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MULTICULTURAL FEMALE IDENTITY IN JEAN KWOK'S NOVEL *GIRL IN TRANSLATION*

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Abstract
The study explores the power relations embedded within the construction of female identity in *Girl in Translation*, a novel portraying the immigrant experience of Kimberly, a young Chinese girl who relocates to Brooklyn, New York. Confronted by cultural barries and socioeconomic hardship, Kimberly's journey reveals tensions surrounding gender and societal expectations. Employing a qualitative approach under a constructivist paradigm, this reasearch applies Michel Foucault's theory of power to analyze the depiction of gender dynamics in the narrative. The findings indicate two distinct manifestation of power; epistemic power, shaped through discourse and informal knowledge, and corporeal power, exercised over the body. These forms of domination influence patterns of thought and behavior within male-female relationships, as illustrated through Kimberly's personal and social interactions. Ultimately, the study highlights how the novel critiques normative structures and foregrounds the subtle mechanisms of control within everyday life.

Keywords—cultural discourse, foucault, gender, immigrant identity, power relation

Introduction

In the context of globalization and cross-cultural migration, the identity of immigrant women is often entangled in power relations that are latent yet deeply influential. Literature—particulary multicultural narratives—serves as a critical medium to reflect and interrogate these dynamics. Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation* exemplifies such complexity by portrying the journey of Kimberly, a young Chinese girl who migrates to the United States with her mother. Her story unveils layers of economic, social, and cultural tensions that shape and constrain her identity as a female immigrant. Power relations in this novel emerge not only through structural and institutional forces but also via discursive mechanisms and daily interactions that embody control over the body and mind. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's theory of power, this study examines how gender constructs and male-female relarions are governed by implicit and pervasive strategies within the narratives. Faucault's framework views power as diffuse and productive, functioning through social practices and language itself—making literaly texts fertile ground for such investigation (A. Sheridan, Trans., 1997).

Multiculturalism, as an ideological response to diversity, plays a vital role in shaping the social landscape in which Kimberly's identity os formed. Multiculturalism must be actively upheld to foster demoracy, human rights, and social welfare, especially in societies marked by cultural plurality (Juwaini, M., et al., 2022). Multicultural awareness should not remain theoretical but must be practiced through education and cultural engagement, as it nurtures respect and tolerance across differences. These perspectives underscore the relevance of literary analysis in examining how multicultural tensions and identify politics are negotiated within fictional narratives (Warsah, I., & Idi, A., 2018). Moreover, identity itself is a dynamic and

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contested. Wooward (cited in Kurniawati, D., & Diyan, A., 2022) argues, identity is marked by difference—it is through recognizing is shaped by factors such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, and social class, which may produce contradictory or fragemented selves. This theoretical lens is essential in analyzing Kimberly's negotation of selfhood within a multicultural society hat both enables and resticts her agency.

This research gains significance within the field of cultural studies as it seeks to reveals the ways in which literature not only represents but also reproduces dominant social structures. By applying a critical reading grounded in Foucauldian power theory, the study opens a space to explore how female immigrant subjectivity is formed and regulated across multiple axes, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Ultimately, this inquiry contributes to a deeper understanding of identity and domination in multicultural societies and affirms literature's role as a site of resistance and reflection within marginalized experinces.

Literature Review

Previous studies on *Girl in Translation* have explored various cultural and identity-related themes. In research titled "Cultural Identity and Cultural Disclocation in Jean Kwok's (Wati, R., 2015)," examined how Kimberly's psychological and cultural complexity shaped her identity amidst dislocation. Using Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and an inductive method, Wati highlighted Kimberly's inner turmoil and longing for her homeland—evident when Kimberly imagines her late father helping her face challenges, reflecting a tension between adaptation and nostalgia ((Kwok, J., 2010, p. 14). While both Wati's and the present study engage with the theme of identity, the theoretical lens differs: Hall's cultural identity versus the author's use of Michel Foucault's power relations framework.

Another research study is the American Dream by Chinese immigrants in *Girl in Translation* (Claudarista, A., & Murwantono, D., 2021). Applying James T. Adam's American Dream theory with a qualitative descriptive approach, they revealed how Kimberly's aspirations and hardships are portrayed through narration and dialogue. For instance, Kimberly's interactions with Mrs. LaGuardia showcase her ambition, uncertainty, and the high stakes involved in securing a scholarship for upward mobility (Kwok, J., 2010, pp. 99-101). Their study shares the object of analysis with this research but differs in focus—emphasizing American Dream values rather than the dynamics of power and subjectivity.

Additionally, another study is *Girl in Translation: The Transnational Mother as Martyr* (Uma, S., & Nagalakshmi, M., 2024), examine the character Ma—Kimberly's mother—as a transnational maternal figure navigating cultural disclocation, economic hardship, and marginalization. Their interdisciplinary approach combines literary analysis and social science to explore how immigrant motherhood intersects with identity, resilience, and systematic inequality. This study enriches the understanding of gendered power and familial roles within immigrant narratives, aligning with the present research's focus on relational power and subjectivity.

Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to examine the construction of immigrant identity—particularly in the main character, Kimberly—and the gender relations portrayed through Michel Foucault's theory of power relations (1997) in Jean Kwok's novel *Girl in Translation*. Qualitative research emphasizes a holistic and in-depth understanding of social phenomena as they unfold within natural settings. Qualitative methods aim to observe social realities more broadly and profoundly, in accordance with their development within the studies context (Sugiyono., 2018, p. 206).

The data collection method utilized in this research is the documentation technique. This techniques involves collecting data in the form of records, writing, images, artistic work, and other relevant sources (Ali, A. J. K. N., 2018, p. 99). Ali futher notes that this process generally includes identification, classification, and categorization to generate research data. The research procedures are as follows: 1) repeated reading and comprehension of the storyline in *Girl in Translation*. 2) Noting and marking both narrative and dialogue passages in the novel that reflect power relations—especially those linked to gender and Foucault's theory of power. 3) classifying,

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identifying, and analyzing these textual elements within the theoretical framework to produce meaningful research findings. For data analysis, this study applies the qualitative analysis technique developed by Miles & Huberman (1984), which consists of three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M., 1984).

Results and Discussion

Based on an in-depth reading of the novel *Girl in Translation*, two dominant categories of power relations were found, namely power relations over knowledge and power relations over the body. These two types of relations work through interactions between characters, are disseminated through various media, and are carried out with a latent but systematic form of control.

Power relations over knowledge

From the results of repeated reasdings of the novel *Girl in Translation*, it was found that the media for the spread of power relations and forms of power relations include the social environment, religion, culture, institutions, and the state. The following is the explanation:

No.	Media	Variant	Form of Power	Frequency
1.	Social Environment	Movement Space	Thought control	8
			Thought manipulation	4
		Hair Model	Thought domination	1
		Pets	Thought stigmatization	1
		Rules of Decorum and Danger	Thought stigmatization	1
		People with Disabilities	Thought stigmatization	1
2.	Religion/ Belief	Chinese Almanac	Thought domination	2
		Gods and Ancestors	Thought domination	4
		Myth	Thought manipulation	1
3.	Culture	Feng Shui	Thought domination	1
4.	Institution	Televisian Broadcasting	Thought control	1
		School	Thought control	1
			Thought stigmatization	1
5.	State	Area eviction	Thought control	1
Total				28

The findings—anchored in Foucault's theory of power—show that control over thought domination, and stigmatization are key instruments of power in the novel. The most dominant

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medium is the social environment, which includes family relationship, schoolmates, and neighbors.

Power relations over the body

From the results of repeated readings of the novel *Girl in Translation*, it was found that the media for spreading power relations such as the social environment, institutions, culture, capitalism, and panopticon. In addition, the form of controlling power relations is through body objectification, body control, body manipulation, and stigmatization. The following is the explanation:

No.	Power Relations	Media	Variant	Form of Power	Frequency
1.	Social Body	Social Environment	Language	Body control	1
			Braces	Objectification of the body	1
			Clothes	Body control	3
				Objectification of the body	2
			Body movement	Manipulation of the body	5
				Body control	3
				Objectification of the body	2
		Institutions	State	Objectification of the body	2
				Body control	2
			School	Body control	9
				Objectification of the body	2
				Manipulation of the body	4
			Post Office	Body control	3
			Religion	Manipulation of the body	1
				Body control	1
		Culture	Martial Arts Movement	Objectification of the body	1
			Greeting Gesture	Body control	1
			Courtesy Ethics	Body control	2
		Capitalism	Life of Factory Worker	Manipulation of the body	1
				Body control	5
			Daily Needs	Body control	2
			Appearance	Objectification of the body	6
				Body control	1
			China	Objectification	1

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			Town	of the body	
			Tax Payment	Body control	1
		Panopticon	Life of a Factory Worker	Body control	2
2.	Sexualized Body	Country	Television Broadcast	Body control	2
		School	Underwear	Body control	1
				Objectification of the body	2
			Dress Code	Objectification of the body	1
			Behavior	Manipulation of the body	1
		Gender	Body modesty	Objectification of the body	1
			Body Sensation	Objectification of the body	1
Total					73

The power relations over the body found in this table are in line with Foucault's theory which is divided into two parts, namely the social body and the sexual body. In the social body. In the social body, the media is disseminated through the social enviroment, institutions, culture, capitalism, and panopticon. The operation of power relations over this social body in the dissemination media is most commonly found through institutions such as state institutions, education, mail dan package delivery services (Post Office), and religion. These three things are most manifested in educational institutions, namely schools through body control.

Discussion

Both power relations over knowledge and power relations over the body operate through interaction between characters, and are distributed through various media with control mechanisms in accordance with Michel Foucault's theory of power relations. The following is an explanation of the dominant forms of power relations represented in the novel *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok:

Forms of Power Relations over Knowledge

Social Environment

In this novel, many things are put into the mind continuously through the medium of spreading the social environment. The social enviroment can be through relationships between family members, and friendships. Overall, the forms of power relations that are inserted are thought control, thought domination, and so on. The following are the data found.

"*Oh, little sister, don't worry," Aunt Paula said. with such warmth and reassurance in her voice that I believed her despite myself. "It is only temporary. There was no place else available that you would be able to afford, not with the many expenses you have. But Mr. N. has many buildings, and as soon as another place opens up that you can pay for, we will move you there* (Kwok, J., 2010, p. 31)."

The quote is a portrayal of Aunt Paula's way of calming Ma and Kim down when they complain about the apartment they live in. Aunt Paula tells them not to worry because they are only temporarily accupying the rundown apartment, until such time

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as they can pay for another apartment in Mr. N's building. Aunt Paula's words control Ma and Kim's thinking as in the following quote, "*Ma visibly relaxed, and I could feel myself beginning to smile again* (Kwok, J., 2010, p. 31)." This shows that thought control can affect one's perspective, as if what Aunt Paula says in the truth.

Religion/belief

In the novel *Girl in Translation*, many things are put into the mind continuosly through the discourse of religious knowledge/belief. The following are the data found.

We put the Tong Sing, the Chinese Almanac, at the head of the mattress. There many phu in these books, words of power written by ancient masters that can pin a white bone demon under a mountain or repel wild fox spirits. In Brooklyn, we hoped they would keep any thieves away (Kwok, J., 2010, p. 19).

The contextualization of this quote reflects Kimberly and her mother's belief in the powerful words written by ancient Chinese scholars to ward off evil spirits and protect them from harm while living in Brooklyn. This shows a form of power relations in terms of intellectual dominance. Chinese society strongly believes in the power of words written in a Chinese almanac called Tong Sing. The word *Tong Sing* was originally known as *Tong Shu* (通书 *tōng shū*). The word 通 *tōng* means 'all', and 书 *shū* means 'book'. Literally, *Tong Shu* means 'The Book That Knows Everything.' However, the word 书 *shū* in Mandarin is pronounced the same as the word 输 *shū.* Which means 'to lose.' This makes the word Tong Shu seems to means 'to lose in everything.' Therefore, its nmae was changed to Tong Sing (通胜 *tōng shèng*). The use of the word 胜 *shèng* was absorbed into *sing* as it is known today. The existence of Tong Sing proves that the discourse spread through religion/belief is a product of that belief to maintain power over the spiritual of humans.

The prepetuation of power is further reinforced by another quote found, which states, "*Then she tweaked my ears to bring my sleeping soul back to my body and brushed my forehead three times with her left hand to ward off evil spirits* (Kwok, 2010, p. 19)." This quote reveals that Tong Sing, serving as a life guide, stems from their personal beliefs. This is capable of changing one's perspective and behaviour in accordance with the teachings of their religion/belief and aligns with Foucault's theory of power relations, which explains that religious/belief-based media can influence how people behave.

Forms of Power Relations over the Body

The findings in *Girl in Translation* show that power relations over the body include two categories, namely the social body and the sexual body. This relates to Foucault's theory of power over the body (Wasesa, A., 2013, p. 64).

Social Body

The medium of dissemination includes educational institutions, the state, culture, capitalism, and panopticon. The form of control found include: objectification of the body, manipuation of gestures, control over physical apprearance, and regulation of body ethics and behavior. The following is the explanation:

Capitalism

According to Foucault, the power relation of capitalism is a way of placing individuals unver control and demanding the body to increase productivity. This is found in the novel as follows:

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> *Chinatown looked very much like Hong Kong, although the streets were less cramped. The fish store was piled high with sea bass and baskets of crabs; grocery store shelves were stocked with canned papayas, lichee nuts and star fruit; peddlers on the street sold fried tofu and rice gruel* (Kwok, J., 2010, p. 29).

The quote is in line with Foucault's theory of how industrial products organize the body to determine social status and gender. The context of the quote is that the body becomes the operation of power for determining social identity. This determination of social identity is reinforced by the continuation of the quote as follows. "*I could understand everyone without any effort* (Kwok, J., 2010, p. 29)." The body is objectified to approach the ideal criteria measured by the capitalism industry to form an identity. The symbol of social identity is shown by the many merchants selling their wares with various types of goods sold in China Town which are made to look very similar to the original situation in Hong Kong.

Sexual Body

The sexual body in the novel is constructed through media such as television broadcasts, educational institutions, and clothing regulations. The state and private institutions play a big role in control. In the novel, the power relations over the sexual body are found as follows:

State

> *There were a lot of shows about hospitals: doctors kissing nurses, nurses kissing patients; there were films about cowboys and Indians; shows with people sitting in squares with flashing lights* (Kwok, J., 2010, p. 39).

The various shows on the commercials in the television broadcast what Kimberly watched were how the discourse of sexuality was controlled by the state. The quoted data that shows this is *doctors kissing nurses, nurses kissing patients* (Kwok, J., 2010, p. 39)." The sexual activity shown in the discourse of the advertisement is the control of the body imposed on one's profession to create a construction in society.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation*, this study concludes that the power relations shaping the identity of immigrant women are manifested through two dominant categories: power over knowlegde and power over the body, as theorized by Michel Foucault. Power over knowledge operates latently through mediums such as the social enviroment, religion and belief system, cultural traditions, institutions, and the state. These mechanisms include thught control, domination, manipulation, and stigmatization. Kimberly, the protagonist, undergoes cognitive shaping through discourses imposed by other characters, belief systems, and institutional structures. Meanwhile, power over the body is divided intro the social body and the sexual body. The social body is regulated through institutions such as education, culture, capitalism, and panoptic surveillance, with mechanisms including objectification, behavioral manipulation, and appearance control. The sexual body is constructed through media representations, dress codes, and occupational norms that define acceptable expressions of sexuality. Through Foucault's lens, the novel illustrates that power is not merely repressive but operates through normalization, discourse distribution, and surveillance that gradually shape the subject. Kimberly is not only a recipient of systemic domination but also an agent capable of negotiation and resistance—through education, perseverance, and personal choices. Thus, Girl in Translation serves not only as a literary representation of the immigrant experience but also as a critical space for examining how power relations shape female identity within transnational and multicultural contexts.

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