

## **I. Introduction: Ethnic Identity as a Key Issue**

In his brief introduction to *The Invention of Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors criticizes the premises upon which naturalization of ethnic purity is based. Raising the following questions, he uncovers the “invention of ethnicity”:

Are not ethnic groups part of the historical process, tied to the history of modern nationalism? Though they may pretend to be eternal and essential, are they not of rather recent origin and eminently pliable and unstable? . . . Even where they exist over long time spans, do not ethnic groups constantly change and redefine themselves? *What is the active contribution literature makes, as a productive force, to the emergence and maintenance of communities of ethnic distinctions?* (xiv; italics added)

It is the last question that puts Asian American writers to the double task of representing their communities and offering a subtler representation of ethnic subgroups. Corresponding to ethnic awareness on the part of ethnic writers, the development of ethnic grouping from ‘Asian Americans’ to sub-categories of Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, and so forth indicates that the focus of ethnic politics has shifted from its early stress on communal struggle to an emphasis on uniqueness of ethnic subgroups.

In her introduction to *Articulate Silences*, a book on the strategies of silence used by three Asian American woman writers, King K. Cheung maintains that the formation of the term ‘Asian American’ as representative of a group of ethnic differences is largely due to a political consideration: “[The Asians] would otherwise be even more invisible in the U. S. political arena” (22). While such a demand for cohesiveness among ethnic subgroups is a political necessity in the

burgeoning of ethnic autonomy, recent definition of ethnic identity nevertheless emphasizes subtle distinction of race, gender, and class in ethnic communities. In “Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies,” Cheung contends that as Asian American literary criticism evolves, the analysis of race, sexuality, gender, and class will take on increasing importance, for “[such] analysis is likely not only to reveal the unequal conditions of Asian Americans but also to prompt a refinement of current critical concepts such as hybridity and diaspora” (14).

Regarding the representation of ethnic autonomy, Asian American writers show an ambivalent attitude toward their culture of origin. As ethnic writers, they always ask themselves the following questions: Does claiming American mean giving up one’s original homeland? Does one need to emphasize one’s own culture of origin to produce an ‘orthodox’ version of Asian American literature? Or considering the multicultural climate, does it work better to have a pluralist re-mapping of ethnic literature? These questions highlight the often contradictory facets of Asian American literature.

In “Reviewing Asian American Literary Studies”, Cheung indicates that earlier Asian American studies—literary or non-literary—were underpinned by assertions of ‘American Nativity’ and a parochial cultural nationalism developed out of a political necessity and a blindness to the pluralist mapping of ethnic identity.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, writers of Asian ancestry such as Maxine Hong Kingston represented the desire to be recognized as American, “which [had] sometimes been achieved at the cost of Asian affiliation” (Cheung 6).<sup>2</sup> To keep away from

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<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, as an umbrella term, ‘Asian Americans’ was employed to consolidate the solidarity of various ethnic subgroups coming from Asia. On the other hand, the original import of ‘Asian Americans’—a term coined in the late 1960s—was rather ‘unbalanced’, with an emphasis on the ‘American-ness’ of Asian immigrants and their descendants.

<sup>2</sup> According to Cheung, Kingston represents in *China Man* such a desire to be “acknowledged as a

'Orientalist' representations<sup>3</sup> of Asians and Asian immigrants (and their descendants), those writers had constructed ethnic identity out of a universally felt need to 'claim America' as their land. In this phase, Asian heritage seems to be traded off by a willing surrender to the grand vision of "becoming American."

It is not until the 1990s that Asian American studies begin to have a 'critical' turn. There is a re-orientation of Asian American literary studies largely effected by a new emphasis on multiculturalism and heterogeneity of ethnic groups. Theoretically and practically speaking, the mapping of pluralist subjectivities and subjects is required to approach the complex making of ethnicities. Thus, writers and literary critics aware of pluralist climate in the making of contemporary Asian American literature have begun to examine the relation between diasporas and their 'diasporic' pattern and experience. A politics of 'positionality' is developed by Asian American literary critics to analyze the often contradictory status of a diasporic subject as represented in many contemporary Asian Americans writings. United by their efforts to explore the diasporic subject, these critics nevertheless represent a varied spectrum of critical attitudes toward the politics of identity. While considering the immigrant experience to be ambivalent and schizophrenic<sup>4</sup>, critics such as Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Sheng-mei Ma argue for the necessity of having a 'location' or 'nation' as the "focal point for any political struggle"

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'real' American", through "jettisoning Asian cultural baggage" (6).

<sup>3</sup> Orientalist imagination draws a permanent contrast of the West and the East, so that those newcomers in American soil are constantly negated as 'foreigners' and 'outsiders' to the mainstream culture. Orientalism as such is prejudiced and exclusionist. As a response, the development of Asian American movements since the late 1960s aims at building up "the American status of immigrants from Asia and their descendants" (Cheung 5).

<sup>4</sup> In "The Ambivalent American: Asian American Literature on the Cusp," Shirley Geok-lin Lim shows that ambivalence is an attitude shared by the immigrant and the larger society he or she settles. In "Immigrant Schizophrenic in Asian Diaspora Literature," Sheng-mei Ma tries to "rehabilitate the metaphor of schizophrenia in ethnic studies without being weighed down by the stigmatization of mental disorder" (45).

(Cheung 9). However, critics such as King-Kok Cheung and Lisa Lowe renounce the confrontational politics of cultural nationalism, in favor of a perspective that highlights the ‘flexibility’ of a diasporic subject. For Lowe, “interventions exist that refuse static or binary conceptions of culture, replacing notions of ‘identity’ with multiplicity and shifting the emphasis from cultural ‘essence’ to material hybridity” (145). For Cheung, Asian Americans can both ‘claim America’ and use their transnational consciousness as a critical edge.<sup>5</sup>

According to Elaine H. Kim, the writings of those first American-born Asian writers in the 1940s are mostly “success stories” which show how “America’s racial minorities may ‘succeed’ through accommodation, hard work, and perseverance” (813). On the other hand, an implicit message conveyed by those stories is that one can only “blame Asian Americans—their families, their communities, their race—for whatever difficulties they face or failures they suffer” (Kim 813). However, the development of Asian American literature represents, generally speaking, a move away from those stereotyped images. Among contemporary Chinese American writers, Gish Jen is distinguished by her stylistic innovations—such as her ironic portrayal of the failure of the Chinese immigrant family, the Changs, in *Typical American* and her representation of a serio-comedy of ethnicity in *Mona in the Promised Land*, the second of the trilogy of the Changs.<sup>6</sup> Through reading Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* as a representation of ethnic issues, this paper aims to discuss those issues raised by her, including the hybridity of ethnicity, the construction of ethnic identity, and inter-ethnic conflicts.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Cheung, the critical edge is largely underpinned by a reflective perspective that enables diasporas such as Asian Americans to see the problematics of cultural nationalism, sexism, and racism concerning the construction of ethnic identity.

<sup>6</sup> Considering that the story of the Chang family will make a trilogy, Gish Jen hopes that “within ten years there will be another Chang family book” (230).

Examining the conflicting mother-daughter relation, the failed assimilationist efforts (exemplified by Camp Gugelstein), and Mona's attempt at identity-switching (exemplified by her conversion into Judaism), this paper tries to indicate the relocation facing Chinese immigrants and their descendants in *Mona in the Promised Land*. Finally, through reading Jen's novel as a comedy of ethnicity, this paper wants to re-evaluate the 'unduly' optimistic resolution of ethnic conflicts in the final pages of the novel.

## II. Ethnic Identity and the Mother-Daughter Relation

While highlighting the immigrant experience of the Changs in *Typical American*, Jen nevertheless foregrounds the mother-daughter relationships in *Mona*. However, Jen distinguishes herself from previous Chinese American writers by placing the narrative (about the mother and her daughters) against a larger social context.<sup>7</sup> Eschewing the conventional family narrative, where a connection to 'original' culture is stressed, Jen develops her narrative as a field in which ethnicity is constantly contested. As Lowe indicates, the prevalence of the family narrative in many earlier Chinese American writings has collapsed all the socio-cultural differences into the generational relationship. Besides, such a family narrative is often employed to convey the loss of a connection to the homeland and the 'original' culture. Thus, Jen's appropriation of the family narrative as a means of interrogating (rather than authenticating) the nativist construction of ethnicity is considered by critics such as Feng and Wong to be innovative and inspiring. In

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<sup>7</sup> Arguing for a 'horizontal' view of ethnic construction, Lowe sees ethnicity as being over-determined by factors such as gender, class, and race. Employing Lowe's perspective, Ping-Chia Feng argues that Jen (re)invents a comic tradition for Chinese American women's writing in *Mona* through reconciling a 'horizontal community' (which is across race, gender, and class and is embodied by Camp Gugelstein) with a vertical (and generational) relationship between the mother and her daughters. In doing so, Jen could "at once acknowledge the importance of matrilineage and introduce a politics of relationality that goes beyond racial confines" (Feng 704).

*Mona*, the numerous conflicts between the mother (Helen) and her daughters (Mona and Callie) lead to an interrogation of ethnic construction.<sup>8</sup> Through having Helen act as an authoritative ‘matriarch’ in *Mona*, Jen posits an ‘assimilationist’ perspective (taken by Helen)<sup>9</sup> against other more flexible, pluralist perspectives (taken by Mona and Callie) on ethnicity.

In *Mona*, Helen and Ralph Chang represent the first-generation Chinese immigrants who struggle to come to terms with their Chinese ancestry. As immigrants, the Changs have had their diasporic experience in adapting to the strange land, as is described in *Typical American*. The well-established status of the Changs (as heads of a ‘model minority’ family) at the beginning of *Mona* results from their ‘melting into’ the host society. Helen’s assimilation of ‘WASP’ values<sup>10</sup> is accompanied by her cultural amnesia. Helen admits that “China was such a long time ago” and “a lot of things she can hardly remember” (7). Amnesia as such is not only a physical disability; it also means giving up one’s own ethnic subjectivity. Replying to the question raised by her daughter Callie, who is offended by those ‘imperialist’ missionaries in colonial China, Helen says:

Oh, the missionaries just wanted to teach us some nice songs in French,

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<sup>8</sup> In “Sugar Sisterhood: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon,” borrowing the terms of Elliott Butler-Evans, Sau-ling Wong maintains that works such as *The Woman Warrior* is characterized by an ‘interrogative modality’ which questions constructions such as ethnicity, race, and gender, whereas works such as *Joy Luck Club* is marked by a ‘declarative modality’ which authenticates those constructions. In *Mona*, the problematics of ethnic identity as a construct are disclosed especially by the conflicting perspectives held by Helen and her daughters.

<sup>9</sup> In their reading of *Mona*, Feng and Wong both indicate the ‘assimilationist’ propensity of Helen, which is manifested by her adopting the many values of ‘Wasps’ and taking a bourgeoisie, racist perspective.

<sup>10</sup> The term ‘WASP’ was coined to refer to the privileged offspring of those white Anglo-Saxon Protestant immigrants in United States, who usually occupy higher social-economic positions. Epitomizing a group of elites in American society, this term nevertheless serves to bring out the many contrasts between those socially privileged and those who are not. Helen’s assimilation of ‘WASP’ values comes from her aspiration to become a ‘WASP’, which is accompanied by her uncritical acceptance of the hegemony of a ‘WASP’ society.

and to tell us what nice food they eat in France. Especially they have nice pastries. The Chinese, you know, don't think so much about the dessert. (42)

Helen's (mis)interpretation of those French missionaries' missions reflects her tendency to downplay the colonialism of the West.

Born of an upper-middle-class family in Shanghai, Helen was susceptible to a perspective that 'glossed over' racial oppression in colonial China. Helen's 'assimilationist' position is not unrelated to her bourgeoisie upbringing as such. Besides, Helen's uncritical acceptance of U.S. hegemony can be attributed partly to her class position, which is re-consolidated by the economic success of the Changs' in Scarshill. In *Mona*, the class contrast of the Changs', their black employees, and the Gugelsteins' (living in their neighborhood) reveals an economic hierarchy corresponding to the ethnic position of each ethnic group. Owing to her class position and 'assimilationist' propensities, Helen had learned to adapt to the oppressor's cultural practice and now applies such experience to interpreting the diasporic existence of her family. For Helen, Chinese immigrants who are economically prosperous are distinguished from other less-privileged minorities. She "never intended that they [the Changs'] should be a minority" (52).

Yet her favorite daughter Mona has begun to negotiate with her identity as a minority since her 'eighth grade'. She is made aware of her minority identity by her teachers and classmates, who identify people with their skin color and culture of origin. Enlightened by Rabbi Horowitz, Mona manages to come to terms with her 'minority' and decides that she should learn more of 'being a minority' from the Jewish. As a 'Changowitz', Mona is admonished by the Rabbi to 'never forget' and 'always remember' her minority status. Thus, contrary to Helen's 'assimilationist'

principle, Mona's is a principle that stresses the memory (rather than the forgetting) of her being 'a minority in the promised land'. It is here the conflict arises. For according to Helen, being American means being identified with 'WASPs' and their values. Mona's conversion into Judaism is, for her, not only giving up her Chinese ancestry but also taking up an even minor identity as a Jew.<sup>11</sup> However, for Mona, "American means being whatever you want" and she "happened to pick being Jewish" (49). Being able to claim herself as a "more or less genuine Catholic Chinese Jew", Mona 'fabricates' for herself a new, hybrid identity that corresponds to the making of a multicultural environment in the 1960s (44).

While Mona is encouraged by a rabbi to explore her minority identity, her elder sister Callie is urged by a black roommate to look for her Chinese ancestry. Naomi, Callie's roommate, "claims for her ancestors a number of people not related to her—for example, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth" (129). A nativist assertion as such is made by her (Naomi) to suggest Callie should seek her heritage in original culture instead of her 'assimilated' parents. Callie's efforts at 'claiming Chinese' (rather than claiming 'American') have ended up her becoming 'so Chinese' that her parents think "there is something wrong with her" (301). 'Claiming Chinese' means for her using a Chinese name ('Kailan'), putting on traditional Chinese clothes (such as Chinese padded jackets and cloth shoes), and most importantly, claiming herself to be 'an Asian American'. However, failing to understand the significance of 'claiming Asian American', Ralph and Helen could

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<sup>11</sup> Descendants of Chinese and Jewish immigrants are both 'model minorities' in US's society, who are often well-educated, hard-working, and have a better socio-economic position than other ethnic minorities. Considering the rather equal (and sometimes even better, such as the Gugelsteins in *Mona*) social stance of the Jewish as minorities in American society, Helen's disapproval of Mona's conversion largely comes from the latter's choosing a 'diasporic' people (who has known a longer life of banishment than the Chinese immigrants) instead of the 'WASP' as her target of emulation.



only “shake their heads” and even think it “better to turn Jewish than Asian American” (302). Thus, unlike her parents, who have ‘melted into’ the American society, Callie/Kailan is eager to claim her Asian (and particularly Chinese) ancestry and to create her identity as ‘Chinese American’.

### **III. Camp Gugelstein: A Failed Melting Pot**

‘Race’ as a term may evoke associations with the politics of opposition, whereas ‘ethnicity’ may appeal more to the hybridity of identity formation. The concept of nationality is constantly under the scrutiny of those who question the purity of ethnicity. As is indicated in Section I, Sollors urges us to rethink about the concept of ethnicity—its genealogy, its plurality, and its hybridity. In “Struggles for Recognition,” Jürgen Habermas mentions that a multicultural society is solidified only through its members’ mutual understanding of their ‘differences’. The following is his suggestion about how a harmonious membership across cultures might be secured through ethical understanding of ‘differences’:

In multicultural societies, the national constitution can tolerate only forms of life articulated within the medium of such non-fundamentalist traditions, because co-existence with equal rights for these forms of life requires the mutual understanding of the different cultural memberships: all persons must also be recognized as members of ethical communities integrated around different conceptions of the good. (133)

Such understanding is basic to any multicultural efforts that claim to tolerate ethnic differences and uphold a pluralist conception of ethnicity. In *Mona*, the gathering of people of different colors at the Gugelsteins’ represents such an

attempt at cultural coalition<sup>12</sup>—an experiment that turns out a failure because of the quarrel over a stolen flask. Camp Gugelstein in *Mona* is more than a place for summer vacation; it is a place where racial issues begin to explode. While the experiment begins with an intention of “seeing what would happen,” it turns out that the participants all freely express their viewpoints, mostly related to the troubles of race (194). The atmosphere is at the beginning cheerful and contributive to a sense of affiliation. According to Professor Estimator, the brain of the blacks at Camp Gugelstein, “redemptive love [is] still alive here, at Camp Gugelstein” but “elsewhere it is on the wane” (201). And the practice of Zen at the Camp promotes a context of harmony in which “[there] are warm palms, cool palms, firm grips, loose; and attached to them such an amazing array of humanity” (202).

However, there are nevertheless undercurrents to this formal union. The experiment on racial infusion intended by Mona and her friends fails for the lack of a genuine acceptance of the Blacks. As Feng contends, the failure of multicultural attempts in *Mona* shows the fallacy of a multiculturalism that is masked by an assimilation of all ethnic differences. In *Mona*, the tolerance toward the Blacks is all too often a patronizing posture. In Mona’s view, Mrs. Bea, mother of Seth, who is willing to speak out for the Blacks, acts for “the banality of goodness” (117). It is goodness offered by the well-to-do to the deprived; such goodness is not unconditional. That Barbara Gugelstein once declines to help the incorrigible Alfred shows the limits of the goodness offered by the privileged:

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<sup>12</sup> Feng considers this cultural coalition as a “rainbow coalition,” a term she borrows to indicate the variety of ethnicities in *Mona*. According to her, the racial infusion at Camp Gugelstein represents a unique way of seeing the constituents of ethnicity; the concept of ethnicity is formed not by a nativist insistence but by a dialogue open to a community of different ethnicities. Despite its failure, the experiment at Camp Gugelstein at least poses possibilities of comprehending ethnicity as a cultural identity that bends to the differences within ethnicities and between ethnicities.

“Of course he’s angry,” [Barbara] says. “He’s angry about his whole life. And he’s right. Here we are so rich, and we’re willing to help him up to a point. But not to the point where we’re going to lose some of our own privilege, right?” (162)

Multiculturalism underpinned by such an assimilationist logic is doomed to crumble, not because that logic does not include differences—in fact, it is an ‘inclusionist’ effort—but because it represents, in Lisa Lowe’s words, “a pluralist attempt at containment of those differences” (68).<sup>13</sup>

#### **IV. Mona’s Conversion: The Performance of Identity-Switching**

One of the emergent issues in Asian American studies is to promote anti-essentialism and explore the multiplicities of ethnic communities. While the term ‘Asian American’ is widely acknowledged for its political connotation, one has to appropriate this term to its political function—that is, to resist being marginalized—yet at the time one has to be careful not to fall into the fallacy of essentialism. Borrowing Gayatri Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism, Lowe finds a middle way between the political power of ethnic autonomy and the demand for hybrid representations of ethnic identity. According to Lowe, strategic essentialism represents a way to get rid of the fallacy of essentialism:

The concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ suggests that it is possible to utilize specific signifiers of racialized ethnic identity, such as ‘Asian American’, for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian Americans, while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages of ‘Asian Americans’ so as to

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<sup>13</sup> The Blacks in *Mona* share this awareness poignantly. As Luther the Race Man generalizes Seth as “[a] typical paternalistic motherfucker who cannot stand blacks talking for themselves,” one sees the distrust in so-called liberal or pluralist pursuits of liberation (202).

insure that such essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower. (82)

The politics of ethnic identity is complex to the extent that it eludes the definition of a quasi-essentialist term such as ‘Asian American’; the literary rendering of ethnic identity is no less complicated, as one can see in the performance of identity-switching in *Mona*.

Having a setting in America’s uproarious 1960s, the story of *Mona* takes place in the circumstances that begin to generate liberal pursuits of every kind. As the narrator suggests, “it is only 1968; the blushing dawn of ethnic awareness has yet to pink up [the Changs’] inky suburban night” (3). This metaphorical expression of the Changs’ ostensible imperviousness to racial awakening foreshadows an upcoming upheaval—that is, *Mona*’s conversion into Judaism—that threatens the mother-daughter relation. In *Mona*, the mother-daughter conflicts appear to result from the daughters’ disobeying the code of filial piety, a Chinese tradition that requires children’s unconditional docility to their parents. However, a close look at the filial standards prescribed by Helen, mother of *Mona* and *Callie*, will lead us to disinterring the mother’s complex of ethnicity and, not unrelated to that, her class bigotry.<sup>14</sup>

Eschewing a nostalgic retrospect on the culture of origin, *Jen* tries to portray Asian Americans in their everyday life or, in *Rachel Lee*’s remarks, to “render Asian Americans a familiar part of America’s literary landscapes” (215). In *Mona*, one does not see much of the historiography of pre-immigration; rather, one sees

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<sup>14</sup> Considering the significance of socio-economic class in *Mona*, *Wong* indicates that the family conflicts over *Mona*’s conversion are “at heart about class” (2002: 674). As there is a hierarchy of ethnic groups in *Mona*, so there is a corresponding ‘assignment’ of socio-economic class among them. The weaker socio-economic position of those minorities in *Mona* is, to a great extent, the consequence of an incorrigible racism that discriminates socially and economically.

how a family of Chinese immigrants settles down in the hurly-burly of everyday business. For Helen, who has assimilated values of the socially privileged white people, ethnic identity is by no means subject to nativist determinism. Her ideal type of a Chinese American is to be as high-achieving as the so-called WASPs.

Many of Mona's arguments with Helen result from the fact that the former has a more liberal idea about ethnicity. Mona's conversion into Judaism, a practice of her identity-switching, irritates Helen all the more not because Mona wants to switch her identity but because she trades her Chinese identity for a minority identity. While Mona's conversion is on the surface a religious practice, it has for Mona and her mother implications more than a conversion can afford. In Mona's words, she wants to know "how to be a minority" and "there's nobody better at it than the Jews" (53). For Mona, the spirit of Judaism is emblemized by its two alarming maxims: 'Don't forget' and 'Ask questions'. Of these two Jewish maxims, the first reminds Mona of her being "a stranger in a strange land," whereas the latter teaches her to always question the authenticity of ethnicity (33). In Mona's view, it is difficult to forget that she is Chinese, for "[she] has people like Miss Feeble to keep the subject shiny" (32). As her name suggests, Miss Feeble, Mona's high school teacher, follows the trite belief in the formation of ethnicity by the culture of origin. Mona's identity-switching is, in a sense, a fight against this nativist assertion; her assertion is largely based on a pluralist concept of ethnicity that maintains ethnicity is subject to border-crossing representations of culture and ethnic groups.

In addition to Mona's border-crossing attempts, there are various forms of identity-switching performed by other characters in *Mona*. In the Jewish group, there are the Ingles' that choose to be the WASPs, a choice that becomes feasible

all because it is easy for them to ‘pass for’ the White. In the Black group, there is Naomi, Callie’s roommate, who finds her model of identity in Chinese culture. In the Chinese group, aside from Mona’s efforts, her elder sister Callie also tries to work out a new definition of being Chinese Americans. All these border-crossing representations of ethnic identity in *Mona* are the attempts by the minorities to explore the possibilities of ‘being an American’. Ultimately, trying to represent a multicultural society at its stake in *Mona*, Jen knows that the very key to communication and understanding of any ethnic groups lies in an egalitarian environment. Since egalitarianism as such is far from being realized in *Mona*, the novel ends with a seemingly peaceful scene where conflicts threaten to emerge.

#### **V. A Re-evaluation: *Mona* as a Comedy of Ethnicity**

According to Jen, *Mona* is an “angrier and funnier” book than *Typical American*. The serio-comedy is, for her, “a way of being angry but telling a coherent story” and also “a way of transcending [rage]” (224-25). Jen’s light style of dealing with the situations of conflicts has made her a pioneer in establishing the comic convention for Asian American literature. Both Feng and Wong recognize comic elements in *Mona*. Wong contends that Mona’s story ends with a happy ending in which “multicultural social threatens are contained and class structure—closely intertwined with racial order—is restored” (2002: 674). Feng maintains that with the reconciliation between Mona and her mother and the birth of Mona’s Jewish-Chinese American daughter, Jen is consciously “re-inventing a comic tradition for Chinese American women’s writing through which she may at once acknowledge the importance of matrilineage and introduce a politics of relationality that goes beyond racial confines” (704). While it is Jen’s light style that renders a comic perspective on Chinese Americans’ diasporic experience, as

the two critics suggest, the comedy of her narrative is nevertheless undermined by a bitter awareness of unsolved ethnic injustice.

As Wong contends that in *Mona*, Jen does not give due attention to the Blacks<sup>15</sup>, one can discern her delicate plotting of ethnic positions in a hierarchy whose scale is largely determined by the color of skin and class privilege, with the well-to-do Jewish families on the top, the socio-economically disadvantaged Blacks at the bottom, and the aspirant ladder-climbing Chinese Americans in between. Despite Jen's doing justice to the apparent unequal allocation of the socio-economic importance of ethnic groups in *Mona* by offering certain upheavals of class status, the order within the race-and-class-based system remains mostly intact.

While it is 'good fortune' that turns the bankruptcy of the Gugelsteins' family into a minor financial crisis that no more than reduces their riches, it is also 'good luck' that makes Alfred the Black, a fired cook, ultimately able to stand on his own against the hostility of racism omnipresent in daily space. One has to observe the ethical logic of punishing the privileged and rewarding the deprived; the premise of this logic is that there 'exists' an injustice that needs undoing. Thus, one is able to discern the subtleties working behind the ostensible resolution of conflicts in *Mona*. That Alfred withdraws the lawsuit against the Changs, who wrong the innocent by firing him for illegitimate reasons, indicates not a resolution of racial conflicts, as those sensitive Blacks in the story may call for, but a temporary suspension of interethnic discriminations.

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<sup>15</sup> According to Wong, the Blacks in *Mona* are mostly stock characters; their existence as a minority of minority is not credited with the possibility of improvement in Jen's comedy of conflicts, which nevertheless "leaves mainstream American values undamaged" in her satirical yet harmless tone (2002: 663).

Finally, as a writer with great sensibility to the politics of identity, Jen explores the possibilities of being a Chinese American, an identity that requires careful consideration of elements such as ethnicity, class, and gender. Rather than reducing cultural conflicts faced by Chinese immigrants to the differences between generations, Jen is generally praised for proposing a broader perspective on the position of Chinese Americans, who are now trying to redefine themselves in the making of America's multicultural society.



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