

American Dream Values Experienced by Chinese Immigrant in Jean Kwok's *Girl In Translation*

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Abstract

*A debut novel written by Jean Kwok in 2010 was *Girl in Translation*. In her novel, Jean Kwok wants to point out the efforts of the immigrant who want to achieve the dreams known as the American Dream. Kimberly Chang is the main character that experiences various difficulties to achieve her dreams in America. Kimberly Chang is an immigrant who moves from Hong Kong to America when she was young with her mother, Mrs. Chang. Kimberly begins to learn the English language, go to school, and work in a factory so that adjusting to the new environment she had just experienced. She faces many difficulties and obstacles which block her dreams. This research analyzes the pursuit of the main character's American Dream as reflected in *Girl in Translation* novel. This research aims to describe the American Dream Values in the main character of the novel in pursuing the American Dream. This study uses James T. Adam's American Dream theory. The method used in this study was descriptive qualitative. *Girl in Translation* novel was the primary data in the form of monologues and dialogues in the novel. The secondary data were taken from the e-books, e- journals, essays, articles, and websites.*

Keywords: Immigrants, American Dream, American Dream Value

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a reflection of society. Through literature, the authors uncover the problems of life. The word ‘literature’ comes from the word *littera* in Latin which means letters. “The definitions, therefore, usually include additional adjectives such as “aesthetic” or “artistic” to distinguish literary works from texts of everyday use such as magazines, newspaper, legal documents, books, and scholarly writings” (Murwantono, 2011). Literature as a form of writing distinguishes its form from other art products, and its aesthetic or artistic values make it different from other writings. In general, literary works are works formed from the author’s imagination. It is also an expression of images and events of daily activities directly or indirectly. Literary works have a function to entertain or teach something to the reader. The function of this literature can be found in all types of literary works.

There are two kinds of prose, fiction and nonfiction. “Typically, these are fictional narratives such as novels, short stories, and plays” (Lin, 2016). Fiction begins to mean something that is made or formed, is a prose story based on the concept and imagination of the author. These include novels, parables, short stories, and romances. On the other hand, nonfiction is a literary work that describes or interprets facts, presents judgments, and opinions. “Many pieces of discursive prose are duly classified as nonfiction, including history, philosophy, religious meditations, and personal essays” (Lin, 2016). It consists of essays, news reports, encyclopedias, magazines, newspapers, broadcast media, and many other forms of communication. A novel today is a long narrative in literary prose. “A novel is a piece of prose fiction of a reasonable length” (Eagleton, 2005). A novel is a narrative text that informs long-form prose containing several fictional characters and events. In the novel, there are intrinsic elements such as plot, setting, characterization, point of view, and theme. Because of the general description above, this study is interested in analyzing a novel entitled *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok.

One of the issues raised in the novel’s literary work is about Chinese immigrants. Besides being known as a great nation, China is also known as the nation with the largest population distribution in the world. In 1930, more than 8 million people were leaving China and spreading all over the world including America. The Chinese usually arrive very poor and have jobs as traders or farmers. The Chinese themselves first came to America around 1848, when there was a gold rush in California. “The influx of the Chinese resulted from a growing demand for mining laborers, which followed the discovery of large deposits of gold in California in the late 1840s (the so-called California Gold Rush)” (qtd. in Misiuna, 2018). Most of the Chinese immigrants were known to be hard workers, especially in agriculture and railroad manufacturing. “The construction of railroads in the 1860s was an even larger attraction than the California Gold Rush. Thousands of men signed prepaid labor contracts that included free transoceanic passage to the West Coast of the United States” (Holland, 2009). They are also known as cheap labor, able to save from this very low income and live very simply.

Meanwhile, a peaceful, and prosperous life is the dream of all mankind in this world. That statement does sound like a mere fantasy, but it does not hurt every human being to crave a minimal life from all its shortcomings and complexities. Not many people can experience a life full of pleasure following their dreams. In reality, the dream of being able to achieve a prosperous life is sometimes hampered by others or caused by the individual himself. “Nevertheless, despite more than 60 years of systematic disenfranchisement, Chinese continued to migrate to the United States because it remained a country where they could find employment and fulfill many of their dreams” (Campi, 2004). Just as Chinese immigrants continue to come to the United States even though they are faced with various rejections and even racism, they still come to the United States to achieve their dreams.

Girl in Translation is one of diaspora literature. It presents the problem of the immigrant’s life which is experienced by the main character in this novel as a Chinese immigrant living in America. It was written by Jean Kwok who was born in Hong Kong but spent her childhood life in Brooklyn. It is Kwok’s first novel which becomes one of the best seller novels in the New York Times version. The novel tells about a girl called Kimberly Chang who was born in Hong Kong and decide to move to America with her mother. She has complex experiences as an immigrant such as language and culture. Kimberly begins a secret double life; she lives as a schoolgirl during the day and becomes a Chinatown sweatshop worker in the evening. Poverty and family burden force her to hide her personal life. Kimberly learns about language and from time to time she does not only translate her language but also herself. In this novel, Kimberly as the main character in the novel considers that she finds herself translating in anything other than languages, such as personality or behavior, and lifestyle. Kimberly traps in two cultures which are caused by ambivalent identity. The past culture (Chinese culture) shadows her path because it has developed since she was born while she is insisted to accept the new culture (American culture) as her effort to do adaptation to her new environment.

The main character of the novel is named Kimberly Chang who wants to achieve the American Dream and to be able to achieve it, she must be faced with difficulties that hinder her dreams. The history of the American Dream can be seen in the United States Declaration of Independence “its promise that citizens of the new nation were already endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, including life and liberty, and that these same people were entitled to engage in many varied pursuits of happiness” (qtd. in White and Hanson, 2011). The basic principle of the American Dream is the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Everyone has the same view, which is free in achieving their happiness. “The Declaration of Independence clearly asserts that among the “unalienable Rights” endowed to humans are “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” ...” (Amato, 2018). The American Dream itself is a term that first appeared in a book called “The Epic of America”. The writer and historian of the United States nationality, James Truslow Adams, states his definition of the American Dream that “a dream of land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with the opportunity for each according to his ability or

achievement” (Adams, 1931)

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses descriptive qualitative research. This study collects data qualitatively. This project result is reported descriptively and delivered in sentences. According to Hossein Nassaji, in his article entitled Qualitative and descriptive research: Data type versus data analysis, he defines that: “Qualitative research, however, is more holistic and often involves a rich collection of data from various sources to gain a deeper understanding of individual participants, including their opinions, perspectives, and attitudes. Qualitative research collects data qualitatively, and the method of analysis is also primarily qualitative” (Nassaji, 2015). Since the study using a qualitative method, it tends to use analysis and shows more of the meaning process. Gaining a deep understanding and developing theory.

There are four steps in collecting the data conducted in this study. The four steps are: 1) Reading the Novel, 2) Identifying the Data, 3) Classifying the Data, 4) Reducing the Data. A novel entitled *Girl on Translation* by Jean Kwok is the object used for this study. Because the object of the study is written form, so the first step is reading the novel entitled *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok. This reading takes some time to be able to understand the whole story and understand the topic to get a better description and avoid confusion in making this study. After reading the novel, the next step is identifying the data. This study identifies the novel to find out the parts of the novel that are going to be analyzed. The data which are identifying can be in the form of narration, dialogues, and monologues. Classifying means grouping the data based on questions being raised. This technique was used to make it easier to analyze the data. Data grouping was carried out based on the problem formulation. In the last step, the collected data was being reduced by taking a small number of data from a bigger number. The collected data was being selected due to its relevance to the topic discussion of the study.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

American Dream Values Experienced by Kimberly

In general, this inspirational novel, *Girl in Translation* is about a young immigrant who wants to achieve her American Dream in a country known as “the Golden Mountain”, the United States. After successfully moving with her mother, Kimberly understood that achieving that dream was not easy and realizes that since they moved, the future of her family was in her hands. There are many definitions from various figures about the American Dream. However, the American Dream can refer to the values and thoughts that to achieve success and a better life, one must work hard to achieve it. People from all over the world come to America with one dream in common, namely the American Dream. Hope to find a better and fuller life than before. To achieve the American Dream in *Girl in Translation* novel, it can be found several values why immigrants come to America to achieve their dreams of a better life, they have the three-point values of the American Dream of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Herewith, the analyzes of the values of the American

Dream to attract immigrants depicted in the novel.

Life

As we know, America is known as a great country to change the dreams of many people around the world. A strong desire to be free from control has existed since the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and that is what keeps immigrants coming to America. This is depicted in the novel, where immigrants come to America for a better future life and free to determine their dreams. The data are in the written dialogues, prologue, and narration in the novel. The first one is the dialogue between Kimberly and her mother, Mrs. Chang.

She spoke softly, as if to herself. “The road we could follow in Hong Kong was a dead one. The only future I could see for us, for you, was here, where you could become whatever you wanted. Even though this isn’t what we’d imagined back home, we will be all right.”

“Mother and cub” (Kwok 20).

As seen in the evidence above, Kimberly and her mother were immigrants from Hong Kong. They left their ancestral land to pursue freedom in reaching dreams that they had not yet felt. America is described as the hope for various immigrants from around the world in terms of achieving a better life. “The United States has offered opportunities to immigrants and their children to better themselves and to be fully incorporated into this society; in exchange “immigrants” have become “Americans”” (Waters and Pineau, 2015). Immigrants believe that America is the place to achieve the dreams they have long wanted. They dream of the opportunity and freedom to achieve a successful life that is much better than their ancestral land.

The American Dream is a journey full of passion for success and change for a better life with hard work. James T. Adams, states: “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyman with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams, 1931). This, the American Dream can also be seen in the dialogues of this novel.

“Maybe Harrison?” I asked. That was where Annette was going.

Mrs. LaGuardia laughed. “Well, you do set your sights high. Why don’t you let me make some phone calls? I’ll get back to you, Kimberly. You may go now, but again, don’t hope for too much. It’s a long shot.”

...

After Easter, I heard from Mrs. LaGuardia that Harrison Prep was indeed interested in me as a scholarship student, which I understood to mean they might be willing to pay for me as long as I got into a good college in the end. That seemed to be a reasonable bargain to me. What else could I offer? (Kwok 99-101).

At the beginning of her transfer to America with a lack of understanding English and her job in a clothing factory until late at night, Kimberly has to think about her education too. Matt, her friend at the factory once told Kimberly that education is a

way to get Kimberly out of the hustle and bustle of the factory. From there, Kimberly must study hard in public school so that she can be accepted into her favorite private school. Kimberly realized that Harrison Prep School was a special opportunity so that she and her mother could have a better life in America later on

Liberty

The American Dream has captivated people around the world is not only a dream about a better life. This is about the dream of wanting freedom that they have not been able to get in the land of their ancestral. They wanted to escape from the control system that restricted their previous life.

“It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class” (Adams, 1931).

By freedom, Americans mean the desire and right of all individuals to control their destiny without interference from outsiders. This is also shown in Kimberly’s desire. “I knew what these boys really wanted—freedom. Freedom from their parents, from their own unsurprising selves, from the heavyweight of the expectations that had been placed upon them. I knew because it was what I wanted too” (Kwok 214). Her move to America raised several problems, such as the shocking behavior of poverty, exploitation as child labor in a clothing factory, and the burden on her family’s future that lay on her shoulders. Kimberly wants herself to be free from all the things that were imposed on her. The freedom that Kimberly dreamed of from a high school girl.

America is believed as a land of opportunity, where one can start a better life away from poverty and change the economic order. This has been stated in the Declaration of Independence which states that humans are created equal, where the rights of every citizen cannot be revoked and people have the right to meet the happiness they want. “These sentiments give the American Dream its staying power. Not surprisingly, Americans have looked to their leaders since the nation’s founding to reaffirm the promise of the American Dream, with its guarantees of fuller liberties and a better life for all” (White and Hanson, 2011). Liberty in the American Dream can be viewed in the novel.

Ma’s hands were trembling but she managed to smile. “In fact, *ah- Kim* has found us an apartment, in Queens.” Aunt Paula’s eyes popped.

“We’ve already repaid our debts to you,” Ma said. When I heard her words, I knew we were freed of Aunt Paula forever. I met Ma’s eyes, and saw she was ready to leave (Kwok 267).

At the beginning of the story, Kimberly and her mother came to America with the help of Aunt Paula, Mrs. Chang’s older sister. To change plane tickets and apartment rentals, Mrs. Chang and Kimberly had to pay off debts by working in a clothing factory owned by Aunt Paula. Until in the end, Kimberly and her mother were able to pay off the debt and be free from the exploitation that had ensnared them with hard

work in the factory and got their return by getting a more livable apartment.

The Pursuit of Happiness

There are three basic principles in the American Dream, namely life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Here will emphasize one of the famous principal that appears in this novel, namely the pursuit of happiness. "Happiness can arise from meeting basic needs of life, or the absence of suffering, or having meaning in life, or having wealth and comfort" (Yacobi, 2015). Most people want to be happy in their life. Almost everyone devotes a great deal of time, energy, and money to the pursuit of happiness, pleasure, and fulfillment. People feel pleased when they are happy. Kimberly's first proof of the pursuit of happiness.

The first apartment he lived in was that one in Queens, a paradise compared to the old one in Brooklyn, which he never saw. I remember Ma would run her hands over the surfaces of the furniture, the walls, the kitchen appliances in a sort of dazed surprise. I too was amazed that the walls and floor were clean and intact, that when we were all in the living room together there were still other rooms in the apartment, empty of people and insects (Kwok 302).

Kimberly and her mother's move from their Chinatown apartment to Queens had an impact on their lives. In the past, they had to experience uncomfortable things, like lots of cockroaches and mice running around and not having a heater in winter. And since moving to Queens, they are happy they do not feel that bad anymore in their new apartment. "Happiness can arise from meeting basic needs of life, or the absence of suffering, or having meaning in life, or having wealth and comfort" (Yacobi, 2015). Based on this statement, happiness can come from the smallest thing that can be found in life, namely comfort that can be felt. And Kimberly feels that comfort with no more cockroaches or rats in their apartment, which is new and certainly more spacious than before.

The other evidence that shows Kimberly's happiness is in the story of this novel. This was shown when Kimberly managed to get a full scholarship during high school at Harrison Prep School.

Ma was beaming when I found her in the crowd of students and parents after the ceremony. "What was that about?" she asked.

"Ma, the principal said I won a full scholarship to that private school!" We hugged each other tight. Ma's eyes glowed. "What an opportunity! This is the beginning of a new direction for us, ah-Kim, and it's all due to you."

I looked up to see Mrs. LaGuardia standing in front of us. She said, "You must be Mrs. Chang. It's a real pleasure to meet you at last" (Kwok 115).

After knowing that she was accepted into her favorite private school, Kimberly was faced with the costs she had to bear while studying there. Wanted to give up her scholarship, Kimberly realized that this was her golden opportunity. That is why she ventured to come to Harrison to discuss matters with the principal. After various provisions and several test interviews by the school, Kimberly managed to get a full

scholarship during her schooling at Harrison Prep School.

“The United States was founded on the principles of inalienable and natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Out of those ideals arose the ideas of an American Creed and American Dream, which have provided aspirations for millions of Americans to pursue their dreams, and, with hard work, the chance to improve their situation in life” (Wyman, 2015).

According to the statement, the ideas of the American Dream have inspired millions of people to pursue their dreams, by working hard, taking opportunities to improve their life situations for the better. Kimberly’s opportunity made her not lose the scholarship she had been fighting for before being accepted at Harrison School

4. CONCLUSION

Girl in Translation novel by Jean Kwok describes the American Dream from the experiences of the immigrants who came to America. Firstly, American Dream described in the novel *Girl in Translation* is any value and belief in the deep heart of American immigrants hold by American society for triggering immigrants to come to America with a dream to get a better life. With the familiar motto “the land of opportunity”, America has attracted many immigrants to come and to change their lives to be a better one. For American immigrants, those values as reflected in the American people are to get a life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They want to change their conditions from the poor family who lived in the ghetto to be a good condition. In their home town, they also do not have liberty like individual freedom, and last, they want to get happiness in America through hard work.

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