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Ambivalent identity as abject in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*

Identitas yang ambivalen sebagai abjek dalam "The Woman Warrior" dan "China Men" karya Maxine Hong Kingston

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Abstract
The Woman Warrior and *China Men* by Maxine Hong Kingston portray abject identity. Kingston's Chinese American family in the novels seek to establish a superior identity over both the Americans, other Chinese people, and even their children who were born in America. This is apparent from the way the family views the white Americans and other Chinese people as ghosts and peasants respectively, hence displaying an ambivalence in regard to identity. By using the framework of feminist narratology and theories of abjection, mimicry, and identity, this article shows how identity as abject is realized through mimicry and displacement in the two novels. This article argues that Kingston's Chinese American family disrespects while also reinforces the borders of identity. Because of their partial representation of identity, they are permanently displaced. Moreover, while they abject other identities to establish themselves, their own ambivalence makes them the abject that possesses a flexible identity.

Abstrak
The Woman Warrior dan *China Men* karya Maxine Hong Kingston menggambarkan identitas yang abjek. Keluarga Kingston yang beretnis Tionghoa America dalam novel-novel tersebut ingin mempertahankan identitas superior mereka baik terhadap orang Amerika, orang Tiongkok lainnya, maupun anak-anak mereka sendiri yang lahir di Amerika. Hal ini terlihat dari bagaimana keluarga Tionghoa Amerika tersebut memandang orang kulit putih Amerika dan orang Tiongkok lainnya masing-masing sebagai hantu dan orang miskin, sehingga menunjukkan sebuah ambivalensi dalam hal identitas. Dengan menggunakan kerangka naratologi feminis serta teori abjeksi, mimikri, dan identitas, artikel ini menunjukkan bagaimana identitas sebagai abjek diwujudkan melalui mimikri dan perpindahan dalam kedua novel tersebut. Artikel ini berargumentasi bahwa keluarga Kingston yang beretnis Tionghoa Amerika tidak menghormati dan sekaligus memperkuat batasan identitas. Karena representasi identitas mereka yang parsial, mereka terlantar secara permanen. Selain itu, meskipun mereka merendahkan identitas lain untuk membangun diri mereka sendiri, ambivalensi mereka sendiri menjadikan mereka abjek yang memiliki identitas fleksibel.

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A. Introduction

Despite having received prestigious awards like the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 1981, the National Book Critics Circle in 1976, and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards in 1978, to name a few, Kingston's works have elicited numerous criticisms, notably in regards to her (mis)representation of Chinese people. Shu argues that Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (Later will be called *The Woman Warrior*), perpetuates stereotypes and Orientalism, subsequently playing into the white readership's stereotypical views of Asian American culture (2001, pp. 208-209). Frank Chin, a notable figure in Asian American theatre and literature, as explained by Shapiro, has also criticized Kingston's writing of Asian American autobiography as "fake" (2001, p. 20). In contrast, a number of readers and/or scholars have expressed their opinion that Kingston's writing is not so controversial. Ya-jie, a Chinese woman, expresses that in her first reading of *The Woman Warrior*, she thought it was full of American imagination and was offensive to her. However, Ya-jie says that she later realizes that *The Woman Warrior* is "an American story, not a Chinese one" (1986, p. 104), and it is about how a Chinese American can find her own identity, thus thoughts and emotions from people living in China and Chinese immigrants are difficult to be shared.

What should be noted from Ya-jie's statement is the different sentiments between Chinese people in China and in America; Chinese people who are "at home" in China and who are "displaced" as immigrants become two different social groups that cannot relate to one another. Hoon, noting his reading of Trinh Minh-ha, states that the sense of belonging in a 'home' is problematic for people who are expatriates, transnationals, migrants, and in exile, because they have "multiple places of belongings" (2006, p. 94). Furthermore, Trinh Minh-ha terms, as quoted by Hoon, that their multiple sense of belonging(s) may be "between a here, a there, *and* an elsewhere" (2006, p. 94, emphasis from the original text).

This feeling of displacement relates to the unhomely, which Bhabha states as "something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (1992, p. 141). Because the characters in the novels are ambivalent with their Americanness and Chineseness, we will refrain from using the term "Chinese American" to refer to Kingston's family in the two novels. Additionally, the novels do not refer to Kingston's family with any collective name or clan name. An alternative term that we will use is "the Chinese family living in America", which will later be shortened to "the Chinese family" for easier use, to refer to the family members in Kingston's family in the novels who immigrated from China to the United States and are the most ambivalent with their identity.

The Chinese family views and calls the Americans, mostly the white Americans, as Ghosts and Demons in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. K. Lee explains that the word "ghost" in English means "an apparition of a dead person which is believed to appear or become manifest to the living, typically as a nebulous image" (2004, p. 112). Further, K. Lee explains that "ghost" in Mandarin has multiple meanings, where it may be the same as the English, or as a term of affection and slight rebuttal from Chinese people to a child ("little ghost"), or as a derogatory term for foreigners which implies that "they are not real human beings, in contrast to the Chinese" (2004, p. 112).

Besides the Americans, the Chinese family also belittles other Chinese people. In *China Men*, in regard to other Chinese families bringing offerings to their deceased family members at the cemetery, Kingston's mother states that she is not like the backwards superstitious Chinese peasants; Kingston's mother prides herself and her family for not having such traditional customs. On numerous occasions in the two novels, Kingston's family refer to themselves as "modern"; in other words, they view themselves as different even from other Chinese families — they view themselves as *better*. However, they do not necessarily view themselves as Chinese American, because they call Kingston and her siblings and cousins, who were born and raised in America, as Ho Chi Kuei or Half-Ghosts.

As Hale concludes from his reading, people "tend to categorize themselves and others in ways that help them make sense of the social world they inhabit" (2004, p. 464), which Aziz et al. (2024), Prakoso et al. (2024), and Susanto (2022) relate to. Note the phrase of categorizing *others* in addition to oneself. Despite being citizens of the United States and despite being the parents of the Ho Chi Kuei, the Chinese family does not view them as fellow Americans or fellow family members, respectively. According to Kristeva, "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin" (1982, p. 5). Being the abject, the Ho Chi Kuei and the white Americans are seen as the unfamiliar and unrecognizable.

However, in addition to abjecting others, the Chinese family simultaneously attempts to mimic others. Despite the Chinese family's rejection of the white Americans, they are faced with the obligation to mimic the white Americans in order to enter and live in the United States as immigrants. While they mimic the white Americans in this context, they in turn reject their Chinese identity. As such, the Chinese family exhibits ambivalence in their attempt to assert a constantly "correct" and "superior" identity.

Hence, the Chinese family shows ambivalence and ambiguity in regards to the identity of the ethnically Chinese in America. The Chinese family enact what Brun, Fàbos and El-Abed refer to as the process of inclusion and exclusion of abjection (2017, p. 221)—they include some of their family members in this righteous group of "superior" identity as ethnically Chinese in the midst of American society while excluding others. This exclusion refers to abjection by Kristeva as the act of expelling that which is unclean and is opposed to "I". The Chinese family's ambivalent identity pertains to the definition of abjection by Kristeva that is which "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982, p. 4). In regards to borders, Anzaldúa states that borders define places that are safe and unsafe, distinguishing "us" from "them", whereas a borderland is vague and undetermined and is in a constant state of transition (1987, p. 3). Subsequently, abjection is always ambiguous (Creed, 1993; Krečič & Žižek, 2016; Kristeva, 1982) and refers to indistinction itself (Diken & Laustsen, 2005).

In a way, the Chinese family in the two works echo Shu's and Chin's sentiment of a "fake" identity, for they deem everyone else as the "wrong" ones and themselves as the only "correct" ones, but they also pass from one side to another; this act of passing indicates ambivalence. As Dasgupta asserts, as quoted by Hoon, there are multiplicities, contradictions, ambiguities and fluidity in the crafting of the self but there is a shifting limit to how identity may be so free-floating, connected to certain structures and processes like historical, social, cultural, and economic ones (2006, pp. 83-84).

Chiu, pertaining to the issue of identity in Kingston's *China Men*, highlights how the male Chinese laborers in America have to constantly do self-reinvention as they experience dehumanization and emasculation by the authoritative white people. Similarly, in talking about *The Woman Warrior*, Mujcinovic states that the protagonist, Kingston, is "aware that her self-definition will always be complex, fluid, and at times contradictory" (2014, p. 101). Regarding such complexity of identity, Mujcinovic uses the term "the sense of double consciousness that many young Chinese Americans develop in the process of negotiating multiple cultures and forming their own" (2014, p. 101).

Other scholars such as Manggong, Royal, Calhoun, S. H. T. Lee, and Maini also discuss the issue of constructed identity in Kingston's work, namely in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. Lee, quoting Patricia P. Chu, writes that authorship in Asian American literature is "part of a broader struggle for national and personal definition" (2013: 127). Manggong (2020) looks at the complicated identity of its protagonist, Wittman, and how his practice of having hallucinations indicates a concept that identity is a social construct. For Maini, Wittman does not have a "viable sense of self since he has lived in the margins all his life" (2000: 244). Royal (2004) discusses how Whittman resists any one form of representation and does not want to be defined solely by his ethnicity or Otherness, concluding that Kingston as a writer prompt for constant renegotiation and redefinition of ethnic identity as well as American literary identity for new and self-empowering expressions. Moving away from the novel's protagonist, Calhoun (2013) turns to the conjoined twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, pointing out that they represent indebtedness, recognition, and hospitality, in contrast to America's individualism.

However, Chiu mainly focuses on the struggling identity of the male characters and Mujcinovic on the female characters; neither of them discuss the characters as a family. Manggong, Royal, Calhoun, S. H. T. Lee, and Maini touch upon the issues of constructed identity in *Tripmaster Monkey*, but not in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. The previous studies also have not touched on how the complicated identity of the characters may allude to abjection. Thus, this research sees that, in addition to it being constructed, complicated, and Othered, the novelty is that the Chinese American identity is also abject. We argue that such abjection refuses to adhere to the rules of identity yet, by being abject, it simultaneously reinforces them. Moreover, we argue that because of this abjection, the Chinese American family are permanently displaced, but they also find that they are able to be flexible because of it.

With this research, through narratology, we aim to fill the gap left by the previous studies by showing how identity as abject in the two novels is realized through mimicry and displacement. With consideration to how the Chinese family in America constantly shifts their identities between being Chinese and American, and how they disregard structure and borders of identity in doing so, we argue that this portrayal of ambivalent identity by the Chinese family is what Kristeva refers to as abjection. Moreover, we argue that the Chinese family's attempt at mimicry is paradoxically disrespecting and reinforcing the borders of identity, only allowing them to partially represent American and Chinese identity. Because of this, the Chinese family in America are permanently displaced. However, their mimicry and displacement provide the Chinese family with a flexible identity. With this, we hope to contribute to the discussion of identity in Kingston's works by showing how the ambivalent identity of a Chinese American character may represent abjection, both as outcasts and as flexible shifters.

B. Method

Because the texts are narrative, this research is conducted through the method of close reading, utilizing feminist narratology. In discussing about voice, Genette (1980), who is structuralist, states that voice relates to the connection between narrating and narrative. For Lanser, feminists are more concerned with the issues of "finding a voice", be it represented textually or not (1992: 4). In comparing structuralist narratology and feminist criticism, Lanser (1986) discusses how structuralist narratology emphasizes the semiotic and does not see characters as particularly significant while feminist criticism emphasizes the mimetic and are most concerned with characters than any other narrative aspect. Despite such differences, this research will still use the textual narratology by Genette to answer how the structure of the novel portrays identity as abject while also considering the feminist narratology discussed by Lanser. This research uses a multifaceted approach in discussing the complexity of the Chinese American identity in the novels, so a dialogue of different methods must be used to understand the text.

In addition, we also look at theories of identity. According to Hall, identification operates on difference, building and marking symbolic boundaries, "what is left outside", in its process (1996, p. 3). Hall emphasizes that this concept of identity is strategic and positional (1996, p. 3), and Hale also asserts that, because identity is situational, identity may change as the person's environment changes, for a change of environment constitutes a re-evaluation of the person's relationship with that environment (2004, p. 466). The Self is always repositioning itself in relation to the Other, and it also depends on that particular time and place (Hoon, 2006, p. 83).

From our reading, we highlighted textual aspects such as diction and expressions that describe ambiguity, specifically when describing the identities of the characters in the novels. In particular, we highlight parts of the novels describing other characters as demons, ghosts, peasants, and American and describing the family as modern or better to. We also note who is portrayed as authoritative, who is submissive, and who rebels. Afterwards, we analyze them through theories of abjection by Kristeva (1982), Brun et al. (2017), Krečič and Žižek (2016), Anzaldúa (1987) and Creed (1993); identity by Hall (1996), Appiah (1994), Hoon (2006), Hale (2004), and Baber (2012); and mimicry by Lahiri (2003), Ahmed (1999), and Bhabha (1984). The theories are used to analyze the ambivalence of the switches in diction, like from calling the white Americans as "ghosts" and the family itself as "American", and the switch of languages when dealing with different situations like using English in the immigration office but using Chinese to deal with a racist customer. Both textual data and theories are essential in understanding the identity as abject within *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Passing Between the Borders of Identity

When Baba and the other Chinese men decide to leave China and move to America, they camouflage their identities by purchasing papers that would acknowledge them as Americans, such as "visas, passports, re-entry permits, American birth certificates, American citizenship papers" (Kingston, 1989a, p. 40), while they remain as China men. They are adopted by "Gold Mountain Sojourners" who are legal citizens of the United States, China men who have established their American identities and seek to help fellow China men to gain that same status. This "adoption" takes the form of the Gold Mountain Sojourner announcing the birth of a fictitious child and opening a "slot" for Chinese immigrants to fill. The fictitious life of the slot will "nominally" belong to the new immigrant (Kingston, 1989a, p. 41).

This new life only being "nominally" theirs shows that their identity as Chinese immigrants in America is certainly "fake". The characters are hypocritical of their own identity, and subsequently an abject as hypocrisy refers to abjection (Creed, 1993). However, rather than implying a racist take on the immigrant, this implies a constructed social identity that is meant for abject survival. By merely filling in a slot of an empty, fictitious identity for the sake of breaking through the border of the Gold Mountain, BaBa and the other China men claim to be an insider of America while still remaining an outsider of it. They are indeed "fake", but in a way that they purposefully construct a flexible identity.

For constructivists, ethnicity is something that people construct rather than possess, in regards to specific social and historical contexts, for their own interests (Wan & Vanderwerf, 2009, p. 7). For the Chinese family, they constantly construct and reconstruct their identities between being Chinese and American for specific benefits at a time. In the construction of the men while crossing the borders of the United States, the Chinese men construct their abject American identities through mimicry. For Bhabha, colonial mimicry is the "desire

for a reformed, recognizable Other", a process "which 'appropriates' the Other" (1984, p. 126). During the interrogation in the immigration office, BaBa tells the demons, "My grandfather is an American. My father is an American. So I'm an American, also my three older brothers and three uncles—all Americans." (Kingston, 1989a, p. 61). However, because they are fake, then BaBa is only impersonating being an American, as the rest of the men are. Through this mimicry, the Chinese men are able to pass through immigration and enter the Gold Mountain.

The reason BaBa and the rest of the Chinese in the two novels wish to migrate is because they have a vision, if not a hyperbolic one, that they will obtain riches and luxuries. As one of BaBa's rebellious students put it, they can just "pick up the free gold on the Gold Mountain" instead of doing their tedious homework (1989a, p. 35). By moving from rural China to America, the Chinese family is moving from being lower class to being Gold Mountain Sojourners.

The Chinese family in the two novels, while crossing the border by faking being proper American, also reject the proper American. In the immigration office, despite practicing how they can properly answer the officers' questions to prove their Americanness, they textually refer to these American officers as "Demons". This indicates that the Chinese men are only nominally claiming Americanness; they are both accepting and rejecting Americanness.

In the two novels, the Chinese men only partially mimic the (white) Americans in the form of legality while still retaining their prominent Chinese features. Instead of conforming their behaviors, they purchase an abject citizenship. Brun, Fàbos and El-Abed state that abject citizenship allows people to "create their own spaces, meanings and identity within their exclusion" as well as open new political possibilities, agency, and creativity (2017, p. 222). In other words, what they do shows that the borders can be *bought* and therefore do not pose as a threat to the Chinese family seeking a better life.

Lahiri, following Butler who argues that parodic performances of gender undermine sexual and gender difference, states that race and class passing also undermines racial and class categorization (2003, p. 409). Similarly, Ferguson states that colonial imitation threatens to unsettle boundaries and relations of colonial authority, and that the uncanny "civilized native" destabilizes colonial identities (2002, p. 553). Thus, the Chinese family living in America, as the anomalies and the abject, "draw attention to the fragility of the law" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), asserting that they have the power to disrupt order.

However, despite their ambivalence with their identity, the Chinese family asserts that they "belong" in the United States. Kau Goong, Kingston's great uncle, says as much when he refuses to go back to China to see his old wife; he shouts that he belongs in California, as well as the rest of their family in America. He does not view China, the place he was born in, as home anymore. Note that Kau Goong and the Chinese family do not announce that they are "American" per se; they announce their placement but not their ethnic identity.

Perhaps this would suggest that the Chinese family as described in the novels are indeed not anomalies in America, but we propose that this may actually suggest that they do acknowledge themselves as "anomalies" but in a sense that they are *better* than the norm. In *The Woman Warrior*, America is referred to as "the land of ghosts" (140), pertaining to how it is filled with white ghosts and demons; to which they are not. Their being an anomaly is a virtue; their being an anomaly proves that the border can be deceived and they are smarter and more resourceful than the demons. Their being anomalies prove that the borders are penetrable.

However, in addition to challenging the borders of America, the Chinese family is simultaneously reinforcing them. Identities emerge within a play of some modalities of power as they are the product of exclusion (Hall, 1996, p. 4), and the act of determining identity can utilize a strategic essentialism for certain political purposes (Ang, 2001, p. 196). For the Chinese family, their purpose in determining their identity stems from their desire for being superior, and in doing so they exclude and deem others as inferior — the act of determining identity for them is a power play. However, what makes them the abject is that the Chinese family is also part of the "inferior" group that they wish to reject.

While they mock the Americans by mimicking them to pass through immigration, the Chinese family also attempts to pass as *not* Chinese. Upon arrival to Gold Mountain, BaBa and the other immigrants are detained at the Immigration Station where the men are put on a floor below the women. BaBa takes this as an offense, a humiliation to be put under women, but he decides that he will "rid himself of Chinese superstitions" (Kingston, 1989a, p. 50) to counteract this. This spontaneous erasure of his Chinese tradition is done to refuse inferiority, in which this inferiority is being Chinese.

Another instance is when Kingston's father forces his wife to be educated in a "Western scientific school" (Kingston, 1989a, p. 62) before he can allow her to pass the border of America. He deems that the success of his wife's passing is that she moves from being an "ignorant villager" to being "his American wife" (Kingston, 1989a, p. 63). In this case, it is not the American who guards the border, but it is Kingston's father

who is an abject Chinese man living in America. Kingston's father, despite meaning to cross his wife through the border, hence undermining the border once again, is also reinforcing the category of identity by highlighting the conditions for being a "proper" American, implying that his Chinese wife is inferior and a Western education is necessary to become superior.

Because mimicry is the appropriation of the Other (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126), it can be said that the minority group enacting mimicry acknowledges itself as the *in*appropriate. Brun, in talking about the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sri Lanka, points out that one of the most common understandings of IDPs is that they are "out of place" until they can return to their "places of origin" (2003, p. 383). Being out of place may signify a sort of inappropriateness or a disruption to expectations and to what is proper in what Cresswell terms "social place" (1996, p. 3), and objects that are out of place are considered to be impure (Diken & Laustsen, 2005, p. 116). Hybridity and the act of passing can undermine authorization and categories and simultaneously reaffirms them (Ahmed, 1999; Lahiri, 2003). Thus, while the Chinese family camouflages themselves to be American to have more opportunities, they simultaneously assert that being Chinese is improper.

However, having abject citizenship only ensures their access to the land; the Chinese family realizes that they not only have to mimic the Americans to cross the border but to also be recognized as belonging. Appiah notes that recognition is seen as "a matter of acknowledging individuals and what we call their identities" (1994, p. 149). The recognition from large collective identities comes with certain notions of how a person of that kind behaves, but instead of meaning there is only one way of behaving, there are certain modes of behavior for that collective identity (Appiah, 1994, p. 159). Therefore, the norms or models for a type of large collective identity are loose (Appiah, 1994, p. 159).

As Ahmed puts it: "While identity may be dislodged through the act of theft […] it also determines the economics of passing" (1999, p. 98). For instance, in the case of the Chinese going through immigration in the two novels, the immigration officers ask the immigrants if they have American relatives, and if they do, then they will be granted access into the country. While the Chinese men utilize their purchased abject citizenship, thus undermining the border's function, the Chinese men inevitably concede by admitting that being as they are, as just Chinese men, will not allow them access through the border. By mimicking the American, they inevitably admit the American's superior identity.

Interestingly, the Chinese family embraces their own ambivalence but simultaneously demeans the ambivalence of others. As mentioned, Kingston's mother asserts her authority over Kingston and her siblings in *The Woman Warrior*. The Chinese family abjects their own children by denoting them as Ho Chi Kuei or half-ghosts, excluding them from the core family but simultaneously acknowledging that they are still their children. The Ho Chi Kuei's abject position is reflected in how they are seen as having "interesting savage things to say", having been raised in "the wilderness", and having a mixed accent of "American" and "peasant like their mother's" (Kingston, 1989b, p. 120).

This indicates that the Chinese family's abjection of Americanness and Chineseness makes the Chinese family themselves the abject by being hypocrites in their maintenance of dominance within the household. By abjecting the Ho Chi Kuei, who are supposed to reflect the Chinese family's own insider-outsider position, the Chinese family also abjects themselves. It is as if the Chinese family has taken on the role of the border's demon keepers, and the Ho Chi Kuei as representing the Chinese family. When the Chinese family is faced with the border's keepers, they maintain superiority by deceiving the Americans. In this changed scenario, the Chinese family sees through the illusion of the perpetually insider-outsider (because *they are* that) and they maintain superiority in the household by reinforcing what the border's demons failed to do.

Ahmed contends that "[t]he dis-organizing of social identities, here, can become a mechanism for the re-organizing of social life through an expansion of the terms of surveillance" (1999, p. 91). This means that because the migrant keeps trespassing the border, the keepers of those borders are inclined to strengthen their security. On one hand, the Americans are said to have "no memory anyway and poor eyesight" (Kingston, 1989b, p. 169), which indicates that the Americans are terrible at maintaining the borders of identity. On the other hand, by being abject themselves, the Chinese family is able to recognize the abject, therefore able to reinforce the borders in a way that the demons could not. Being able to destabilize *and* reinforce the borders proves the Chinese family's superiority over the demons *and* the abject.

2. Being Displaced and Loving It

Ang refers to a feeling of "permanent sense of displacement" that is experienced by all "racialized and ethnicized people living in the West" (2001, p. 191); this sense of displacement refers to the unrest that is within the abject person. As Sharkey and Shields state, as explained by Brun, Fàbos and El-Abed, displacement is simultaneously labelled as "out of place" and "never fully excluded" (2017, p. 223). As a

mestiza, Anzaldúa says, "I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine" (1987, p. 80).

Thus, the passing migrant, despite attempting mimicry, are only "*almost the same*, *but not quite*" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126, emphasis from the original text). As Bhabha asserts, mimicry only "*repeats* rather than *re-presents*" (1984, p. 128, emphasis from the original text), and that the Other who mimics can only be a "partial representation" (1984, p. 129). This means that the Other who attempts to fit themselves to the dominant group can never fully be recognized as a member of it, and this becomes a crucial blow to their identification.

As Kristeva says, the abject is what "I" does not recognize (1982, p. 2). By constructing an abject identity, the Chinese family in the two novels also threaten their own subjectivity. On one hand, by putting on the cloak of Americanness, they threaten the stability of their Chineseness. On the other hand, by retaining their Chineseness, they also threaten the eligibility of their Americanness.

Moreover, the act of passing has its implications in social conflict and antagonism, as the act of passing is examined by the subject's encounter with others (Ahmed, 1999, p. 96). This means that the "success" and/or "failure" of their attempt at passing is determined by other people, not just themselves. Thus, despite donning a camouflage to pass, the keepers of the borders are the ones that determine whether the migrant may pass or not pass, whether the camouflage is good enough or not. For Ahmed who passes between being white and a black feminist, she worries that she will be "caught out or detected" as "inauthentic and improper" (1999, p. 96). Therefore, the hybrid who passes between being white and non-white is perpetually in a state of abject and threatened with abjection by others.

However, though ambivalent, the Chinese family utilizes it to their benefit. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's mother faces a racist customer. "No tickee, no washee, mama-san?" the customer says (95), assuming that Kingston's mother is Japanese and unable to speak English well. Here, Kingston's mother is made the abject by the customer, but Kingston's mother actually utilizes the customer's inability to understand Kingston's mother's own language, Chinese. In retaliation, Kingston's mother writes "Noisy Red-Mouth Ghost" on the customer's package, sneaking in a rebuttal without jeopardizing the customer's continued patronage (Janette, 2002, p. 3). From this instance, Kingston's mother does not pass as an American to the racist customer, but she is determined to uphold her superior identity by weaponizing that failure. In such a subversive act, she acknowledges the border's keeper's verdict that she does not pass, honors that verdict by not insisting otherwise, and shifts back to her "original" state. She abjects herself from the border and back into the side of Chinese identity, but she also abjects the keeper by insulting the American while being safe on the Chinese side of the fence.

In *China Men*, before leaving for the United States, the men assure the women that they are "Sojourners only" and "only a tourist" (Kingston, 1989a, p. 39), promising that they will return to China. Ang references Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican performance artist, who notes that the border does not mean the same thing for a tourist and an undocumented worker (2001, p. 165). Gómez-Peña states that people who are socially, racially, or economically privileged, like the tourist, can easily cross physical borders, but they find it difficult to negotiate the borders of culture and race (Ang, 2001, p. 165). For the China men as being "only a tourist" to the Gold Mountain, they have the "privilege" of being abject, for being ambivalent means they do not have to commit to the space they invade; the border is something they can penetrate as they like. Additionally, unlike the undocumented worker, they have the "privilege" of abject citizenship.

Such privilege is reflected from the Chinese family's casual passing between one or the other social group. For many, being marked as a part of a culture involves expectations and obligations in relation to that culture, thus actually undermining the individual's liberty and making them unable to exit the community (Baber, 2012). Pagan also states that such traditional structures with implicit rules will be more susceptible to additional stress when the relevant individuals are geographically relocated (2021, p. 32). However, in the two novels, the Chinese family in America manipulate these expectations for their own benefit, donning them on as camouflage and stripping them off at a moment's notice. In talking about Satyendranath Chatterjee, a migrant who has a criminal record of identity imposture and racial mimicry, Lahiri similarly states that "racial passing was not a long-term commitment: new disguises were appropriated and discarded pragmatically" (2003, p. 413). Thus, the act of passing brings privilege to the Chinese family for they are not restrained by the commitment of conforming. They are liberated through partial mimicry, through being cheap imitations that pass just enough.

Thus, mimicry for the Chinese family in the two novels is more about doing just enough to gain a privileged identity. Janette contends that the no name aunt, when she commits suicide by jumping into the family well, "moves from abjection into power" (2002, p. 2). Ferguson points out that the dominant anthropological interpretation of colonial and postcolonial imitations of Europeans is that they are some combination of parody and appropriation, as gestures of resistance to colonialism (2002, p. 554). However, Ferguson looks at a case of two young Guinean boys who implore Europeans to "help [them] to become like

[Europeans]" and posits that such a case is "neither a mocking parody nor a pathetically colonized aping but a haunting claim for equal rights of membership in a spectacularly unequal global society" (2002, p. 565). As a fitting conclusion to such mimicry, Ginsberg, as quoted by Lahiri, states that passing is generally about shedding an oppressed identity for social and economic opportunities (2003, p. 411).

Thus, the "Sojourner" China men living in America are *enjoying* their status of temporary resident, of partial representation. Their brief and basic pass of being American allows them to obtain more opportunities while having a free-floating identity that they can manipulate. Another privilege that the China men have is their ability to keep "other possibilities secret" from the women (Kingston, 1989a, p. 39). The women wait for their husbands to return and bring them money for their labor in America, while the men plan other possibilities that they can pursue while in America. Again, being hypocrites, the men are able to abject themselves from the family while simultaneously representing the family's hope while they are away. This proves to be true as the men grow accustomed to America and choose to settle, flirting with demon women (white American women) and not wanting to go back to China.

Like in *China Men*, Kingston's father, Ed, reads about Gold Mountain Sojourners who returned to China but ended up being tricked out of their money by their friends and family. These Sojourners are later "quoted as saying they were coming back to America" (Kingston, 1989a, p. 56). From this, the life of a "Sojourner" that invites pleasure is actually one where he is a sojourner forever. As Kristeva states, "the more he strays, the more he is saved" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8). The men realize this and instead of coming home to China as they have previously promised, they choose to bring their wives to America so they may continue to pleasantly stray.

Their status as Sojourner in America renders them as not quite having America as their home. At the same time, being away from China for so long to the point they do not long to come back also means that China is not their home, either. As Kingston as the narrator in *The Woman Warrior* puts it, "We don't belong anywhere since the Revolution. The old China has disappeared while we've been away." (168).

As Lahiri states, displacement from the homeland unprecedently provides a degree of freedom to "experiment with self-creation and challenge imposed racial exclusivity" (2003, p. 413). In the two novels as well, the Chinese family having immigrated to America are forced to undergo mimicry to be able to enter the States, but at the same time they take it upon themselves to constantly assert a superior identity within the States by means of back-and-forth passing. Lahiri uses the term "emancipatory" to describe such possibilities due to displacement (2003, p. 419), and this is reflected in the way the Chinese family utilizes their ambivalence for their own emancipation.

Yew points out how migrant narratives typically focus on the migrant's experiences with alienation and isolation as a result from the subject's displacement (2016, p. 15). This stereotypical trajectory is "the proverbial tug-of-war between the desire to assimilate and a rejection of the migrant's adopted country" (Yew, 2016, p. 16), which echoes the ambivalent tug-of-war in Kingston's two novels. However, in examining the work of Michael Ondaatje entitled *In the Skin of a Lion*, Yew posits that Ondaatje is suggesting an alternative to the dichotomy, which is that belonging is neither fitting nor rejecting a dominant culture but is instead "finding and representing one's voice within a cacophony of voices" (2016, p. 16). This, too, echoes the ambivalence of Kingston's two works; the ambivalence is not just in the Chinese family's constant choice of assimilation and/or rejection but also in the way they find their own voice through the constant shift between the two. The Chinese family achieves a voice by accessing both environments at once, not just "within a cacophony of voices" but *through* a cacophony of voices.

D. Conclusion

In *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, the Chinese family constantly negotiates their identities between being Chinese and being American. They shift from one identity and ridicule the other and vice versa as an attempt to always appear superior and in control. They partially represent the white American in order to cross the borders of the United States but simultaneously deem the white Americans as ghosts and demons. The Chinese family forges an abject citizenship in the United States, buying their way into the social space of America. After forging legal paperwork to penetrate the border, the Chinese family proceed to camouflage themselves with typical American behaviors to ensure their survival and shallow belonging.

The act of passing and mimicking identities is a matter of identifying as the appropriate and refusing to be the inappropriate. This inevitably also means that they acknowledge that they attempt mimicry because they *are* the inappropriate to begin with. Therefore, while they succeed in disrespecting the border by camouflaging themselves as American, they also reinforce the notion that being Chinese is inappropriate. Because of this, the Chinese family is in a permanent state of displacement. Despite that, the Chinese family in America exhibits a fulfilment of being the abject. They reject the expectancy of adhering to a certain social

group, whether assimilating to the white American culture or upholding their traditional Chinese heritage, and instead choose to establish their own voice which echoes and bounces between the walls of categorization.

Thus, the identity of the Chinese family in the two novels is ambivalent, constantly shifting and contradicting itself. The Chinese family abjects other identities to establish themselves, but the Chinese family's own ambivalent identity renders them the abject as well. However, it is exactly because of their abjection and permanent state of displacement that the migrant family is able to establish themselves. By being abject, they are free floating, unanchored, and unrestricted. With this research, we argue that the ambivalent identity of Chinese American characters do not just reflect Otherness but also flexibility, as seen in the way the characters narratologically describe themselves and others (Others). Thus, we have offered a new approach to reading Asian American women's literature in line with critical theories of abject, mimicry, and identity.

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