Homeland.

Introduction

In the modern age of globalization and modernization, and due to invention and introduction of advanced means of communication and transportation, a man of one country, either as an individual or in group, travels to new countries, near or far, for this reason or that. In fact, man's mobility is an age-old phenomenon. He travels and settles down in the geographically alien and culturally new country. There he stays, works, earns money and his livelihood and returns to his home. However, sometimes he stays there and settles down permanently, on the unknown land of almost unknown people. This man of one geographical region living on another geographical land is known as Diaspora. Such guest population is known as „Diaspora" in the host country.

The term Diaspora "carries initial "D" always in capital which sufficiently indicates that "Diaspora" is not a common word but a term having specific cultural meaning. The above discussed mobility of man from one place to other is called migration, in technical terminology. Man's migration or his settling down in a geographically new and culturally different environment gives birth to numberless questions and social, cultural, economic, political, religious and intellectual issues. Consequently, in the course of time, the same has become a matter of concern for diplomats, and a topic of intellectual thinking and deliberations for the research scholars and crucial issue for decision makers of the host country. Study of such migrated people or populations is known as Diaspora Studies that plays substantial role in decision making on both the banks of the river. "The past is a foreign country" is the opening line of L. P. Hartley's novel "The Go Between". After seeing the cover-page of the book, Salman Rushdie, the champion of Diaspora Studies, in his book *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, writes, "It reminds me that it is my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time."

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Salman Rushdie's quote is enough to take the readers in the past which is their home at heart while they are on the foreign land bodily which characterizes Diaspora. In a nutshell, a Diaspora is one who lives in two countries but belongs to none.

Diaspora within Diaspora:

On the new land, in the new country, Diaspora community gets absorbed in the host culture, or it is rejected. However, at the same time, in a naturalized manner, Diaspora preserves his own native culture also, in the case of their acceptance in the new culture. His life within the four walls and outside the four walls on the new land undergoes a number of adjustments. He preserves his own culture and adopts the new one, speaks his language and tries to acquire the new one, and supports his religious cults but at the same time, tries to get insight into the new ones. He continues his ancestral eating and clothing habits, faiths, beliefs, rituals, ways of worship and celebration of festivals, and at the same time, unknowingly or deliberately gets used to the host society's cultural shelves. After a considerable time span, he starts thinking of himself as a native of the land, in which he never succeeds. This is because of his improved financial background, social involvements, relations with the natives and his belongings, both, political and individual; though not in front of indigenous population of that country. In spite of the above, when someone from his own country comes or migrates newly, he behaves in a different manner and pretends as if he is the native of that land, apart from his name and associations. He does not treat the native of his own country, who has migrated recently, as his family member. He thinks that he is something special for the new-comer and does some kind of favor to him. But in return, he expects that the new-comer should live there in his eyesight. In his assistance, the older member of the Diaspora community feels elated and supported and confident. However, in doing so, he forgets that the new comer is also is a human being like him and has every right to think independently, and to progress and to establish his or her own identity and to lead a life of comfort. This mentality of one Diaspora member about the other members of his own community is termed as "Diaspora within Diaspora."

Jean Kwok: The Author:

Jean Kwok is an American Born Chinese novelist and *Girl in Translation* is her debut novel. This novel is highly autobiographical in its theme and fervor. When Jean Kwok was five, her parents immigrated to Brooklyn, New York in America. She worked in Chinatown garment factory. The house or apartment, they were accommodated in, by her elder sister cum benefactor cum factory owner, was infested with roaches and rats. There was no central heating either or no healthy atmosphere in the surrounding. Everywhere, there were heaps and layers of filth, dirt and garbage. The atmosphere was not healthy at all. Working conditions at and in the factory were also not at all happy and healthy. The owner of the factory was none else but her own aunt who treated them for her own benefit and denied them the life of human being. All these things and their memories made Jean write a novel like „Girl in Translation“ which is much more autobiographical, though not an autobiography proper.

Girl in Translation: The Novel

Published in 2010 by Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin House, *Girl in Translation* is Jean Kwok's first novel. It became a New York Times and international bestseller. In many ways, this novel appears an autobiographical work of Jean Kwok. It has been published in 18 countries and translated in more than 16 languages across the globe. Kimberly Chang (Kim for short) is the protagonist and the narrator of *Girl in Translation*. Kim's mother is working in a garment factory in the finishing section. The factory is owned, run and managed by Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob. Aunt Paula is nobody else but elder sister of Kimberley's mother. Kimberley's mother moved from Hong Kong to America when Kimberley was just eleven. In fact, this had become possible only because of Aunt Paula. They had given work to Kim's Ma's hands to earn livelihood, and a small apartment to live in. For a person, these two things are more than necessary for his survival on a foreign land, which Aunt Paula did. Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob had also done some other kinds of favor to Kim's Ma. In return she had expected Kimberley's mother to work in her factory and it was at meager wages. Secondly, they expected Kim to work with her mother after her school hours, as they had given heavy loads of work to her mother. Obviously Kim's assistance to her Ma was for free. They had created an atmosphere that Kim's mother started thinking that her survival on the foreign land was and would be just impossible without the elder sister's help and favor.

Kim was very a good or excellent student at Math though she was not that good in English and communication. Kim's teachers figured out her talent and insisted that Kim should give Harrison Prep test which she gave and also passed. She won full scholarship for Harrison Prep. Everywhere, Kim was appreciated and applauded. This gave Aunt Paula an irritation. Aunt Paula started becoming jealous toward Kim and ultimately Kim's Ma. She had her son Nelson who was also in a prestigious private school. However, despite being new, Kim was growing and moving very fast, out of box. She was progressing and had started thinking independently which Aunt Paula could not stomach. When one member, especially a new one, of Diaspora community grows out of box, the older ones cannot digest it. They forget that they are also the members of Diaspora community on that foreign land and start treating the new members as though they are the indigenous population of that country. Our Kim, though she was little or considerably below average in English, she was excellent in math and her hard work and balanced mind won her full scholarship for Harrison Prep. Kim's story was an all-time inspiration to Nelson, but Aunt Paula found it hard grasp.

Aunt Paula, Uncle Bob, and Kimberley Chang and Her Ma:

Before analyzing the novel, in the light of the theme, it would be bit helpful to know the characters that are involved and victimized in the process of Diaspora within Diaspora thinking. Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob is Chinese American couple living in the New York Chinatown. They run a clothing factory. In fact they are the owners. Nelson is their son. This family is also a Diaspora family. Kimberley's (Kim for short) Ma is working and she is the only one in the finishing section of Aunt Paula's garment factory. However, when it comes to Kimberley and her Ma, Aunt Paula and Uncle Bob think of themselves as superiors or the natives of America. Kimberley and her Ma are their own people. Aunt Paula had helped them in coming to America after Kim's father died. Aunt Paula gave them roof on their head and work to their hands. She gave her own address as the address of Kim and her family because it was necessary for school admission of Kim. If they had given the real address to the school, Kim would not have gotten admission. However, the mentality of Aunt Paula and her husband is something mysterious. They always think of

Kim's mother and Kim herself as their tenants to which Kim reacts in a fierce manner. Her mother tries to calm her down, but in vain.

Thematic Analysis of Girl in Translation:

Kim, the protagonist is an extraordinarily talented student in her school. Though she is not so good at English language and communication, she outstands and excels in Mathematics. She works hard to assist her mother in her factory work in the Chinatown and studies hard to win the scholarship to enter the Harrison Prep, a prestigious school for the gifted children. Despite all odds and uneven circumstances, Kim wins the full scholarship. This success makes the child and the mother more confident. They start thinking in progressive manner and dream of bright and prosperous future. However, Aunt Paula is the only person who is not happy with Kim's success and her progress. Aunt Paula had given her own address to Kim's school. She always told this to Kim's Ma. Her address was given for Kim because no school would allow Kim in, if they knew their real address of the filthy apartment where Kim and her mother were accommodated. But when Kim's letters regarding sanction of full scholarship and admission to Harrison Prep arrived at Aunt Paula's, she didn't let them know. In fact Aunt Paula must have told them about this immediately and celebrated Kim's success and recognized Kim's talent. After all Kim and her Ma were the members of her Diaspora community, though not family. But she did not do. On the contrary, she threatened Kim's Ma to fire her from the work and asked to vacate the apartment which was allotted to them, if she thought otherwise.

Not only Aunt Paula, but her son Nelson also does not accept Kim's talent. Aunt Paula, Uncle Bob and Nelson always think in terms of supremacy and economy. Aunt Paula invites Kim and her Ma on rice i.e. dinner. This is the only second time since the whole last year. While inviting, she asks Kim's Ma to bring Kim also but in some nicer outfits, may be her school uniform. She gives her hint and she knew well that her younger sister would not disobey her. Kim goes to Aunt Paula in her school uniform. There at Aunt Paula's, Kim and her Ma see that Nelson was also in his school dress. Through this, Aunt Paula wanted only to show her younger sister that Nelson was also in a private school. Needless to say Aunt Paula was jealous towards Kim. While talking, Nelson spoke to Kim softly so that adults wouldn't hear,

"When you see our home, your eyes glowed, don't they?" (P-142)

Nelson's word, his intention, his way of speaking, all contribute to his mental settlement which he has inherited from his parents. His innocent mind was poisoned unknowingly for discrimination. Nelson is not a grown up person. He is a kid, little elder than Kim. He compares his marks with Kim's. This is but natural for kids. But Nelson's case is bit different. His words are not out of innocence. When Kim and her Ma arrive at Aunt Paula's, Nelson asks Kim her marks in English,

"I got hundred on my last English test." Nelson interjected. "What did you get?"

Nelson did not want to know the number of marks obtained by Kim simply, but his intention was to make Kim look down. This indicates that Aunt Paula and her family do not skip a chance to insult Kim and her Ma and make them feel harassed. This has become their habit. This is only because Kim and her Ma were brought to America by Aunt Paula.

I was ashamed but I had to be honest. "A sixty-seven" (P-143)

When Kim honestly told her numbers, Nelson was startled. Uncle Bob paused in the middle of feeding Godfrey a spoonful of rice. "Aaah." Aunt Paula breathed out. There was relief and satisfaction in her sigh. Obviously, her wish for me to be unsuccessful was greater than her desire to use me to inspire Nelson. (P- 143) Aunt Paula, at least in front of Kim's Ma thinks of herself as the native of America. She treats her as she is a member of Diaspora community when she herself is no other than that and is doing illegal things in her factory such as making under age children work in her factory. She was satisfied by the number of marks, Kim had scored in English test. Her satisfaction was obviously demonic. Kim's opinion about Aunt Paula is rational when she writes, "Despite my dislike of Aunt Paula, I worked harder and faster whenever she passed by to show her that we were industrious people, valuable workers and loyal to the factory. I still hoped that maybe we would be rewarded for our good behavior. (P- 161) It was the expectation of Kim and her mother that Aunt Paula should treat them as human beings at least. Their devotion to their work in the factory was real. For them Aunt Paula was their benefactor. Accident at Aunt Paula's garment factory is another incident that displays hegemony of one Diaspora over the other members of the community. There takes place a small blast in the steamer in the factory. The man who was at work, Pak, was a Chinese boy. In the blast, he was badly injured. Other workers gathered around him out of sympathy and with intention of doing some help in the emergency. But Aunt Paula's indifference to the accident and to the injured worker was beyond imagination.

"Why are you so clumsy?" Aunt Paula yelled. She grabbed Mr. Pak, who was sobbing and hunched over his hand, and she pulled in the direction of exit. Uncle Bob hurried after her, with his swinging limp. She called over her shoulder, "Nobody calls a lifesaving car! We will take him to the factory doctor! Everyone, get back to work, tonight the shipment goes out." (P- 164)

Aunt Paula, instead of taking Pak to a hospital speaks of taking him to the factory doctor. For her, more than Pak's life, shipment is important. This shows that she does not have any kind of sympathy for Pak. She does not have any sympathy for the workers working in her factory. For her, her workers are not human beings, but mere money-making machines. This is because they are Chinese and are not supposed to open their mouth. They are not allowed to see dreams. They have no right to think independently. They are supposed only to work, work and work.

Kim and her mother work hard, is obvious. They are not only very good at work but excellent. They work for more hours at greater pace to earn extra money. But when Aunt Paula calculates their wages, she is surprised. Her mind starts thinking otherwise and she summons Kim's Ma and tells, "Due to bad economic conditions, after this shipment goes out, the rate of skirts will have to drop to one cent a skirt." (P- 164) "Why?" I asked. And then I knew, Aunt Paula had seen me working fast. Too fast. We had started earning more and she'd calculated that we could receive less and still survive. (P- 165) This shows only one thing that Aunt Paula uses other Chinese people working in her factory for her sake denying them the basic human rights. She expects them only to survive. She wants them to survive only physically. When Kim brings to her notice their loyalty in work, and asks about reducing the wages, Aunt Paula only says- "Sorry, but that is the way it is. Company policy. For all the finishers." (P- 165).

Needless to say that Kim's Ma was the only worker, working in the finishing section. Kim could not digest this. Though she was aware of the favor the aunt had done to her family, she protested,

"This is not fair."

At this Aunt Paula's reaction was surprising at least for Kim's Ma. However, she did not want to lose the job that was in hand in the foreign land. The aunt turned her attention to Kim, "I wouldn't want the two of you to be unhappy. You are free to make your own choices if you feel uncomfortable. There is no slavery in America anymore, is there?" And she started to walk away. Kim's mother apologized for no mistake on her part. "Older sister, I'm so sorry. She is much an outspoken child." However, the aunt's mentality within her personality was not ready to listen to her. "No, no," Aunt Paula said. She sighed. "Those bamboo shoots, they are like that. Don't worry about it."

Aunt Paula, while pacifying Kim's Ma, used the word „bamboo shoots“ for Kim. For her, Kim was a bamboo shoot because Kim had started thinking independently on the foreign land which was not liked by Aunt Paula. The aunt was of the opinion that they should stay in America for her, under her.

Conclusion

This study concludes with following finding:

Old generations of Diaspora community always think of themselves as superior to the new generations and treat them in an illogically inhuman way which is more or less, the replica of the Guests and the Hosts relations on the foreign land. They act as though they are the natives of the land and expect that the people coming to the land after them should lead their life in their monitoring. However, the new age Diaspora members are having their focused mindset and they are hardly ready to remain under the control of older generations. Aunt Paula tried to suppress Kim's Ma. But Kim is new age member of the Diaspora community. She has her own ways of life and she goes her way. Successful or unsuccessful is a matter of another deliberation. The natives of America have turned helpful to the Diaspora community. They recognized and Kimberley Chang's talent and inspired and assisted her in each step accordingly. The previous generations have become hegemonic towards the new generations.

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