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De-Generation: The Deterioration of Identity in “No Name Woman”

“No Name Woman” chronicles the pregnancy and suicide of the narrator’s Chinese aunt. Both the narrator and her family are unnamed. While the narrator speculates about the personality of her aunt, a woman she never knew, her true goal is to define what it means to be Chinese in America: “Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.” The narrator is thrown into a new world, one for which her emigrant elders cannot prepare her, not having experienced the transition themselves. She searches for meaning and self in a world of other emigrants who are equally unsure in this new, undefined world. In “No Name Woman,” the ideology of globalization and being raised in an emigrant family has distorted the narrator's concepts of identity, along with her own personal identity.

The narrator's musings about her aunt can be divided into two distinct categories: the historical and the idealized. The historical side is briefer and explores the possibility of rape. She makes a distinct comparison between Western rape and Chinese rape: rape in China is inescapable and cyclical; “His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told.” The distinction between Chinese and Western rape rests not on any tangible differences or variations in the act itself, but rather on the consequences it brings about, particularly for the woman victimized. Once violence against a Chinese woman has begun, the only end for a her is to be found in violence: either the retaliation of her family, or retaliation from the rapist or from a greater representation of the society, like the villagers in the story. This view of rape is more influenced by her mother, who tells her the story both as a type of cautionary tale, and to clarify the place of an unmarried woman in Chinese society. The lesson of how to be a proper Chinese woman is summed beautifully when the narrator says “Women in Old China did not choose.”

The narrator, however, seems to refuse to bend to this tradition, both in her life and in her speculation throughout the story, instead focusing on a sweet and unrealistic romance. The narrator's speculations about her aunt’s romance illustrate her glorified notions of romance, along with her own idealized vision of history. This humanized side of the narrator's theories highlights her American

upbringing and transforms her aunt from a faceless suicide-ghost into an actual woman. In the narrator's musings about the rape, her aunt is more of an instrument: used first by the rapist, then by the villagers, and then by her mother. She finds the parts of the story most useful to be those parts excluded by her mother: who was this woman before she became nothing more than a nameless caveat? The narrator seeks to define her aunt as an actual emotional being because of the connections she feels towards her.

While these two conflicting explanations are both completely unsupported by the tale of the narrator's mother, one is much more so than the other. Based upon the attitude of the narrator's family, the rape explanation emerges as the clearly more realistic possibility. For the narrator, her family is the most accurate representation of Chinese history and culture she has. This willingness of the narrator to disregard so easily her history, a past she has constantly been exposed to and reminded of, perfectly exemplifies the modern immigrant's problem: while she is Chinese-raised, she is American-born. The narrator has been raised in what can only be defined as a tiny bubble of China, threatened at all times to be burst by the immense pressure of America pushing at its edges. She cannot escape either of those two influences, no matter how contradictory they become. In romanticizing her aunt, she reaches back to a static past to find a woman, Chinese, who also embraced the Western ideals of true love, expression, and individuality. Consider, for example, the narrator's romanticized language when describing her romantic vision—"fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate, wire and bone . . . or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip"—when compared with the harsh, concentrated language she uses to describe the rape scenario: "She told the man, 'I think I'm pregnant!' He organized the raid against her." It is clear, when the elaboration and winding tangents of plot line she uses to explore the transgressions of her aunt is juxtaposed with the caustic simplicity of before, that the narrator is much more invested, much more concerned with the outcome of this analysis, no matter its historical relevance.

The narrator seeks dignity through her aunt; her hopes for her aunt mirror her hopes for herself. The narrator's refusal to think that her aunt carelessly slept around demonstrates that she is using her aunt to discover her own identity: "Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit . . . Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help." The narrator uses the story of her aunt as a vehicle to investigate her own identity. She explores how she can fit into a culture in which both of these stories might be possible.

The narrator is only bits and pieces Chinese, so a question remains: which parts of her are faithful to tradition, and which parts betray that heritage? In breaks from actual narrative or speculation about her aunt, the narrator broods over what exactly it means to be Chinese and, more important, what a Chinese identity means to her. When referring to Chinese customs, she repeatedly uses the phrase “the Chinese” instead of the more inclusive and common “we.” This pattern, whether conscious or not, indicates that the narrator does not feel that she is a part of this group and distinguishes that their beliefs are not her own. However, she also refers to herself as Chinese, demonstrating her confusion about her place in Chinese society. She has difficulty separating the individual nuances and quirks of her family from the overall society they represent. “How do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese?” questions the narrator. The narrator recognizes that even through all her speculation and measured guessing, she will never truly be able to discern two things: her aunt’s true identity and precisely what “being Chinese” means. She has begun to realize the mutual exclusivity of an American identity and a Chinese identity, or at least her family's own particular brand of Chinese heritage.

To overcome her crisis of kinship or her concerns about which cultural identity to embrace, the narrator must select one of these two identities and adopt it as her own. She has not yet realized that she cannot pick and choose from societies and then expect there to be a well-defined standard to which she can mold herself. Although the narrator’s mother “tested our strength to establish realities,” no cultural identity was sufficiently “established” for her. To achieve the kind of comforting, guiding identity she is seeking, she must make a choice. Is the narrator the “Betty Grable” of her American extravagances, of movies and carnival rides, or does she define herself by the avoidance of her aunt’s mistakes, carrying the guilt and caution commanded by Chinese tradition? The narrator’s obsession with her mother’s story symbolizes not only an attempt at self-identification, but also the fear of a fate similar to her aunt’s.

The narrator feels torn between betraying a past that was never hers and adapting and assimilating into a world that, though one she was raised in, is still distinctly foreign and incompatible with the narrator’s life. This discord is due to her family’s refusal to fit into a culture that is not their own: “The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways—always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable.” Although the treatment her aunt was subjected to might not occur in America, the narrator is still cautioned by

her family to avoid her aunt's behaviors. Familial ties revive a distant and distinct China into a living entity, a kind of surviving threat. The narrator seeks her aunt's identity, a woman so removed and ill-defined that she becomes little more than a shape onto which she might project her own feelings, doubts, and rationale, to help keep her within the confines of her family's approval.

The narrator seeks ancestral assistance in her aunt's husband as well as her aunt. Although represented harshly, the husband is a character to which the narrator relates, although not consciously. He too, an emigrant, stumbled through his new American dream guided by the faltering light of Chinese tradition. Although the narrator is "among the barbarians, [and] could fumble without detection," she still feels the pressures of her aunt, laid upon her by her mother and family. Although the narrator is a part of this new, forgiving environment, she must tread lightly to avoid the mistakes of her aunt, mistakes that would be punished not by her current country's culture, but by her family's own interpretations of Chinese morality.

The narrator takes away a lesson with which her mother is unconcerned: refusing to see things in black and white, or in absolute morals and sins, the narrator seeks answers about what led her aunt to that deep, dark well. Her generation is left trying to fit warped notions of cultural identification into obsolete schemata. This is not a uniquely Chinese emigrate phenomenon: emigration has created, in an age of ill-defined borders and restless transience, a generation searching for the cool summit of the Golden Mountain. As the narrator realizes, the simplicity of the past might never again be attained. The definitions for culture, for tradition, have evolved so rapidly that there is no one left versed in the shifting tides of identities.