To Go in Order to Come Back: A Comparative Analysis of Wooden Fish Songs and The House on Mango Street

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Abstract

Each ethnic text carries its own unique force. A glimpse of the otherness of the other can produce new perspectives on our own faces in the great mirror of culture. Though different in culture and ethnicity, Sandra Cisneros and Ruthanne Lum McCunn share the same confusion about their multicultural identity. Their works both focus on the themes of cross-cultural gender tension, identity shaping and community building. McCunn concludes that individuals can only thrive if they inherit and understand their own culture. Afterwards, they should cross-pollinate their own tradition with new perspectives from other cultures. Cisneros emphasizes the role of writing for female achievement, and proposes that after personal success, one should come back to their community and help others who were left behind.

The world of Wooden Fish Songs and the world of The House on Mango Street seem completely different, yet both works echo the same challenges and deserve comparative attention. Former scholars were influenced by the idea that the East/West comparison is impossible, since it is believed that the philosophical and interpretative discourse governing one of those worlds are untranslatable and cannot be successfully applied to the other world. This is maybe the reason why previous critics have only focused on their works separately. This essay compares the two works through close reading. It discusses their role as ethnic authors, and concludes the importance of comparative studies of the works of women of color.

Keywords: cross-cultural gender tension, identity shaping, community building, women of color, ethnic author
Though different in culture and ethnicity, Sandra Cisneros and Ruthanne Lum McCunn share the same confusion about their multicultural identity. Their works both focus on the themes of cross-cultural gender tension, identity-shaping and community building. McCunn concludes that individuals can only thrive if they inherit and understand their own culture. Afterwards, they should cross-pollinate their own tradition with new perspectives from other cultures. Cisneros emphasizes the role of writing for female achievement, and proposes that after personal success, one should come back to their community and help others who were left behind. Previous critics have only focused on their works separately. This essay compares the two works through close reading. It discusses their role as ethnic authors, and concludes the importance of comparative studies of the works of women of color.

WOODEN FISH SONGS

*Wooden Fish Songs* records the laments sung by nineteenth century Chinese women who were left behind when their husbands, sons and brothers sailed to America in search of financial achievement. This novel not only recounts the lonely life of the three female narrators, but also gives insight into the lives of the first Chinese immigrants who suffered double rejections, from both their traditional Chinese families and the racially segregated communities in the Western world. The main figure, Lue Gim Gong, is a real person from history. He was an early Chinese immigrant who perfected a hardy grapefruit, brought millions in revenue to the citrus industry, but left no trace of his personal life. His diaries were destroyed, and his family in China considered him a traitor and removed his name from the clan’s genealogy. He was neither acknowledged by the residents of his Western adopted home, nor respected by his birth family.

In 1995, the first edition of *Wooden Fish Songs* was published. McCunn interweaves fiction with fact as she tells Lue Gim Gong’s life story through three female voices, each from a different cultural background. By orchestrating these three voices, the novel offers a cross-cultural interpretation on the life of Lue. *Sum Jui—A Mother who has lost her son*. Sum Jui was raised in a traditional Chinese village and believed in supernatural powers. Told by her mother that she was marked by her grandfather’s ghost, she learned to keep a secret in silence at a young age. She was taught and learned her proper female place: to obey without question and always put herself behind men. Her depressing image mirrors the traditional female role in China. As life was very hard and her family struggled to survive, her youngest son Lue Gim Gong decided to go to the “Golden Mountain” (the Chinese name for San Francisco) to earn some Western money to support his family. He was still a young boy at that time. When he came back to China as a young man, Sum Jui realized that she could no longer communicate with her son. The family could not understand Lue’s thoughts, and they simply came to the conclusion that he was possessed by foreign ghosts. In order to win her son back, Sum Jui arranged a marriage for him. He escaped and never came back.

From Sum Jui’s monologue, we discover her unconscious prejudice toward the Western
world. Everything linked to the “Golden Mountain” was called ghostlike: the machine her firstborn brought home was a ghost machine, the priests who gave out rice were ghosts, Fanny was a ghost teacher who hexed her son, and her loving son became a ghost son after the family lost control of his actions and thoughts. Her tragedy does not lie in her old fashioned superstitious beliefs, but in her inability to understand new things and her continuous resistance to her son’s new ideas.

Fanny---A Creator of a new man. The relationship between Fanny and Lue started as teacher and student and later evolved to mother and son. Lue called her “Mother Fanny.” Fanny valued him highly for his work with plants. For every achievement Lue made, she praised the Christian God and ascribed it to Lue’s Western education. She never considered the knowledge he had already gained from his mother when he was still a boy, nor did she acknowledge the useful information her African servants Jim and Sheba taught him. She was caring and loving toward Lue, but deep down, she still held a prejudice toward Chinese people. Furthermore, she secretly had sexual desires for Lue, which she often described as wrong and shameful. She never expressed her true feelings, because not only was she worried about their age difference, but also she was afraid that Lue’s Chinese identity would damage her reputation.

Fanny created a new Lue and taught him her “civilized” ways. At Fanny’s urging, Lue stayed distant from his African friends Sheba and Jim, abandoned his Chinese traditions and became a devout Christian. In Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories 1828-1988, McCunn presents a biographical study on Lue. Lue is included in the official Burlingame genealogy as Fanny’s adopted son. His precise status, however, “was nebulous, even awkward. Lue acted more like a servant than an adopted son, passing out refreshments at parties and building fires at picnics” (McCunn 35). By calling Fanny “mother,” Lue demonstrated his willingness to completely abandon his old identity. He cut his long queues (Chinese men had long braids during the Qing dynasty), which signified him cutting his roots. After Fanny died, Lue lost both his adopted family and his birth family.

Sheba---A Dreamer for Mixed Ideas. Suffering from the trauma of losing her parents, Sheba was afraid of being unable to provide a good life for her offspring, so she secretly took birth control medicine. She was a true friend to Lue. Sheba’s voice was always clear-headed and objective. Even after Lue’s success in planting, she pointed out that in spite of Lue’s brilliance and kindness, people would still reject him.

The tragedy of Sheba is that she kept looking for protection for her unborn child and did not share the strong conviction of her husband Jim, who pointed out that protection could only come from their own hands. Fanny disliked Sheba because she found her too loud and too rude. Sheba refused to be subdued, and kept her ties to her African roots. She also talked constantly about storytelling. According to the old African stories, her people possess powerful magic and were able to fly, but once they left the ground of Africa, the magic left as well. Here, the author
implicates that people can only possess the power of freedom if they are connected to their own roots. Storytelling is a method to connect with tradition and culture and so symbolizes a way for finding our own identity.

In the end, Sheba’s desire to carry a child was not fulfilled, but she and Jim found a way to comfort themselves by caring for other people’s children. The novel ends with Sheba passionately recalling the young African children’s curiosity and willingness to learn about their homeland’s stories: “I tell you, the faces turned up at us for stories are like the roses on that bush Lue done made. They are a mess of colors, their skins soft as petals and smelling as sweet. Looking at them, a new dream comes to me: a dream of better. Not with plants, but with people. Yes” (McCunn 380). McCunn uses Sheba’s voice to express her view on how to solve cross-cultural conflicts: to mix the different ideas of different people from different cultures together.

THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

The House on Mango Street is a masterpiece by the Latin American author Sandra Cisneros. It was published in 1984 and won the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award in 1985. Critics mainly focused on interpreting it through a feminist lens. In her novel, instead of three narratives which McCunn uses, Cisneros creates a voice of a young girl, and through her childish narrative, the author gives the readers a glance of the lives of the people of Mango Street. Her collective stories arouse a series of questions including the consciousness of identity, social neglect and discrimination, the status of women in the Mexican-American community and the awareness of otherness. There are three themes the two novels share in common: cross-cultural gender tension, identity-shaping, and community building.

Cross-Cultural Gender Tension. Culture is a set of values and beliefs, and it can cause tension and problems in a multicultural society. The situation becomes more complicated when the issue of gender is involved.

The feeling of otherness of the women in their culture is what the two authors both focus on. The female narratives in Wooden Fish Songs all have secrets: Sim Jui’s ghost mark, Fanny’s intimate sexual longings and Sheba’s birth control. Their fears of otherness and the lack of education take away their power.

The female characters in The House on Mango Street also have their own secrets. Marin is a pretty young girl who has a secret boyfriend in Puerto Rico. She loves him, but her idea of life is to wear nice clothes and look beautiful in order to meet someone in the subway to marry. Rafaela is imprisoned by her husband and her secret is to drink coconut and papaya juice every Tuesday night when he is out to play Dominoes. She leans out of the window and dreams that her hair is like Rapunzel’s in order to escape. Sally is a pretty girl who is physically abused by her father, but tells people that she is fine. Esperanza’s mom tells her that she used to be very
talented, but she left school because her clothes were not nice. As a result of her regret, she encourages Esperanza to respect herself for her brain and embrace education. From them, Esperanza learns that marriage is not necessarily an escape but a potential prison of itself. Esperanza has her own secrets. She is ashamed that her family’s house is not like the houses on TV, and disbelieves her parents’ promise of a better life. She finds out that only through writing and education can she achieve her goal to have a house of her own.

Cisneros echoes the literary image of the feminist pioneer Virginia Woolf of having a room of her own, and inherits her idea about the key role writing plays in female freedom. She is very clear in her novel that only education and writing can help women to find a way out of the barrio, and create a safe home in their hearts. Her idea of writing and McCunn’s metaphor of Sheba’s story-telling achieve the same end: the creation of female independence through literary presentation.

Identity Shaping. Individuals with multicultural backgrounds mostly struggle to identify who they are and where their place in the world might be. Ethnic identification plays a big role in the works of immigrant authors.

In the introduction of The House on Mango Street, Cisneros indicated the narrator’s voice as “antiacademic.”

The Language in Mango Street is based on speech. It’s very much an antiacademic voice—a child’s voice, a girl’s voice, a poor girl’s voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American–Mexican. It’s in this rebellious realm of antipoetic that I tried to create a poetic text with the most unofficial language […] At one time or other, we all have felt other. When I teach writing, I tell the story of the moment of discovering and naming my otherness. It is not enough simply to sense it; it has to be named, and then written about from there (Cisneros xv-xvi).

In Wooden Fish Songs, McCunn also writes in an “antiacademic” language. San Francisco is called “The Golden Mountain” (Chinese translation for “San Francisco”); Grandpa is called Yeh Yeh (Chinese translation for “grandpa”). Metaphors and mottos are directly translated from the Chinese language, which draws a distance to the Western audience and creates an exotic style.

Neither author converts their voice into standard written English, which made their voices even more unique and special, and respected for their otherness. They did not only pay attention to create a unique narrative voice, but also let their characters face the identity shaping challenge.

In Wooden Fish Songs, when Lue was new in San Francisco, he argued that the Christian religion and the Chinese beliefs share similarities in their core ideas:
When Phoebe rebuked a convert she discovered practicing the pagan ritual of ancestor worship, Lue defended the Chinamen, arguing that the ancestral tablet was no different from the tombstones in Western cemeteries, the incense the Chinese lit had the same significance as the flowers Western people lay on graves, the deep bows Chinese made reflected nothing more than respect, like the bows gentlemen make to ladies. (McCunn 91)

Unfortunately, once Lue became a Christian himself, he lost his insightful perspective. The loss of his original voice blurred his identity and robbed him of his social status. In *The House of Mango Street*, the character Mamacita is a Mexican woman who moves into the neighborhood in order to live with her son. She is bereft having to leave her country, and refuses to speak English. She tries to protect her identity by refusing the foreign language. Esperanza emphasizes with her feelings of dislocation and her powerlessness in controlling her situation.

Lue has lost his voice by abandon his own roots; Mamacita has lost her voice by refusing new changes. The two authors offer different examples to show the same challenges: how to deal with a hybrid identity as an immigrant and how to build a unique voice. *Community Building*. The interrelationship between the community and the individual is very important and indicates the identity of the individual.

Both McCunn and Cisneros focused on the development of their own ethnic communities. McCunn hopes that the Chinese American community can create an environment with mixed ideas while Cisneros asks Esperanza to return to Mango Street in the future to help the others who cannot leave.

According to Harold Bloom, some critics on Cisneros “took exception to her portrayal of men, claiming that it was too generalized, portraying all men as predatory and dangerous. Others claimed that it was particularly insulting to the Chicano men and destructive to their already compromised persona in the mass media” (Bloom 15). In the introduction of *The House on Mango Street*, however, Cisneros points out that all of her characters are born from reality and their struggle mirrors real life in her cultural community (Cisneros vii).

McCunn and Cisneros are both ethnic authors. In “What is an Ethnic Author,” We are told that consciously or not, the texts of ethnic authors are driven by the themes of cross-cultural tension, identity-shaping and community building (Partridge 49). According to Maxine Hong-Kingston, sometimes readers forced Chinese American authors into cultural ambassador roles. Thus, unlike mainstream writers of the major literature, ethnic authors are likely to experience a conflict between authentic/positive representation of their ethnic community and genuine artistic freedom (53). Both Cisneros and McCunn reveal the negatives of their own ethnic community. For them, what is important is not to be the spokesperson of their people, but to enhance the discourse of their own community and find a solution to make it a better one.
WHY COMPARE?

In the time of globalization, we celebrate the term World Literature. We also support multiethnic literature by dividing literature by color and gender, as African American Literature, East Asian Studies and Women Studies. Compared to canon American literature, however, ethnic literature still has a long way to go.

Ethnic as well as other approaches to literary study as feminism and queer theory have established their own categories of texts and also read rebelliously within the canon. But the perception that the value of mainstream and canonical works exceeds those of multiethnic texts is still far from displayed. In fact, this perception is being consolidated in unexpected ways in a globalized context (Jo bona and Maini 183-184).

In the Introduction of Multicultural American Literature, we are introduced to Meena Alexander’s understanding of identity:

In our multiple identities as Asian American, we are constantly making alliances, both within and outside our many communities. In order to make up my ethnic identity as an Indian American, I learn from Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Chinese Americans, African Americans, Native Americans. Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, Arab Americans. And these images that slip and slide out of my own mind jostle against a larger shared truth. And my artwork refracts these lines of sense, these multiple anchorages. (Lee 8)

Each ethnic text carries its own unique force. A glimpse of the otherness of the other can produce new perspectives on our own faces in the great mirror of culture. The world of Wooden Fish Songs and the world of The House on Mango Street seem completely different, yet both works echo the same challenges and deserve comparative attention. Former scholars were influenced by the idea that the East/West comparison is impossible, since the philosophical and interpretative discourse governing one of those worlds are untranslatable and cannot be successfully applied to the other world (Behad and Thomas 96). This is maybe the reason why past critics had not compared the two authors. I believe, however, that the multicultural American literature of women of color makes a difference, since the works are written in English. It is time that we come out of our refinement studies and compare what these women authors share in common. To go is in order to come back. In the end, we should combine separate studies for the ultimate goal to serve the research of humanities in general.

CONCLUSION

This essay emerges from my desire to examine Wooden Fish Songs and The House on Mango Street from a comparative perspective. Through close reading, I analyzed the characters of these two works, and interpreted the three themes the two works share: cross-cultural gender
tension, identity shaping and community building. I presented a comparative reading of Wooden Fish Songs and The House on Mango Street. My conclusion is that the texts of female ethnic authors are driven by similar themes, and it is important for us to focus on the works of women of color through comparative studies.
References


