

CONTESTING THE ASIAN FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH TRANSCULTURALISM IN *RICE WITHOUT RAIN*

^{1*} Syamsina Zahurin Binti Shamsuddin and ² Ida Baizura Bahar

^{1,2} Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia,

*Corresponding author: szahurin@gmail.com

Abstract

Rice without Rain (1986), written by the Chinese American writer, Minfong Ho (b. 1951), has been recognised internationally and awarded with numerous awards including Best Books for Young Adults (1991). Set in Thailand, the text is believed to have been overlooked in regards to works by Ho as scholarships on the issue of the Asian female identity through the lens of transculturalism are scarce. Previous scholarship on *Rice without Rain*, for example, focused more on the general identity of the female characters through the concepts of a “whole” self and female “space” for Thai and American-born Thai young women (Thongthiraj, 2006). We hypothesise here, however, that the true identity of the Asian female is reflected through the depiction of Jinda in *Rice without Rain* which is believed to contain the concepts of transculture/ality and identity fluidity. Here, we explore the concept of transculture/ality by the transcultural scholar, Arianna Dagnino (2015), as a platform to contest the current understanding of the Asian female identity by the scholar of English and Comparative Literature, Lalaine Yanilla Aquino (2011) who states that the Asian female identity is recognized culturally as powerless, voiceless and submissive. We examine how transculturalism forms the identity of the protagonist using the concept of transculture/ality by Dagnino and identity fluidity by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2011). Findings of this paper demonstrate the application of transculture/ality and identity fluidity in a work of literature revealing that Jinda contests the stereotypical understanding of the Asian Female identity reflecting transculture/ality and identity fluidity.

Key words: Minfong Ho, Asian female identity, transculture/ality and identity fluidity, *Rice without Rain*.

Introduction

Throughout history, the stereotypical images of the Asian female identity have been strongly echoed in the Western media and have actually shaped the stereotyped images of the Asian females as “feminine and passive” (Nguyen, 2016: 130). The images of the Asian female identity are indeed tied to the depiction of Asian females as victims, built by Western women writers. More significantly, Asian females are also

seen as unimportant as they are often neglected. When they speak, they are not taken seriously and nobody listens to their voices most of the time (Duncan, 2009: ix). These images of stereotypical Asian females continue to thrive; thus, in this paper, we attempt to contest the current understanding of the Asian female identity by the scholar of English and Comparative Literature, Lalaine Yanilla Aquino (2011), who states that the Asian female identity is recognised culturally as powerless, voiceless and submissive. Asian females are not to be recognised as individuals capable of doing meaningful and worthwhile things, and are trained not to speak their mind and must be submissive to the patriarchal setup. When the Asian females speak, they risk being isolated by their loved ones and deemed as problem creators. Asian females are also seen as voiceless, powerless and are not capable of speaking their minds and affirm themselves (Aquino, 2011: 88-91).

With regards to the Chinese-American writer, Minfong Ho (b. 1951), her effort on writing about Asia is due to the fact that she wants to break the misconceptions of Asia from the Western view and write about the Asia that she knows ("The Authors' Guild"). Ho's novels often deal with strong female protagonists who struggle with poverty and injustice set against real historical events that either she has experienced or observed (Wiggins, 2006: 52). Thus, in this paper, we attempt to contest the current understanding of the Asian female in Ho's novel *Rice without Rain* as we hypothesise that the novel contains examples of how the Asian female identity is challenged through the concept of transculturalism, where they are normally perceived as voiceless, submissive and unworthy, leading to a fluid Asian female identity.

Literature Review

The Chinese American Literature began in the 1850s as throngs of immigrants from China came to the United States of America in the midst of the Gold Rush in 1849. Most of the immigrants, who comprised of workers, scholars, students and diplomats, at that time, wrote in Chinese and English as they shared their experiences of becoming immigrants and their lives in America in contrast with their Chinese backgrounds. These writers wrote autobiographies, poems and novels mostly on issues of identity and race as well as disputing stereotypes of the "Yellow Peril". The most prominent description of the "Yellow Peril" is by the culturist, Gina Marcetti (1994), who described this phenomenon as many Westerners saw the Chinese people as dangerous, wanting to steal from them, would dominate America and jeopardise their Western and Catholic beliefs. The Americans had prejudice against the Chinese people as the Chinese workers, at that time, worked for very low salary. This "Yellow Peril" occurrence brought many implications to Asian immigrants, where the media started to illustrate the "Yellow Peril" as a symbol of evil, disease ridden and malice Asian immigrants (Marcetti, 1994: 2-4). Most notable writers of the era include the biracial writers; the Eaton sisters, Edith Maude Eaton (1865–1914) and Winnifred Eaton (1875–1954). Winnifred, who used the name 'Onoto Watana', was the first Chinese writer who published her novel *Mrs. Nume of Japan* in 1899 while her sister, who took the pen name of 'Sui Sin Far', published her collection of short stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* in 1912 (Bella Adams, 2008: 7-11).

The Chinese American Literature progresses with the emergence of many prominent writers, such as Jade Snow Wong (1922-2006) who authored the much acclaimed *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) and *No Chinese Stranger* (1975); Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940) who published the widely controversial *The Women Warrior* (1976) *China Men* (1980), *Hawai'i One Summer* (1980), *Through the Black Curtain* (1987), *Tripster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), *To Be the Poet* (2002), *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* (2006), *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011); Amy Tan (b. 1952) who wrote *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), *The Valley of Amazement* (2013); and two children's books, *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *Sagwa the Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994); Fae Myene Ng (b. 1956) who wrote *Bone* (1993), *Steer Toward Rock* (2008); Lisa See (b. 1955) who wrote *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family* (1995), *Flower Net* (1997), *The Interior* (1999), *Dragon Bones* (2003), *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), *Peony in Love* (2007) and *Shanghai Girls* (2009); and Minfong Ho (b. 1951) who first published her novel, *Sing to the Dawn* in 1975. American writers of Chinese descent, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Faye Myene Ng, Lisa See and Amy Tan, concentrated on the issues of the Chinese immigrants in America or the Chinese American experiences in their novels.

On the contrary, Ho focused on writing truthful and profound stories about strong young female protagonists who struggled through the hardships of life and survived (Wiggins, 2006, p. 52). She is an award-winning and successful author, where her first novel, *Sing to the Dawn* (1975), won the first prize from the Council of Interracial Books for Children. Ho's second novel, *Rice without Rain* (1986), was recognised internationally and awarded with numerous awards including the first prize from the National Book Development Council of Singapore and a "Best Books for Young Adults" citation from the American Library Association (Oh, 2007: 107). Ho then continued to pen *The Clay Marble* in 1991. Other works by Ho include *Tanjong Rhu and Other Stories* (1986), *The Two Brothers* (1995) and *Brother Rabbit* which she co-authored with Saphan Ros, *Hush!: A Thai Lullaby* (1996), *Maples in the Mist: Children's Poems from the Tang Dynasty* (1996) which she translated and compiled, *Peek!: A Thai Hide-and-Seek* (2004), and *Gathering the Dew* published as *The Stone Goddess* (2003) ("The Authors' Guild").

Asian females have been stereotyped since the era of the immigration of the Asian to America. It started during the Gold Rush era (1880-1940) when masses of Chinese migrated to America igniting the "Yellow Peril" phenomenon. One of the first stereotypes of the "Yellow Peril" is Dr Fu Manchu, an antagonist of the crime novels of the same title written by the British author, Sax Rohmer (1883-1959) in 1913. The image of Dr. Fu Manchu is very consistent with Chinese men at that time with his traditional robe and his unique style of moustache. Dr Fu Manchu is depicted as the symbol of Asian domination of America ("BGSU University Library"), where the immigrants were labelled as thieves who stole from the Whites. They were also depicted as hostile, violent and menacing. Their female counterparts were also labelled in demeaning ways, where, throughout history, Asian females are

stereotyped with the derogatory perception of having “deviant sexuality, erotic sensibilities, and exotic sexual practices” (Duncan, 2009: 174). These stereotypes of Asian females are reiterated in Western films and televisions when they are perceived as “Dragon ladies”, women who used their sexuality to achieve their goals or as “China dolls”, obedient and very feminine (“Ithaca College Library”).

One of many impressions of the Asian female identity comes from the popular character of “Cho-Cho-San” or the more prominent character of “Madame Butterfly”. Cho-Cho-San is depicted as naïve, weak, demure; her voice and movements were illustrated as “resistlessly caressing”. So beautiful and exotic, White men cannot help but fall madly in love with them (Long, 1898/2016: 387-391). She is submissive and loves her White companion passionately. This short story of *Madame Butterfly* (1898) by American lawyer and writer John Luther Long (1861-1927) is heavily influenced by a novel written by French naval officer and novelist Pierre Loti (1850-1923), *Madame Chrysantheme* (1887). *Madame Chrysantheme* is set in Nagasaki and reveals an account of a naval officer who found a Japanese girl to be his temporary wife. Initially, the story was written as a series in *Le Figaro*, a French newspaper, in 1887. Its illustrated novel was published in 1888 and continued to be reprinted two hundred twenty-two times and translated into many European languages. The novel’s English version was translated by Laura Ensor in 1889. The popularity of *Madame Chrysantheme* continued to flourish with many artists creating adaptations of the story. These artists include Australian-born artist, author, printmaker and illustrator Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938), who drew a painting titled “My Lady Chrysanthemum” in 1888 to depict his account of travelling to Japan; and French composer, organist, pianist, conductor and administrator, Andre Messager (1853-1929) who produced a play based on Loti’s *Madame Chrysantheme*. The most notable work influenced by Loti’s *Madame Chrysantheme* is of John Luther Long’s *Madame Butterfly* (1898) which was later made into a play in 1900 and published as a book in 1901. In 1904, Italian opera composer Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) staged an opera of Long’s *Madame Butterfly* in 1904 and made the story of the Geisha and a naval officer very successful (Reed, 2010: 1).

Rice without Rain is the second novel written by Ho. Set in Thailand, the novel has been recognised internationally and awarded with numerous awards including Best Books for Young Adults (1991) (“The Authors’ Guild”). *Rice Without Rain* was dedicated to 46 students who perished in the tragedy of the Thammasat University massacre in 1976 (Havis, 2013), and revolved around the 17-years-old female protagonist Jinda who lives in a village in Thailand. A group of students, led by Ned, arrive in Jinda’s village during their summer break to live with the villagers. Gradually, the group of students is accepted in the village with Jinda becoming close to the students, Sri and Ned. Jinda’s acquaintances with Ned and Sri lead to Jinda joining a peaceful, communist-led demonstration which goes awry. Jinda then escapes home, where she decides to stay with her family rather than joining Ned and the rebels. Jinda’s character personifies an identity of a strong, resilient young woman who prevails over life hurdles.

Our initial research has shown that there has been only one prominent study, so far, conducted on the novel, namely exploring the concept of a “whole” self and female “space” for Thai and American-born Thai adolescent women focusing on the grandmother-granddaughter bond (Thongthiraj, 2006). Thongthiraj examined *Rice without Rain* (1986) as an emerging literary text of literature in the context of Asian and Southeast Asian American discourse that focused on the exclusive experience of Thai Americans. According to Thongthiraj, Ho has produced a work of “self discovery and personal development amid various levels of isolation and dislocation” (234). Additionally, one particular scholarship by Nirmayanti (2013) explored Millet’s theory of Sexual Politics and Johan Galtung’s theory of peace and security in *Rice without Rain* (1986) as part of three novels by Ho, specifically *Sing to the Dawn* (1975) and *The Clay Marble* (1991) in order to reveal how patriarchy works and creates issues in the rural community like the narrative in *Sing to the Dawn* (1975).

Research Method

In this paper, we employ a textual analysis involving a close reading of Ho’s *Rice without Rain*. Examples are extracted from the novel and served as evidence in our analysis. The close textual analysis is used to determine the ways in which transculturalism form the identity of the characters. A close reading, paying close attention to the details of what the protagonists say and do, is necessary in order to discover the diversity and details of their lives as women living in Asia in the novel and to provide evidence to counter the hegemonic narrative that Asian females are all the same: unworthy, submissive, and voiceless. For the purpose of analysis, then, we have chosen to explore the concept of transculture/ality as reflected in the protagonist in the novel in her quest to find her true identity. According to the literary theorist on transcultural writers, Arianna Dagnino, in “Comparative literary studies in the twenty-first century: towards a transcultural perspective?” (2012), transcultural writers, such as Ho, may have experienced transculture/ality through either migration, exile, transnational or post colonialism, and have creatively utilised these experiences by taking on a more “innovative transcultural attitude” (p. 3).

With regards to the conceptual framework for analysis, we begin, firstly, with the understanding of the term ‘transculture/ality’. Dagnino in *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* (2015) stated that transculture/ality is an approach that looks at culture as not static and fluid. In the context of ethnicities and nations, culture is not solid, exclusive and independent. Rather, it is formed through interactions and infusion of communications between or among cultures. As a result of developing transculture/ality, people have the right to make their own cultural choices, to act independently to “allegiances”, “plural affiliations” and “multi-layered identities” and construct a hybrid persona (p. 140). Culture and the formation of one’s cultural identity is realised as a dynamic process. Here, transculture/ality perceives the cultural boundaries of a society or nation as concurring, blurry and unstable. More importantly, it does not deny the fundamental culture or nationality of an individual but rejects the notion of “fixed, self-enclosed, cultural, ethnic, and national identities or allegiances” (p. 140). In transculture/ality, the individual construct is seen as a dynamic process of a humble openness to other cultures. Dagnino described it a

“cosmopolitan approach” of not only acknowledging our own roots but the importance of embracing the dynamics of cultural formation within the self that are fluid and transcends a person from being a pure race, ethnic or identity to a more whole person without having a specific identity. We hypothesise here that the issues concerning the Asian female identity can be found depicted in Ho’s novel *Rice without Rain* where the female protagonist is portrayed as encountering problems and hardship of life thus manifesting the true identity of the Asian female. At this point in our discussion, it is imperative that we highlight the definition of the phrase ‘identity fluidity’ which will be used along with the concepts of transculture/ality.

In addition to the concept of ‘transculture/ality’ by Dagnino, we will also use the three concepts of identity, “enlightenment subject”, “sociological subject” and “postmodern subject”, as outlined in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (2011: 597-598) by the Jamaican-born cultural theorist, political activist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1932-2014). The first concept, the “enlightenment subject” is a conception of the self when a person is born. Halls contends that the conception of an “inner core”, after a person is born, forms a “fully-centered” person who is capable of thinking and acting accordingly. With a personal consciousness and a fundamental inner core, a person continues to develop his/her identity throughout its “individual’s existence” (p. 597). The second conception of self is the “sociological subject” as the “inner core” continues to develop while the identity of a person links the self and society through interactions within the society by establishing “values, meaning and symbols” in a person’s domain. The third concept of identity, also known as the “postmodern subject”, is a never-ending production subject to the influence of the diverse development of history, a fluid ‘process’, features that are important in our understanding of the nature of fluidity and cultural hybridity.

Discussion

Dagnino has postulated that, in transculture/ality, the formation of an individual is dynamic as the person unpretentiously embraces other cultures. Jinda, in *Rice without rain* (1986), after being acquainted with Sri, from the group of students who has come to her village, feels a sense of admiration for her and later helps Sri to open a makeshift clinic in the village even though she is worried of what the other villagers might think of her as exemplified below:

Jinda felt rather uneasy when she helped Sri unpack her box of medicine on a wooden desk borrowed from the monks, and placed a kerosene lamp on it. “You’re all set,” she told Sri. ‘I’ll wait for you at home.’

‘Jinda, don’t go away,’ Sri said, clutching her hand. ‘You’re so good with the children, and I... I don’t understand their dialect sometimes. Please stay.’ Jinda bit her lips. Much as she had grown to like Sri, she did not know how the other villagers might react to her joining this stranger in their midst... Sri’s hand tightened on her own. ‘Jinda please,’ she said. ‘I’m scared.’

Jinda smiled. It was settled then, as simple as that. ‘Fine, let’s start,’ she said. (Ho, 2010: 134)

In the above extract, Hall's concept of identity is also realised when Jinda, as a "fully-centered" person who is capable of thinking and acting accordingly, continues to develop her identity through her interactions with society and establishes her own "values, meaning and symbols" in her domain thus manifesting an Asian female identity that is fluid. Jinda, after working with Sri and seeing how Sri has helped the villagers get better from their ailments, has grasped the importance of getting the right medical treatment. Consequently, after her father Inthorn falls very sick after accidentally wounded his hand with a wooden drill, Jinda allows Sri to tend to his father and cure him with her medicines despite her sister's objection as depicted below.

Then she noticed a light flickering in the doorway. She looked up, and there was Sri. Her glasses glinted in the light of the oil lamp she was holding.

'Please Jinda, may I come in?' she whispered.

For a moment Jinda hesitated. She looked over at the far side of the room, where Dao was now sleeping. Taking a deep breath, Jinda motioned for Sri to come in.

The medical student crept into the room and knelt down beside Inthorn. She reached for the farmer's bandaged hand, and turned it over... Jinda held her father's thumb in place as Sri proceeded to stitch along the cut. (Ho, 2010: 155-156)

Therefore, we can also conclude here that our findings showed that Jinda, has found her true identity through "self-discovery and personal development amid various levels of isolation and dislocation" as stated by Thongthiraj (2006, p. 234). However, Thongthiraj has focused on the close bond of the the grandmother-granddaughter relationship that leads to the protagonist's "self-discovery and personal development". Contrary to that, our findings have shown that despite finding her true identity through "self-discovery and personal development", Jinda attributes all of it to the process of transculture/ality and identity fluidity.

Dagnino also contended that culture is formed through interactions and infusion of communications between or among cultures and, as transculture/ality develops, people have the right to make their own cultural choices and to act independently. People are also free to make connections and to be able to construct multilayers identity to be a hybrid persona. In the novel, Jinda is portrayed as a character that has undergone the process of transculture/ality and has acted independently in making her own cultural choices. This can be seen in the following example where, after knowing Sri, Jinda feels connected to Sri and understands the need for proper medicinal treatments for many of her villagers when they fall ill rather than going to see the village healer, Mau Chom. She is the only one who believes that Sri, with her medicines, can help cure her father's wound as illustrated below:

'No, Father, Mau Chom didn't do this. He only chanted spells.'

'Who did this, then?'

'Sri did, Father.'

‘Sri?’ Inthorn frowned. ‘She’s just a young girl. Is her magic really stronger than Mau Chom’s?’

‘You’ve seen her work at the clinic, Father. She’s good.’

‘Yes, but that was only for small ailments. I always thought Mau Chom was more powerful for sicknesses of life and death.’

‘Apparently not, Father,’ Jinda said drily. ‘Sri’s magic is powerful too. It must be, she cured you when Mau Chom couldn’t.’ Jinda took out the little packet Sri had left with her, and poured the capsules out into her hand. White and red, they gleamed like wet pebbles in her palm. ‘See, Father? She gave you this medicine for fever. You’ve taken six already, and it’s time to take two more. Go on, take two. It’s worked so far.’ (Ho, 2010: 158)

As suggested by Hall, after undergoing the two stages of identity, the “enlightenment subject” and the “sociological subject”, a person will continue to develop his/her identity through the never-ending production subject to the influence of the diverse development of history called the “postmodern subject”. Hence, Jinda has revealed her identity fluidity when she not only put her trust in Sri to treat her father, she also understands how the medicine works and helps her father gets better as described below:

The farmer looked at the capsules, frowning. ‘What is it?’ he asked.

Tetracycline. Jinda could remember the lilting name Sri had used for those capsules during the many times she had prescribed them at the clinic. ‘Tetracycline,’ she said softly to her father, then smiled. ‘Magic.’ She amended. (Ho, 2010: 158)

As Dagnino states, transculture/ality rejects the notion of a fixed identity, we can see that, after joining Ned in the city, Jinda’s openness to embrace the life of a student activist like Ned has actually shaped her to become courageous and bold. She dares to speak out her mind when she agrees to deliver her speech in a rally. This can be seen below:

Quickly, she glanced through the notes, reviewing them. They had worked on it for many hours, weaving together Jinda’s memories of her father with the complex issue of land rent. Ned had insisted that she memorize it rather than rely on notes, and had already spent several sessions coaching her on her delivery of it.

She stood in the middle of the room now, and started her speech. (Ho, 2010: 219-220)

Again, as Hall affirmed that the identity of a person is fluid and will go through three stages as we can see that, after many interactions with the student activists in the city especially Jinda’s observation of Ned, she now not only can speak her mind out but she can even deliver her speech in a more proper manner as illustrated below:

Now, as she spoke about the drought in Maekung, she knew how to modulate her voice, when to pause for effect, even how to gesture a little with her hands. (Ho, 2010: 220)

Contrary to the scholarship by Nirmayanti (2013) that explored on Millet's theory of Sexual Politics and Johan Galtung's theory of peace and security in *Rice without Rain* (1986) to reveal how patriarchy works and creates issues in the rural community, our findings disclosed that Jinda has a very good relationship with her father and treats him with unconditional love when she takes care of him during his illness. Jinda has also become Ned's close friends and discusses many issues with him without any disparity. We can also see that she is not being oppressed by the patriarchal set up. Our findings have shown that Jinda has been portrayed as the true Asian female identity who is strong, resilient and firm as presented in the above extracts. Jinda's strong, resilient and firm personalities are reflected through the concept of transculture/ality presented by Dagnino. Jinda also personifies the Asian female identity that is fluid as suggested by Hall as she goes through the three concepts of identity; "enlightenment subject", "sociological subject" and "postmodern subject".

Conclusions

This study has examined how the concept of transculture/ality is reflected in the protagonist of *Rice without rain* (1983), Jinda, to contest the current understanding of the Asian female identity by Aquino (2011), who states that the Asian female identity is recognised culturally as powerless, voiceless and submissive. Through transculture/ality, we have found that Jinda has found her true identity as an Asian female who is dynamic, able to make her own cultural decision and, though she has gone through interactions and infusion of communications with many student activists in the city, she still regards herself as a native of Maekung, who has experienced many hardships. Our analysis has also revealed that Jinda, through transculture/ality, has embraced other cultures openly and, as suggested by Hall, Jinda has blossomed from the "enlightenment subject", to the "sociological subject", and as Jinda communicates and interacts with society she continues to develop as the "postmodern subject", in a never-ending process thus establishing identity fluidity.

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