

A Study on the Challenges of Cultural Assimilation in Gish Jen's *World and Town*

Jeniffer Shaheena Singh G.¹, Dr. Stephen Foster Davis²

1. Ph.D. Research Scholar, Reg.No: 21113164012017, Department of English & Centre for Research, Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil – 629003, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, Tamil Nadu, India)
2. Assistant Professor, Research Supervisor, Department of English & Centre for Research Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil – 629003, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, Tamil Nadu, India)

Abstract:

The novel *World and Town* by Gish Jen explores the challenges of cultural assimilation in a panoramic way. Gish Jen is a contemporary American writer and speaker of Chinese descent. Jen raises thought-provoking questions about the complexities of personal and communal identity and the impact of immigration and globalization on a community through her novel. The paper discusses the clash of traditions and values experienced by new cultural norms, the erosion of community values and traditions with the influx of new cultures, the frustration and tension in intercultural interactions, the difficulty in balancing cultural heritage and assimilation, and the generational gap in attitudes towards assimilation. It also highlights the costs of assimilation on personal identity. The abstract concludes by emphasizing the importance of inclusive and empowering approaches to assimilation in order to foster social cohesion.

Keywords: challenges, cultural assimilation, identity, language barriers, traditions.

Gish Jen, the acclaimed Chinese-American author, skilfully weaves cultural assimilation as a recurring theme through her works, particularly in her novel *World and Town*. In a rapidly globalizing world, the challenges and complexities surrounding cultural assimilation have become more relevant than ever. This study aims to explore the multifaceted difficulties encountered by individuals and communities as they navigate the process of assimilation. Focusing specifically on Gish Jen's *World and Town*, this paper examines the struggles of characters in adapting to a new culture, preserving their identities, and reconciling their ancestral heritage with their adopted society.

Cultural assimilation is the process of adopting the cultural traits and practices of another culture, and becoming part of that culture in the end. Language, customs, beliefs, and values are some of the aspects that can be integrated. Sometimes, cultural assimilation

happens by choice, but other times it is forced by factors such as colonization or migration. The dominant culture exerts its influence on the minority or immigrant groups, causing them to lose their original culture and adopt the new one. This process has both positive and negative effects: it can enrich the culture and unify the society, but it can also erase the diversity and traditions of different groups. Throughout history, cultural assimilation has been praised and criticized for its impact on social cohesion and identity.

In *World and Town*, Gish Jen provides a profound examination of the challenges faced by immigrants as they navigate cultural assimilation in a foreign land. Through the character of Hattie Kong, a retired schoolteacher of Chinese descent, the novel delves into the delicate balancing act of retaining one's cultural heritage while adapting to the norms and expectations of a new homeland. Additionally, Jen highlights the tension between the older generation, who yearn to maintain traditions, and the younger generation, who are often caught between two worlds and struggle to establish their own identities.

Through the novel, Jen brings forth the challenges of cultural assimilation through the experiences of Hattie Kong, a Chinese-American woman living in a small town in Riverlake. Riverlake, once a quiet and peaceful town, undergoes rapid changes as suburban neighborhoods and shopping centers replace the once-abundant farmland. "Riverlake being a good town, an independent town- a town that dates to before the Revolution. A town that was American before America was American, people claim- though, well, it's facing change now, and not just from the Cambodian family. Of course, there's always been change" (13). Hattie's town is nowhome to the immigrant population, with different customs, languages, and beliefs. The arrival of migrants from different places creates tension and misunderstandings but also forces the dominant culture to confront its own biases and prejudices.

As more immigrants settle in the town, Hattie witnesses the erosion of community values and traditions. The influx of new cultures and ideas challenges the existing norms and threatens the sense of cohesion and identity within the community. This erosion of community values can lead to a sense of loss and disconnection for those who have deep roots in the town.

Further, intercultural interactions also bring frustration and tension. Hattie struggles to communicate with her new neighbours who speak different languages and have different

cultural expectations. Language plays a significant role, and it is an essential key to communicating with others in the host land. Hattie Kong, a Chinese-American widow and a retired biology teacher, is a descendant of Confucius and a former missionary. She speaks several languages, including Mandarin, Qingdao dialect, Teochew dialect, and English. However, she sometimes feels alienated from her own languages and cultures, as well as from the dominant culture of the town. She also has trouble communicating with some of her neighbours, who are evangelical Christians and have different views on faith and science.

Similarly, the Cambodian family, the Chhungs, who fled from the Khmer Rouge genocide, have difficulty learning and speaking English. They often rely on their daughter Sophy, who is more fluent than her parents and siblings, to translate for them. However, Sophy also faces challenges in expressing herself and fitting in with her American peers. She feels torn between her Cambodian culture and her American aspirations.

Further, the novel also depicts the linguistic diversity and complexity of the town, where different languages coexist and collide. The *World and Town* uses different languages and dialects in the dialogue, such as English, Khmer, Chinese, Spanish, and French. By analysing different languages it is evident that the character faces challenges of language barriers and it makes them difficult to fully understand and connect with the newcomers, leading to misunderstandings and a sense of isolation. Furthermore, the clash of cultural values and expectations creates friction between different groups, as they try to navigate a new social landscape.

Another challenge highlighted in *World and Town* is religion. Religion plays a significant role in shaping the characters' beliefs, values, and identities, and it is one of the challenges of cultural assimilation in the novel. Hattie Kong, a retired biology teacher and a descendant of Confucius, contrasts with some of her neighbours, who are evangelical Christians. Hattie, a rationalist and humanist, believes in science and reason as the foundation of knowledge and morality. Her Chinese heritage influences her with its emphasis on harmony, balance, and pragmatism. While she is tolerant and respectful of other cultures and religions, she questions their validity and relevance in the modern world.

On the other hand, some of her neighbours are religious fundamentalists who believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible and prioritize their faith. They exhibit intolerance and hostility toward other cultures and religions, particularly Islam, which they associate with

terrorism and violence. Suspicion and fear of science and technology as threats to their faith and values also shape their worldview. They attempt to impose their beliefs and norms on others, especially the Cambodian family. The Chhung's family faces pressure to convert to Christianity and abandon their traditions and customs.

Ginny, the leader of the church, "who had blond hair and wore a chain with a cross draped over the collar of her turtleneck like a lot of the girls did" (178). She often sends a blue car to Sophy's house to divert her attention and bring Sophy to the church. "the blue car was coming to their house all the time" (173). "Cambodian kids were not supposed to hang around downtown" (150). But one day Sophy and his younger brother Gift went for a drive, "the drive was so different" (174). Soon, Sophy begins to accept Christianity within her soul. She starts to read "the Bible... called Good News! ... How the Lord knew everything about you, like your downsitting and your uprising and all your thoughts and ways to begin with, and how He didn't look on outward appearance, but on the heart. So that you didn't have to undo anything bad you'd done, you just had to be truly sorry. . . "It says in John 3:3, 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,'" Sophy started crying. Because she did so want to be reborn. She wanted to be reborn into the right life, her real life. Her old life was just so wrong." (W&T, 182). The love of God makes her to realize her past sins, and she believes in the Lord and is assured that "Her future was going to be bright" (W&T, 190). Her repentance and faith in Christ denote a new jaunt in her life. It gives her a new experience and symbolizes a turning point in her journey through life toward an identity shift.

This demonstrates how religion impacts the characters' willingness and ability to assimilate into a new culture. The Chhung experience difficulties in learning English and adapting to the American way of life due to their traumatic past under the Khmer Rouge regime and their religious beliefs and practices. While their Buddhist faith provides comfort and solace, aiding them in coping with suffering and loss, they also encounter discrimination and harassment. Balancing their own culture with the dominant culture of the town becomes a struggle for them.

The costs of assimilation are also evident in the novel. Individuals like Hattie face pressure to shed their cultural distinctiveness and conform to the dominant culture, leading to a loss of personal identity. This loss can create a sense of alienation. Additionally, the loss of

language can create communication barriers, making it difficult for individuals to fully express themselves and connect with others.

In examining real-life challenges of cultural assimilation, it becomes apparent that these issues are not unique to Hattie's world. Immigrant populations in diverse countries often face similar struggles. For example, the experiences of Asian immigrants in the United States or African immigrants in Europe can mirror Hattie's challenges. Similarly, indigenous communities around the world have grappled with the impact of cultural assimilation on their traditions, languages, and ways of life.

In conclusion, *World and Town* by Gish Jen provides a nuanced exploration of the challenges of cultural assimilation. Through the experiences of Hattie Kong and other characters, the novel highlights the struggles faced in adapting to multicultural environments. It sheds light on the erosion of community values, the clash of cultural traditions, the difficulty in balancing heritage and assimilation, and the costs of assimilation on individual identity. By examining these challenges in the context of real life one can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding cultural assimilation and the need for inclusive and empowering approaches. Also, it highlights the importance of facilitating integration without sacrificing cultural heritage or individual identities. To achieve cultural assimilation, education, language learning, and social interaction are often used. However, a balance between preserving diversity and promoting integration is necessary for a healthy and inclusive society. Cultural assimilation should be seen as a dynamic process that promotes mutual understanding, empathy, and intercultural exchange while preserving the rich diversity that enriches our global society.

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