

**THE MARVELOUS CHINESE CARIBBEAN FEMALE IN
MEILING JIN'S FICTION**

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The Marvelous Chinese Caribbean Female in Meiling Jin's Fiction

What constitutes being Chinese in the Caribbean? When considering the harrowing history of colonization, which led to the arrival, entanglement, and creolization of diverse ethnic groups and cultures in the Caribbean, attempting to answer this question is challenging, to say the least. The Chinese are a diasporic minority that has been marginalized and excluded “from national identity formations and cultural productions” since its arrival; moreover, they have been stereotypically portrayed “as culturally insular, politically homogeneous, and nationally extraneous” (Yun 28). The literary contributions of Chinese Caribbean authors like Willi Chen, Kerry Young, Jan Lowe Shinebourne, and Meiling Jin have been paramount in discouraging the perpetuation these stereotypes. Their works convey and validate their ancestor's ordeals, while simultaneously ascertaining the importance of their cultural contributions to the Caribbean identity.

In the introduction of her poetry collection *Gifts from My Grandmother*, Meiling Jin stated: “For me, writing is healing. It is also communicating. But above all, it's powerful” (7). Through her poems and short stories, Jin has assumed the responsibility of voicing her individual and collective reality, rather than allowing others the power to diminish or misrepresent it. This paper focuses on her collection of short stories *Song of the Boatwoman*. By using *marvelous realism*, Jin depicts an array of complex and multidimensional female characters on journeys of transformation and deliverance from the conventions that limit their personal and cultural identity.

A summary on the history of indentured servitude and its connection to *marvelous realism* is paramount to provide the proper framework for the study of Jin's fiction. After the British Slave Emancipation Act of 1833, the necessity for stable, low-wage labor arose in the

colonies; therefore, “various kinds of immigration experiments were initiated” between the 1840s and 1860s (Look Lai, “Chinese Caribbean” 4). Suddenly, British plantations were deprived of a consistent influx of cheap slave labor, and there was an exodus of Black workers seeking independence and new laboring opportunities. Additionally, other European powers were exploring an alternative workforce due to the growing demand for raw materials from the colonies and the rising pressures to end slavery.

Initially, there were three options to emigrate from China: “one could pay for one’s own way and go as an individual free migrant; one could be sponsored and have one’s passage paid for later reimbursement, or one could obtain a contract as an indentured worker” (Misrahi-Barak 2). In the second half of the nineteenth century, most Chinese immigrants arrived in the Caribbean and the Americas as indentured laborers. According to historian Walter Look Lai, by the 1880s approximately 270,000 Chinese had departed to Latin America and the Caribbean; 51 percent arrived in Cuba, 36 percent in Peru, 7 percent in the British West Indies, and 6 percent dispersed throughout the Central and South American colonies (“Chinese Caribbean” 7). Most Chinese laborers went to Cuba during this migration wave, where indentured servitude and slavery were executed simultaneously until 1886 (“Asian Diasporas” 41).

Furthermore, in the chapter “The Chinese in the Caribbean Region,” Look Lai emphasizes the differences in Asian migration patterns. On one hand, the Chinese migration streams were globally widespread in the nineteenth century; large numbers departed to a variety of new destinations all over the world, which included Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific islands, the Indian Ocean islands, South Africa, and the Americas (5). Indentureship migrations to the Caribbean and Latin America comprised no more than 12 percent of the Chinese global dispersal (8). In contrast, the Indian labor migrations were mostly confined to the British

colonies (5). The British West Indian plantation system received about 536,310 laborers between 1838 and 1918; 80 percent were from India, 7.5 percent from Madeira, and 3.5 percent from China (4).

In the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly the period from 1910 to 1940, there was a second wave of Chinese migration to the Caribbean, but this time it consisted of free immigrants who occupied “mercantile-related occupations, rather than agriculture” (Look Lai, “Chinese Caribbean” 17). Lisa Li-Shen Yun states that, because of the public dissent and activism against the forceful and deceptive kidnapping practices of coolie traffickers, the Chinese authorities beheaded the agents who enabled these violent practices of the coolie trade. This influenced the withdrawal of the Americans and the British from the trade in China in the 1860s, and by 1874, the Chinese government had banned all forms of trafficking (32). Notwithstanding, the British government continued the coolie trade in India until 1917.

In comparison with other European indentured systems, Look Lai explains that the British seemed to pay, in theory, special attention to the creation of regulations that safeguarded the rights of the laborers, particularly in the “aftermath of the vigorous British abolitionist campaigns against slavery,” but in practice, the results were far from the intended goals. Under contract, the laborers were promised proper housing, medical care, regular food provisions, and fair wages. Instead, they experienced abuse in the form of physical disciplining and withholding of wages, rations, and shelter. In addition, under contractual stipulations, any act of insubordination by the laborers was punishable with incarceration, whereas the West Indian employers and representatives were rarely fined for their “breaches of duties” (“Chinese Caribbean” 12). Many Chinese, especially in Guyana, Trinidad, and Jamaica, “found ways, shortly after their arrival, to abandon the fields for the towns, where they quickly established

themselves in local commerce” (Hu-DeHart 70). Others were able to return to China at the end of their servitude; however, most remained in the Caribbean (Taylor 156). Those who settled in the West Indies strategically chose to upgrade “their status of agricultural laborers” rather than renovating their contracts (Misrahi-Barak 3). Subsequently, with the arrival of the twentieth century, most Chinese in the Caribbean had established themselves in retail business sectors.

Correspondingly, the conspicuous rise in success of Chinese shopkeepers and merchants led to various degrees of Sinophobia across the West Indies. The levels of Anti-Chinese expressions “varied from society to society, and indeed from period to period within any given society” (Look Lai, “Asian Diasporas” 57). Nonetheless, the following charges against this minority echoed across the Caribbean landscape: business monopolies, cheap labor, lack of employment opportunities for members of other ethnic groups, illegal or unethical business practices to underrate local competition, and unwillingness to assimilate (López 191-195).

Regardless of prosperity or affluence, Evelyn Hu-Dehart argues that Chinese commerce was far from constituting a monopoly (75). Most of their businesses relied on family labor for survival; they were often unable to afford wages for regular workers. When laborers transitioned out of their indentureship, they had a compelling reason to find wives and reproduce a labor force (80). Since women in the Chinese labor migrant communities were scarce, the men married creolized natives or other immigrants, and mixed Chinese communities emerged (Look Lai, “Chinese Caribbean” 16). As stated by Patrick Bryan, the link to China waned with the rise of new generations, yet the “strong sense of ethnic ethnicity between the members of the Chinese community” remained alongside other cultural traits (20). Afterwards, with the ensuing increase of free migration, successful Chinese merchants invited relatives from the homeland and offered

them apprenticeships that would eventually allow them to establish businesses of their own accord (16).

Restraints were put in place by various Caribbean societies to alienate and confine the economic advancement, the physical and social spaces, and the integration of the Chinese in the national identity. Some restrictions manifested in the form of discriminatory laws inspired by the growing concerns of elite powers when confronted with competition from Chinese enterprises; others appeared as “pressures emanating from below, from constituency sentiment” (Look Lai, “Asian Diasporas” 57). Nevertheless, the overwhelming alienation of the Chinese did not impede their traditions, customs, practices, and beliefs from integrating and syncretizing with other ethnic contributions. Furthermore, the “spiritual commitment to the Chinese ancestral tradition” can still be found among its descendants today (Taylor 156-57).

Meiling Jin acknowledges this historical context with the story entitled “Victoria.” It introduces the journeys undertaken by Jin’s unique female characters in the book *Song of a Boatwoman*. Victoria’s presence in Guyana begins with her grandfather’s indentureship: “Ho A-yin come over from China to work for Lainsi up at Kamuni creek. Lainsi pay the passage from China and, in return, they work for him in the charcoal pit. If any of the boys wanted to leave, Lainsi would kill them and throw them in the pit. All except Ho. Ho escaped” (7). After his desertion, Victoria’s grandfather transitioned to shopkeeping, thus initializing the family involvement in the merchant trade: her father Wong has a shop at the Rose Hall estate, her brother David owns a bakery in Georgetown, her other two siblings Stanley and Edward inaugurate an ice cream parlor in Trinidad, and her brother-in-law Mr. Chin opens a shop in Georgetown.

Likewise, Victoria exhibits the proclivity and talent for entrepreneurship. She initially leaves her father's shop to help her sister and Mr. Chin with their new enterprise, yet her progress as a vendor is hindered by her brother-in-law's sexual advances. Because of the sugar economic crisis in the plantation, Wong sells the shop at Rose Hall. Father and daughter move to David's house and labor at his bakery. Victoria's resolve to pursue an independent business endeavor was not abated by adversity. After her father's death, she moves to Trinidad, "leaving behind her family's indentured past" (Misrahi-Barak 5).

Just as Victoria breaks free from her constraints and embarks on a voyage of self-discovery, the women in the tales "Song of the Boatwoman," "Three-Breasted Woman," and "Bear Woman" undergo journeys of deliverance, transformation, and empowerment. Although there is an essential Chineseness in these stories, the female protagonists also embody the cultural diversity found in the Caribbean and its diaspora. They reflect Jin's desire "to raise a few questions about the paradoxes of diasporic existence, [and] possibly to overcome a few restrictions on the way" (Misrahi-Barak 5). This is achieved with the integration of the *marvelous* in the narrative.

Amongst the literature of the Caribbean and Latin America are works of fiction characterized by the intertwining of two isotopies: the "realis" or rational and the "irrealis" or supernatural (Arentsen 81). Critics have yet to reach a consensus on what to call this type of literature. What is more, they have not been successful in delineating the narrative qualities it embodies. The most recognized and accepted term in literary circles is *magical realism*, but many have opposed it in view of its Eurocentric origins and individualistic nature. *Magical realism* focuses on the individual experience, perception, and reaction to the supernatural,

whereas the *marvelous* is based on the cultural beliefs and traditions accepted by the collective (Utley 14).

Alejo Carpentier first defined the *marvelous* as the mythical, the miraculous that is naturally embedded in reality; when the supernatural appears, the community's faith makes it an unquestionable and integral part of life. Even though Carpentier coined the term *marvelous real* to name the extraordinary aesthetic born out the intermixing of ethnicities in the Americas, he failed to provide the instructions, narrative techniques, or structures required for authors to transform their surrounding reality into literature (Lukavska 69).

Diversely, Irleamar Chiampi proposed a model of specific structural requisites which came to be known as *marvelous realism*. According to María Fernanda Arentsen, the first literary characteristic in Chiampi's model is the lack of contradiction between the isotopies. The *marvelous* is not the antithesis of the real; the rational and irrational are equal, and the mystical is integrated into reality without putting it in question. The second, there is a validation of the mythological values and beliefs developed from cultural interactions and creolization. This recognition breaks the occidental hierarchy that overvalues rationalism and suppresses the *marvelous* due to its cultural provenance. The third, it establishes new senses, other possibilities. Finally, it asserts the American values over the European values (106). Nonetheless, it is more accurate and inclusive to say that *marvelous realism* asserts liberating cultural values born from diversity over oppressive and divisive cultural values driven by supremacy.

It is worth noting that these terms have been discussed almost exclusively in relation to Latin American literature; notwithstanding, the process of ethnic intermixing was not limited to Spanish colonies only. Therefore, it stands to reason that authors from a variety of cultural backgrounds in the Caribbean can perceive and capture the *marvelous* in their works. And

Meiling Jin is no exception, for her literature not only expresses the individual, but also captures the “rhythms, forms, and popular symbology” of her ancestry and uses them as a tool for liberation (Arentsen 92). At their core, myths and legends, which are the fuel of the *marvelous*, have a constructive and destructive duality; they can either establish and maintain norms, order, and authority, or challenge and disrupt them (Xiyao 110). Jin draws inspiration from various mythologies, especially the Chinese, to create *marvelous* features that dismantle stereotypes, honor cultural provenance, and rebel against oppressive traditions.

The story “Song of the Boatwoman” follows Xiao Huang’s process of self-exploration as she struggles to fulfill the expectations of those closest to her. Her grandmother, Ah Po, declared it was time for her to marry the neighbor’s son, Zhao Qin. Devastated by the forthcoming loss of her freedom and agency, Xiao Huang confided the news to Zhe Hua, her closest friend. Zhe Hua, in turn, revealed a secret: a group of women, herself included, had sworn a vow to never marry, and if one of them broke the vow, then the others had to drown themselves in the lake. Xiao Huang was intrigued and thrilled by this practice, and both women had planned to visit Three Moon Island the next day to discuss it further. However, their outing was delayed by Ah Po, who arranged a visit to the neighbor’s house and began the nuptial negotiations.

Because the visit ended early, Zhe Hua and Xiao Huang resumed their plans and took a boat to Three Moon Island, where Zhe Hua had an idea of how to help her despondent friend: “Why don’t we swear a vow now? To each other, binding our friendship together in this world or the next. I know some of the other girls have done it” (Jin 36). Xiao Huang hesitated; an oath was still an oath, whether it was given in marriage or in friendship (Jin 37). Enraged and offended by her friend’s uncertainty, Zhe Hua left. The emotional exhaustion of the day caused Xiao Huang to lie down and fall asleep. She awakened at nightfall, stranded on the island, and

was rescued by a boatwoman named Bright Jade. On the journey back home, the mystical boatwoman prompted Xiao Huang to question her boundaries and understand her reluctance to commit.

Three Moon Island is symbolically significant within the narrative. For the Chinese, the moon is “the concrete essence of the female,” the yin or negative principle in nature which belongs to the night (Williams 274). The island is the site of Kuan Yin’s shire, where the women swore the oath against marriage. More specifically, it is where Xiao Huang and Zhe Hua spent many Sundays nurturing their friendship and affection, where the vow became a point of contention between the two friends, and where Xiao Huang’s despair and melancholy invoked the boatwoman, who emerged from the darkness to provide safe passage and healing. Hence, the name of the island is representative of the female energy in the story.

Additionally, the name of the island is mythologically invocative, for the moon is the home of the goddess Chang’e. There are several versions of how Chang’e became a lunar goddess. The Guitsang text (fifth century B.C.E) portrays Chang’e as a mortal who steals the elixir of immortality from Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West (Lai 157). After consuming it, Chang’e flies to the moon and becomes its spirit. With the “widespread adoption of Confucianism” during the Han Dynasty, the legend was re-written to promote new domestic policies that strengthened the patriarchal system; consequently, Chang’e becomes the transgressive wife of Archer Yi, who betrays her husband by stealing the elixir from him (Zhuang and Lin 3). Her punishment is to live in the lunar Palace of Pervasive Cold, always yearning for the warmth of human contact (Lai 154). The myth became an “unequivocal ethical lesson” for women, admonishing any disruptiveness or disloyalty to “the traditional husband-based family structure” (Zhuang and Lin 4).

Three Moon Island has other implications from this mythological perspective. As a woman, Xiao Huang is confronted with three choices. She could perpetuate the patriarchal values of domesticity by marrying the neighbor's son and submitting to societal expectations. Otherwise, she risked being ostracized for failing family and duty, like Chang'e was in the amended tale. Second, she could swear a vow with Zhe Hua to escape marriage, but this option was not entirely synonymous with freedom; it imposed limitations and rules. Similarly, in the original myth, Chang'e sought the elixir to escape mortality and procured it from a goddess, but her choice came at a price, and she remained bound to the moon for eternity. The third option, and perhaps the most difficult, was for Xiao Huang to defy expectations and choose when and how to commit, despite the risk of alienation.

The ethereal boatwoman is a *marvelous* female character beckoned by Xiao Huang's consternation and melancholy. One possible interpretation is that the boatwoman is a manifestation of the Buddhist bodhisattva Kuan Yin. She "is regarded as the quintessence of compassion" and seeks to bring comfort to those who are suffering by appearing to them in "whatever form could best save them" (Bailey 179-80). To Xiao Huang, she appeared as a boatwoman and provided a womb space for healing within her boat.

On the other hand, when Xiao Huang was about to disembark the boat, she saw the boatwoman had no feet and believed she had encountered the ghost of the female poet who threw herself in the lake when love and honor deserted her (Jin 40). The Chinese call the spirits of drowned people *shui gui*. A *shui gui* is dangerous because it must arrange for a person to drown at its place of death to achieve rebirth (Eberhard 273). Contrary to folklore, the boatwoman was characterized as a benevolent entity who sought Xiao Huang's wellbeing.

While on the boat, Bright Jade prompts a process of self-examination by asking her passenger three questions. The first question, “Do you love your friend?” unveiled an emotional turmoil; the internalized cultural conventions prevented Xiao Huang from understanding the depth of her feelings for Zhe Hua. Sensing her confusion, the boatwoman continued:

‘What if your grandmother had arranged for you to marry your friend. Would you have married her?’

‘That is not a real question. Girls don’t marry each other.’

‘But if they did and your grandmother arranged it, would you have done it?’

‘Yes’

‘Then think of your vow as the same thing.’

Suddenly, Bright Jade looked sad. ‘Yes, there is only the lake. And forever is long enough.’

‘Somehow, I feel as if I’m doing what everyone else wants me to do, not what I want to do.’

‘What do you want to do?’ (Jin 41)

Xiao Huang’s love for Zhe Hua appeared to be deeper than the love of friendship, for she admittedly would have no qualms if marriage between the two of them had been a possibility. Despite this, her circumstances were diminishing her agency. Submitting to family obligation was an unbearable trap, and Zhe Hua’s vow was a tempting alternative to escape without becoming a pariah altogether. She would be welcomed into a sisterhood at the house in Zhong Shan Lane and would continue to have financial independence as a worker in the silk factory. Still, choosing to make a vow solely out of fear and desperation, and not out of love and devotion, could potentially become another form of entrapment. The boatwoman told her, “You

do well not to vow hastily. Perhaps that is what the vow is for: to prevent us from being hasty; after all, friendship is a precious thing, worthy of such a solemn vow” (Jin 42). If Xiao Hua made an oath to Zhe Hua for the wrong reasons, then love and honor would certainly desert her as they did the boatwoman.

The punishment for breaking the vow against marriage could also originate from Chinese folklore. Because the Yellow River was often the cause of great devastation, in former times there was an annual ritual where priests selected a young girl, dressed her in bridal attire, and drowned her to appease the river god (Williams 395). Jin’s story depicts Western Lake as ominous, magical, and chilly; its dark waters would become the resting place of the women betrayed in favor of marriage. Nevertheless, the water served as a conduit, providing serenity and stability during the voyage. The lake was a “primeval female principle” (Eberhard 309), home of the boatwoman. It helped Xiao Huang drown everybody else’s voice, so she could hear her own.

To summarize, Chinese mythology and symbolism heavily influence the new expressions of the *marvelous* in “Song of the Boatwoman.” The experience with the boatwoman never undermines reality within the tale, as is observed in the seamless transition from the mystical voyage to the streets in the town of H: “At last, I turned from the lake to the streets. They seemed warm and crowded with families strolling or eating outside. I glanced at my watch. It was only eight o’clock. Someone stopped and asked for directions” (Jin 43). Xiao Huang does not try to rationalize the apparition of Bright Jade; she accepts the extraordinary experience with the boatwoman as a part of her reality. Although the ending is ambiguous and Xiao Huang’s decision is never revealed, the story affirms the right to commit for love and loyalty above the obligations of an obsolete patriarchal system.

The axis of the story “The Three-Breasted Woman” is Blue Orchid, another *marvelous* female character with otherworldly abilities. She belongs to a tribe of women with the power to construct mirrors that reflect the essence of others, the sum of their actions and inactions. This power is derived from their three breasts, as is their longevity. Blue Orchid and Morning, her lover, worked at the same wood factory. One night, after attending a party to celebrate the end of the production year, their co-worker, Mei Quan, is raped by Mr. Hu, the production manager. When he offered to escort Mei Quan home, no one gave it a second thought, for this seemed to be a very gentlemanly action from a respectable married man. Even so, Mei Quan felt deep shame and guilt; she was a woman of fifty-four with two grown children and felt she should have known better (Jin 54). Morning wanted to report Manager Hu right away, but Blue Orchid pointed out that this course of action would cause their friend further humiliation and pain. Instead, Blue Orchid uses her power to mirror Mr. Hu. What he saw made him lose his balance, and he fell on one of the saws, dying instantly.

After some time passes, Morning and Blue Orchid move in together. Their apartment becomes a safe and warm space for women to gather and heal. Many of their co-workers often called on them to ask for Blue Orchid’s advice. The arrival of Kenensat, a woman from Blue Orchid’s tribe, changes the trajectory of the story. Blue Orchid feels the desire to see her family up North and to visit Delta, the birthplace of her people. At the end, she says goodbye to Morning and embarks on her journey.

Mythology is woven into this story, manipulated to serve new purposes and to develop new senses within the narrative. This can be observed in the choice of name for the main character. Initially, people called her Venus, and later Blue Orchid, yet her real name was a source of power, and therefore it was revealed to none but a few. At first glance, naming her

after the Roman goddess of love, fertility, and sex seems appropriate, but her second name is by far more meaningful and suitable. The term “blue orchid” is a misnomer for some species of this flowered plant that exhibit a color closer to purple than to blue. Genetically, orchids cannot produce a true-blue hue. This name shatters the rationalist perspective because it conveys this woman’s ability to exist both inside and outside the bounds of possibility. Appropriately, Blue Orchid’s ebony skin turned “a strange blue tinge” whenever she was meditating to construct mirrors (Jin 53). Confucius once remarked on the resilience of the orchid, which does not rely on soil for survival and adheres loosely to tree trunks and other natural surfaces. The philosopher reflected on its capacity to grow where other plants cannot, independent from the host. These traits made it “emblematic of the perfect or superior man” (Williams 292). Jin, on the other hand, reclaimed this symbol of empowerment and used it to characterize a superior woman.

The three breasts and the power of mirroring are the most prominent forms of the *marvelous* in this tale. Wolfram Eberhard indicates that in popular Chinese art “it is the male breast that is strongly emphasized, not the female.” Whereas women wore sashes to hide their breasts, a man’s well-developed bust was considered good fortune. What is more, it is said that the Zhou Dynasty, the longest in Chinese history, was founded by a man with four breasts (48). The existence of a female character with three breasts is a celebration of sensuality and womanhood. This is best exemplified by Morning’s admiring description: “They stand out from her naked body like soft, smooth, undulating hills, and each hill is topped by a firm, dark nipple” (Jin 52). The breasts are not a weakness; they are not vulgar, repulsive, or bizarre. The extraordinary women in this tale can manipulate the cosmic energy emanating from their bosom to mirror or reflect the entirety of the human soul. This power could be inspired by Chinese lore,

especially since emperor Qín Shì Huáng is credited with the possession of a mirror with the power to reflect the insides of an onlooker (Williams 271). However, Jin's contemporary approach is more tantalizing to the imagination.

Delta, the native home of the extraordinary three-breasted women, presents new possibilities in mythological symbolism. "My grandmother came from the Upper Delta, the great cradle of civilization more than two continents from here" (Jin 60). Geologically, Deltas form at the point where a river transitions into another body of water, like an ocean or a sea. The currents of the river drag sediment that deposits at the mouth, forming wetlands rich with "incredibly diverse and ecologically important ecosystems" (National Geographic Society). One of the most classic deltas is in the Nile, where the river meets the Mediterranean. This information, paired with the description of both Blue Orchid's and Kenensat's ebony complexion, suggests that the birthplace of three-breasted women is Egypt, the "cradle of civilization." Regardless, the Delta becomes a metaphor of those who were dragged away from their countries by the currents of colonialism and deposited elsewhere. Despite their traumatic past, they were able to settle and grow in rich diversity. Blue Orchid's desire to journey back to Delta, back to the ancestral land, back to the birthplace of her power resonates within many in the Caribbean. And while some physically visit the homeland, others embark on internal journeys and find the cultural connections within.

"The Three-Breasted Woman" presents the perfect balance of the real and the supernatural. A mystical woman operates within the real world; she works in a factory, lives in an apartment, and has a lover. Although she is exceptional being with inconceivable abilities and longevity, she is mortal and has human basic needs. Morning momentarily struggled to accept that Blue Orchid looked twenty-five but was a hundred and thirty five years of age, but

this shock never discredits reality within the story. The new knowledge shifted the relationship's dynamic, but, once she had time to process it, Morning embraced it as she did all other miraculous traits. Her partnership with Blue Orchid challenge traditional ideals about age, relationships, and sexuality in favor of new principles that recognize and embrace diversity.

Unlike the two previous stories, in which it is quite difficult to pinpoint the precise geographical setting, "Bear Woman" takes place in London, where the *marvelous* is dormant. A woman of Indian descendance named Makepeace, is held hostage in her apartment by two bank robbers who are hiding from the authorities. With the guidance of her deceased grandmother, Makepeace can access the spirit realm and channel the strength of the bear, her ancestral spirit animal. With this power, she violently flings the robbers across the room and renders them unconscious.

Makepeace's ability to communicate with the spirit of her grandmother is a clear break from rationalism. At the beginning, the protagonist struggles against her heritage. She suppresses her grandmother's voice because it obstructs her efforts to assimilate. The matriarch represented the connection to her Indian roots, a connection Makepeace was desperate to sever. If she acted like everybody else, then perhaps she would seem less foreign, and the micro and macroaggressions against her would cease. Although there was no remedy for her dark-colored skin, she actively engaged in socially acceptable practices, like her karate lessons, to divert attention away from her Indianness. The internalization of European values even drove her to perpetuate the dominant discourse of reason against the *marvelous*: "She had bought that poster because her grandmother had told her that she was guarded by the spirit of a bear...On the other hand, Grandmother had said a lot of strange things, in a language barely understood" (Jin 64). In her moment of need, Makepeace wished she were a graceful Samurai, powerful enough to defeat

her captors, when all the while she was rejecting the power and the wisdom within her. The conspicuity of her *marvelous* talents frightened her:

Grandmother, you can't keep popping in and out of my head or I'll go crazy, as you did.

And I don't want to. I don't want to. I want to be like everybody else.

You're not like everybody else.

I can pretend to be. (Jin 68)

Finally, the grandmother breaks through the barriers of internalized rationality and compels Makepeace to act. As her name suggests, she had to "make peace" and embrace the extraordinary as an integral component of her reality. In doing so, she freed herself from the robbers and from Western cultural hegemony.

The assertion of Indian beliefs over European standards comes to fruition when Makepeace is possessed by the spirit of the *Ursus Arctos*. Neither the authorities nor the lessons in martial arts provided the necessary protection; true deliverance could only be found in the *marvelous*. The grandmother helped her navigate the spirit world and siphon the bear's attributes:

'I said not to touch me!'

He grips her arm. She sees red. The muscles in her neck bulge.

'GRRRRRRRR!' she growls. Her movements are slow and clumsy.

'GRRRRRRRR!' She takes the young man by his arm. He screams. Her totem is a bear. She is a bear. She hugs him in a grip so tight he almost faints. The revolver man aims his gun at both of them.

'Uncle Jack!' screams the young man. The revolver man hesitates. Makepeace tosses the boy like a toy at the revolver man and they both fall to the floor. She lurches to their side in one leap and holds one head, the blond one, as if she will snap it off with her fingers.

Makepeace!

Grandmother.

That's enough.

The transformation evaporates.” (Jin 69-70)

Both the real and the supernatural are in harmony during this transformation. A physical metamorphosis could have discredited the reality within the story and unbalanced the interplay of the two isotopies. Instead, the transformation was metaphysical. It was not an absolute possession, for she remained fully conscious and cognizant throughout the experience. When Makepeace was losing control and succumbing to instinctual violence, her grandmother stopped the transformation. The power of the spirit world could not be used for vengeful or nefarious purposes. In the resolution, her neighbor Odette, who was also a hostage, attributed Makepeace's display of strength to her brown belt in karate. This rationalization restored the equalness between the real and the *marvelous* after the mystical episode.

The bear is a significant animal in both Chinese and Indian mythology. For the Chinese, the bear represents a man's courage and vigor. Furthermore, “a model or picture of a bear was regarded as a potent charm against robbers” in olden days (Williams 62). This is another instance in which a mythologically charged symbol is adopted and modified to generate diverging and wondrous manifestations that advocate inclusion. In this story, it is the women who can travel to the spiritual dimension and invoke the animal's brawn and dauntlessness. The bear also pays homage to the Hanuman myth from the *Ramayana*, an Indian Sanskrit epic. According to Narendra Wig's rendition, Hanuman was the son of the God of Wind, Vayu, and the princess Anjana. He was a flying monkey, divinely bestowed with great powers. Hanuman became mischievous and started stealing from the Rishis, the holy men. The Rishis initially punished Hanuman by stripping him of his ability to fly, but, when Anjana pleaded on her son's behalf, they decided instead to take away all his knowledge. Hanuman would not remember who

he was or what he was capable of until a wise man reminded him in his time of need. Years later, Hanuman and an army were sent to Lanka to rescue Queen Sita from the clutches of the demon Ravana. The army struggled to devise a plan for crossing the tempestuous sea surrounding the island. In that moment, Jambavan, an aged bear soldier, revealed Hanuman's forgotten identity:

Why are you sitting silent and dejected in a corner? Do you know who you really are?

You are "Pawan Putra" – son of God of wind. You have the power to fly and reach any corner of the earth. Unfortunately, you are not aware of your own powers. (Wig 26)

After listening, Hanuman regained his confidence and used his powers to rescue the queen. Similarly, Makepeace's Indian identity disrupted the venerated European standards and way of life. In the myth, Hanuman was the transgressor and the holy men, the paragons of virtue, taught him a lesson in humility. However, in "Bear Woman," Western society depicts Makepeace as the transgressor of the sacred fundamentals of white supremacy. Because of her otherness, she was indoctrinated through harassment and humiliation. During the process of assimilation, Makepeace started to forget who she was; she grew uncertain and unaware of her potential, as Hanuman did. The grandmother, like the wise Jambavan, urged Makepeace to remember and embrace her ancestral legacy. Without it, she would be defenseless and defeated. Her lesson was that the irrational and the deranged existed within the empty values of the oppressor, and not in the *marvelous*. Jin's selection of the bear as the protective spiritual totem in the story is, primarily, a validation of the Asian mythological contributions to *marvelous realism*.

In conclusion, Meiling Jin portrays remarkable female characters who challenge the stereotypes that jeopardize the expression of their personal and collective identities. The women

in the stories “Song of the Boatwoman,” “Three-Breasted Woman,” and “Bear Woman” confront their pain and traumas and are transformed by the healing properties of the *marvelous*. In every tale there is a mystical mentor imparting the wisdom of self-acceptance. The boatwoman protected Xiao Huang from a tragic fate by taking her on a voyage of guided discovery; she became aware that her path to achieve love and honor differed from social expectations. Morning learns from Blue Orchid that control is the antithesis of love; love is honoring the agency of others, nurturing their individuality, and supporting their journeys unconditionally. Makepeace’s grandmother taught her to overcome the weakness of conformity by embracing the strength of her inherent diversity. The *marvelous* dissipates oppression and enables female empowerment.

As a Chinese Caribbean author, Meiling Jin acknowledges the traumatic history of slavery, indentured servitude, and colonization. It generated the cultural intermixing that sustains the *marvelous*. The Caribbean is the site where the ordinary and the extraordinary coexist authentically due to the shared beliefs and faith of its people. Using Chiampi’s narrative structure for *marvelous realism*, Jin constructs new literary possibilities that validate the mythological contributions of various ethnicities, in particular the Chinese. Her stories showcase “a mixture of fictional characters operating in a real world” (Waker 25). Her characterization stimulates the imagination and upholds the principles of diversity in gender and sexuality over obsolete patriarchal values. Jin’s literature condemns the dominating paradigms of rationalization utilized in the marginalization and subjugation of differing cultural belief systems. The tales are heavily influenced by Chinese elements. Nonetheless, the writing is restorative, inclusive, and engaging because it shows characters from a variety of backgrounds who share “similar emotional and spiritual needs” (Lee Loy 43). The collection of short stories *Song of the*

Boatwoman is an important contribution to the Caribbean literary repertoire because it refutes the prevalent Sinophobic portrayal of the Chinese minority and provides genuine representation.

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