

Gish Jen's *World and Town*:
A Female Bildungsroman Novel of Postmodern Humanism

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Gish Jen, a Chinese American writer known for her humorous, yet serious, novels that capture the difficulties of adapting to a new culture, recently released *World and Town* (2010). This latest novel continues with the experience of assimilation, but she rewrites the traditional Bildungsroman. Jen's novel picks up the narrative of sixty-eight-year-old Hattie Kong, a Chinese American who has lived in self-imposed isolation for two years, following the deaths of her husband and best friend. Hattie realizes she has "attained some sort of terrible detachment" (Jen 361) until violence and death invade her solitude. September 11 and the traumas that hit closer to home further destabilize an already unsteady Hattie. She struggles to come to terms with this new world in "flux" (11) and must also navigate the complex multiple identities of what it means to be a Chinese American, widow, mother, matriarch, scientist, community member, and finally, lover. The world and town converge on Hattie's doorstep. Emotional emails from her extended Chinese family fill her in-box, and her new neighbors are a Cambodian family who have moved from an urban ghetto to Riverlake, a place they would not have moved to "if they were thriving," she believes (59). The Chhungs' difficulty assimilating and Hattie's developing relationship with the children, particularly the fifteen-year-old Sophy, recall her own memories of being an immigrant, and her intervention in their lives is an ethic of care that forces her to reconsider her sense of self and sense of place. Todd F. David and Kenneth Womack's book *Postmodern Humanism in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Reconciling the Void* illustrates a postmodern world as one of "social and economic implications that ... alter ... existing notions of identity" and demonstrate the importance of "interpersonal relationships between the self and others [in the] immigrant transformation" (102-103). As she develops a relationship with the Chhungs, Hattie is unable to remain detached from human suffering for long and must take a renewed interest in those around her.

Jen's novel "foregrounds the workings of memory," a "place where identity is formed" (Grice 93), and Hattie's memories of China trigger her own feelings of never belonging. Memory compels her to acknowledge the despair that is around her and forces her out of isolation. Helen Grice's consideration of identity in Asian American women's writing finds that "ethnic group identification works through a sense of community/ commonality" when a "member identifies with and identifies as part of that ethnic group" (90). She also sees Asian American women writers incorporating a "strong sense of community within their work" through "polyvocal texts" that represent this "communal/ community" (90). As a polyvocal text as well, *World and Town* incorporates the voices of Hattie's dead parents, of Hattie the teenage exile, those of her Chinese niece and relatives, the Chhungs, and finally Carter, a former lover, among others. Incidents evoke memory and memory drives action. Her relatives' accusations that Hattie does not know

despair cut deep. When she is finally called on to stop the self-destructive tendencies of Sophy and Ratanak Chhung, Hattie calls the Riverlake community to action. In the process, she realizes the essence of *being* human and explains the human drive to act to Carter:

People [are] trying not to *combust*, [are] trying to play along—to see where [they are] going. ‘People in whose pictures and stories we appear. Or better yet, gods. A community, imagined or real ... And the answer, maybe, that such inclusion fosters cooperation and social cohesion. Which contributes in turn to the survival of the gene pool—that is, to the genes of the individual and of his or her kin.’
(239)

Hattie refuses to stand back and observe. “Miss See-It-All” takes Carter to task for not caring about anyone or anything that matters (Jen 241). Finally, through the couching of polyvocal texts we, too, hear the human despair that burdens Hattie. At one low point she wonders why she should even care about the Chhungs (225). Despite her doubts, the rational Hattie will finally reconsider her relatives’ pleas to rebury her parents’ bones in Qufu in order to stop the family’s bad luck—a child’s anorexia and another’s death—to ease their “heartache” (321), though she does not believe in superstitious “hogwash” (34). Nevertheless, this move is partly in reaction to the dreams she is having in which her parents visit her “waving their arms, whether in warning or greeting” (317). Hattie hires a bone picker, removes her parents’ bones, and sends them to China. This experience triggers another memory in which she recalls her father’s Chinese saying: “Fallen leaves return to their roots” (328). She too must consider where her remains are to be interred upon her death: the family graveyard, sprinkled in her flower garden, or buried in the backyard pet cemetery? Hattie’s feeling that she belongs nowhere foregrounds the novel. When her dreams, emotional emails from China, and the distress next door push an emotional Hattie into a corner, she finally admits that she “can’t watch their lives fall apart this way” and must “do something” (317). In fact, she boldly moves to cover for Ratanak when he tries to bludgeon Sarun to death and protects a guilty Sophy from being charged with theft and arson. Hattie’s instinctive drive to protect is an “ethics of caring” that overrides “abstractions about justice” (Kafka 101) and further aids her self-transformation.

Hattie’s story fits nicely within the rubrics of the female growth fiction reconstructed by Maryellen T. Mori. The structure of Jen’s novel maps her heroine’s “interior ‘journey’ toward self-transformation” (538) which is prompted by memories via four phases sectioned in the novel: Rebellion, Retreat, Renewal, and Rebirth. These four “R’s” are couching within three chapters of Hattie’s story: “Hattie I: I’ll But Lie and Bleed Awhile”; “Hattie II: Rising to Fight Again”; and “Hattie: III: The Pride of Riverlake.” Hattie’s story is briefly interrupted by two episodes for Sophy and Everett, a community member Hattie fails to save. “Memory is one place where identity is formed,” according to Grice (93). Therefore, Jen’s female-centered narrative assigns memory as the necessary stimulus that prompts Hattie into action. Her ability to identify her own assimilation experiences with her Cambodian neighbor’s “immigrant transformation” is empowering. Memory, as an empowering agent in this *bildung* narrative, alters Hattie’s existing

notions of self. The Bildungsroman usually opens with the protagonist's birth and concludes at maturation as it asserts the importance of community and its relevancy to the character's realization of self. Hattie's story begins in later life and after she has raised a son and buried her husband and best friend. Unlike other Bildungsroman heroines who traditionally retreat from mainstream society to isolated settings (Mori 538), Hattie does not discard material possessions or abandon rationality, but she does wish to avoid responsibilities. Hattie's retreat to small town life and the picturesque, natural setting of Riverlake should be ideal, but she is unfulfilled (Jen 539). Hattie's small walking group of female friends and her dogs are her only companions. Her "loneliness is [now] almost beyond words" (12); she is living the life her best friend warned her against, the "unlived life [that] isn't worth living" (12). Nevertheless, Hattie is like the bamboo she paints, flexible but unbreakable. At this juncture her chief job is to "reconstitute herself" so "that [she] might rise and fight again," quoting her friend Lee's "old warrior who said, as he lay a-drip on a field, 'I'll but lie and bleed awhile. Then I will rise and fight again!'" (21).

Hattie's symbolic reconstitution is realized in her paintings of bamboo and the soothing process of traditional ink mixing in her father's old inkwell. Through this creative process she reconnects with childhood memories but detaches from life: "She is no longer the Hattie who would dive into any kind of water. Time's made a sensible creature out of her" (Jen 42). At first she paints in a meditative way, seeking a "monklike lightness," a "detachment ... the old Chinese scholars used to seek ... a feeling that one has risen above life, seen through it" (21). The composition of Hattie's painting parallels her developing relationship with the Chhungs. Her composition is "less blank"; the "stalks seem to have more to do with one another, as if they're acquainted from another picture—involved" (60). When Hattie eventually fulfills her family's wishes, she visits her parents' graves while the bones are being exhumed. There she notices their names in Chinese letters and the carving of a clump of bamboo in each corner of the stone. At this point, Hattie realizes that she has been "painting her way all along to this moment—retreating that she might inch forward" (328). When we move back in time and consider how the shift in the painting's composition parallels the changes in her life, suffering is also mirrored in her earlier compositions. Hattie takes on the suffering of her Chinese relatives, is at odds with Carter, and the Chhung family suffers yet another crisis. At this point she adds leaves to her bamboo stalks that are "blowing pell-mell, flecked and pelted with rain" (103), an image that foreshadows the violence and suffering yet to come and is indicative of her own turmoil. By the mid-point of the novel, Hattie has tried to separate Sophy from a fundamentalist Christian church, separate Sarun from his gang, and protect the girl and Ratanak, her father, from criminal charges. And "[f]or once she has a clear idea what she's going to focus on if she ever makes it back to her bamboo—a more natural splay of the leaves. Like the fingers of a hand" (184).

Yet, when she intercedes in yet another Chhung family crisis, Sophy sees her as the enemy which sends her back to painting. But this time, Hattie "starts working on some bamboo in snow—trying to convey the weight of the snow [with a] judicious absence of ink. The weight of it's all suggestion—a matter of bending stalks and burdened leaves, and of using these things to trick the eye into 'seeing'" (225). Here

Hattie questions why she has burdened herself with all this suffering. She is painfully aware through her relationship with the Chhungs that she has “evoked” a “good heavy load” (225). Still Hattie is unable to sit back as Carter does and “watch people get pushed halfway around the globe only to get plowed under once they get here” or “airbrushed out” as she was when she arrived in the U.S. as a teenager (238). Her rational mind knows humans are “prone to superstition” and “are wired to seek cause and effect whether it’s there or not” when they “don’t feel quite in control” of things, such as her relatives’ belief that reburying the bones in China will stop their bad luck. But Hattie’s “human-heartedness” and Confucian ideology, a “humanist philosophy [of] a secular ethics of *reason and fairness*” (He 45), will not allow her to airbrush out any part of human suffering and undo what she has accomplished. Nevertheless, she attributes her empathy less to Confucianism and more to “tradition and hope and humility and coping” (Jen 321-322). Consequently, by the end of the novel she creates a new picture of home for herself and the Chhungs. As the novel closes with Hattie moving toward a realization of self, she grows “sick of bamboo” and will turn to painting the lake behind her house (383).

Because Hattie empathizes with the Chhungs living on the fringes of Riverlake, she easily assumes matriarchal authority in the face of Ratanak’s unyielding patriarchal authority. She sees Ratanak discipline a kneeling Sarun, who is acting the part of the “filial son,” hitting him on the back of the head. Hattie hears the beating with her “heart’s ear,” and her mother’s voice reminding her that “*Your heart’s ear being your true ear*” will not allow you to ignore what you see (Jen 168-169). The Chhungs continually evoke Hattie’s memories of being an exile sent to the U.S. under the assumed name of a dead “half-half” girl who was killed in an anti-foreigner uprising in China. Hattie’s self-identification as “a half-half” and a foreigner, despite her relationship with her white American grandparents and extended family, plus the loss of her parents, cause her to feel that she is not a whole person. At a pivotal moment in the novel when Sophy threatens to commit suicide, Hattie explains her own desire to have died when she lost her husband and best friend. She also privately recalls how, as a teenager, she wished to drown herself in a Chinese lake, not an “American lake” because “she didn’t want people just to think she was nuts” (201), though she does not tell Sophy this. Hattie understands Sophy’s feelings of isolation and tells her, as much as herself, that as “an old retired lady with a dead husband and a faraway son and no sisters” who has her dogs and friends, she is “not an integral part of anyone’s picture” (262). Eventually Hattie will admit that she needs Sophy and the Chhungs more than they need her.

Hattie’s memories of being a part of the Hatch household as a young girl, about Sophy’s age, recall her feelings of always being a “guest” in the family; “welcome, then—as she will always remember—welcome to leave” (Jen 375). Nevertheless, her attempts to do as Dr. Hatch, the head of her host family once suggested - to never “accept not fitting in,” to “[b]e a part of the picture” and to “[r]emake the picture if need be” (200) - are empty words. The only home Hattie ever knew was the lab in which she and Carter Hatch worked while she was a grad student. There she found “solid ground” and felt as if “she had arrived in a country that would not vanish” (203). The lab was also the

only place in which Hattie ever felt whole. By the time she is ready to “rise and fight,” Hattie discovers that “‘home’ is a feeling of sharing the same reality” (203). Shan Qiang He considers the development of Chinese-American immigrant literature as a “minority discourse of resistance shaped by ... political movements, transculturation, and institutionalization in the United States” (61-62). Further, the lack of wholeness that he reads in immigrant texts can be read as a “negotiation with another that is already part of ourselves, a process of critical (self-)reflection on the world of massive migrations, on the country founded by different kinds of immigrants, and on the self that is not whole” (61-62). Yet Hattie assumes some sense of wholeness during her quest to save the Chhungs. Plus, the bond she and Sophy have supports Mori’s argument that the narrative pattern of the “‘grail’ of the female developmental pilgrimage” re-establishes contact “with a female principle” (540). Hattie’s self-imposed isolation ends when Sophy becomes the “daughter [she] always wanted,” who replaces her absent son Josh (Jen 90), and claims the girl as “Her Sophy! Her beautiful Sophy!” (217).

Hattie continues toward a new identity through her relationships and actions. On Carter’s return to Riverlake, they renew their friendship and their sexual relationship. However, he is nothing more than a transitional figure that assists Hattie’s quest to find some sense of self, whose presence recalls memories of her absent husband. Their history shows that the time was never right for them; either she was too old and he too young, or they were in the wrong places professionally and personally. Their definitions of integrity differed as well: “She believed it something in the person; he thought it something in the work” (Jen 205). He never denied the unfounded rumors that they were having an affair that led to her dismissal from the lab and the loss of her dream job. As Hattie re-remembers these events, she also recalls Carter telling her that “*if they played their cards right, maybe [she] could come back as an equal, someday*” (205). Their lab was a boy’s club that represented patriarchal suppression and exemplified an institution where “[m]en in general are depicted as deeply implicated in the patriarchal symbolic order by virtue of their privileged position within it,” says Mori of the representation of men in the bildung narrative (540). Carter’s defects imply that he is unable to be more than a minor figure in her development since she is unable to completely forgive his abandonment. Hattie’s strength comes from moving Carter toward his own self realization.

While Hattie might rediscover her sexuality via Carter, and has some sense of “home” when they are together, “she [still] feels she belongs elsewhere ... Nowhere” (Jen 375). By the conclusion of the novel, she has crossed the divide between the living and the dead. The attack on the World Trade Center, her bond with Sophy and the Chhungs, and her relationship with Carter cause her to feel “how Lee and Joe have retreated to the back side of a divide ... How she’s gone on [and] ... left them behind now—she who was once left behind herself” (220). Though Hattie has developed a firm sense of self, ultimately she is unable to reconcile her feelings of not belonging.

Works Cited

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