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Ng, Wen Lee; Wan Yahya, Wan Roselezam; Mani, Manimangai

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Cultural Identity in Eugenia Kim's *The Calligrapher's Daughter*

Ng Wen Lee^{1*} Manimangai Mani² Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya³

^{1,2,3}Department of English
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

*E-mail address: wenleeng@ymail.com

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ABSTRACT. Eugenia Kim's *The Calligrapher's Daughter* (2009) is a well-received East Asian novel about a Korean Christian, Najin's encounter with western culture. As an aristocratic woman, she is expected to uphold Korean tradition. However, as Najin realises that she is culturally marginalised by her father and the Korean traditional society mainly due to her gender, she picks up a foreign culture introduced to her, western culture. This move is extremely significant because after Najin driven by cultural marginalisation to embrace western culture, her cultural practices are no longer the same with traditional Korean women. This important turn of the novel has not been explored by scholars extensively. Thus, this study aims to depart from the cultural marginalisation faced by Najin. Furthermore, due to the fact that cultural identity formation is highly influenced by culture, there is a need to look into the changes of Najin's cultural identity as she incorporates western culture into her Korean traditional culture. By investigating the changes of Najin's cultural identity throughout the novel, this study finds that Najin has transformed from a nameless girl without an identity into an independent woman with the help of western education.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book *The Long Revolution*, Williams asserts that from a social perspective, culture is "a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour" (57). He further explains in the book chapter "Culture is Ordinary", that a culture is made up of two aspects (Williams 93). The first aspect is the known directions and meanings which its members are trained to, while the second aspect is the new meanings and observations which are offered to and tested on its members. These two ordinary processes of human minds and human society cause the nature of culture to always be both traditional and creative. This is extremely evident as one meets foreigners, migrates to a new country, encounters a new idea or belief, or experiences colonisation.

The culture of Koreans who converted to Christianity, is a good example that exhibits the traditional and creative aspects of culture. Chun-gil Kim writes that Koreans converted to Catholic Christianity after Korean scholars in China, who were exposed to Jesuits' religious texts, brought these texts back to Korea (269). However, this religion was suppressed until reformation was launched. Beasley delineates that after Japan successfully forced Korea to open three ports for trade, Japanese influence began to become established in Korea (44). This led the king to promote reformation, as indicated by Ebrey and Walthall (373). As a result, missionaries gained entry into Korea and brought in Western institutions. This enabled the missionaries to spread Christianity and convert Koreans. More importantly, modern schools formed by missionaries enabled Korean women to be educated and promoted with a certain degree of gender equality (Ebrey and Walthall 310). Hence, it is apparent that when these Korean Christians were in contact with foreign cultures, they incorporated the foreign cultures into their traditional Korean culture to form new cultural practices. This, in turn, shows that the traditional aspect of these Korean Christians' culture is their own Korean tradition, while the creative aspect of their culture is the foreign cultures they encountered through religion.

Since culture and identity are intimately connected, the identity of the Korean Christians also experience changes. Samovar et al. have stated that identity formation and maintenance are influenced by culture because identities are constructed socially through cultural lenses (48). Similarly, Stuart Hall claims that,

Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. (Hall 225)

Hall believes that one cannot keep talking "about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities" (225). This explains why Ashcroft believes that cultural identity has a transformative nature (Ashcroft; Wan Yahya et al.; Mohd Muzhafar Idrus et al.). Thus, it is worth investigating the changes of an individual's cultural identity as the individual encounters foreign cultures.

In this study, the changes of a Korean Christian's cultural identity portrayed in Eugenia Kim's *The Calligrapher's Daughter* (2009) are examined. This novel is selected for its vivid depiction of the Korean Christian protagonist's transformation of cultural identity as she acquires western culture and incorporates it into her Korean tradition.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Calligrapher's Daughter (2009) is a biographical novel (Formy-Duval). Eugenia Kim has declared in an online magazine article that the novel is written based on her mother's life. As stated by Eugenia Kim, when interviewed by Deborah Kalb, "[t]here are a few things that happen to Najin that are pure fiction, but otherwise, the events are from the stories my mother told about her life in Korea." Since the novel is written based on a real life story, Eugenia Kim is able to capture nuances of historical settings and exposes the rich cultural heritage of Korea. In detail, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* (2009) is set from 1915 to 1945 in the Japanese-occupied Korea (Steinberg; Stone). The protagonist Najin's life is deeply affected by the political instability of that period of time. Najin, who is the daughter of a calligrapher from the aristocratic class, was born when the Japanese began to occupy Korea. This causes her father to refuse to name her, and later she becomes known as Najin, which is her mother's birthplace. However, another significant reason Najin's father refuses to name Najin is because of her gender. After the deaths of many infants, Najin's father, who attempts for an heir, is disappointed that the first to survive is a daughter. This has not been pointed out by most scholars who have reviewed the novel. It is important to read the novel from this perspective due to the fact that after Najin realises that her father marginalises her mainly because of her gender, she makes dramatic changes to her life, such as abandoning Korean traditional culture and embracing a foreign culture.

Furthermore, Najin is different from usual Korean females at that period of time in that she strongly does not want to be bounded by traditions. She escapes from an arranged marriage planned by her father by becoming the princess's companion with the help of her mother. She also pursues education by enrolling in school and a university run by missionaries. After graduating from university, she works as a teacher in school but still thinking of continuing graduate studies in America. Later, Najin falls in love and marries a Korean who is strongly influenced by western culture. The whole novel depicts the conflict between modern possibilities and old traditions faced by Najin and how she struggles throughout the Japanese invasion period. Thus, in *The Calligrapher's Daughter* (2009), Najin incorporates western culture, the foreign culture introduced to her, into Korean culture, her traditional culture, to establish new cultural practices. Hence, it is apparent that *The Calligrapher's Daughter* (2009) gives vivid portrayals of how Najin's cultural identity undergoes changes.

3. LACK OF IDENTITY IN KOREAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Since birth, Han Najin is culturally marginalised by her father, “the much respected” “literati-scholar-artist, the calligrapher Han” (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 3-4) for being born as a daughter rather than a son,

After the death of so many infants in his attempts for an heir, it was difficult to deny the irony that the first to survive was female, and one with health that was as stubbornly strong as her obstreperous personality. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 101)

Han is disappointed that his first child who survives is a daughter, not a son, who he yearns for. Thus, it is evident that Han’s marginalisation of Najin originates from her gender as a girl. This is again manifested as he refuses to adopt the Japanese law, which promotes female to have equal rights as male does,

Japan’s laws were meant to eradicate the ancient moral right of male ascendancy, and he refused to support the implication that a female child could come into this world with the same rights as men. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 101)

Han reasons that his refusal to adopt the Japanese law is to maintain Korean ancient moral right. He never thinks of the benefits and opportunities this law would bring to Najin, his own daughter. Conversely, he uses Najin as a tool to challenge Japanese law,

Han considered it his personal responsibility to challenge Japan’s attempts to suppress Korea’s mores and ethics. Hadn’t he refused to name his own daughter for that very reason? (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 101)

By positioning himself as one who is responsible for upholding Korean tradition and challenge Japanese law, he refuses to name Najin. However, his defence ends in a question mark. This signifies that he knows deep inside his heart, he is not speaking the truth. This is reinforced in the line, “[a]t first he had little desire to find a name for a girl-child whose birth a few weeks after the Treaty of Annexation foreshadowed Korea’s decline” (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 101). It is apparent that in the first place, Han does not intent to name Najin because of her gender and her birthdate rather than his responsibility as a Korean. Later, when Najin flourishes in the modernised Korea, Han decides not to name her,

And then as she grew, the Japanese occupation also grew entrenched. The more his traditions fell by the wayside of modernization, which he blamed entirely on the Japanese, the more he saw that his daughter thrived in the change, and she came to represent to him Korea’s failures. He would resist the failure that surrounded him by refusing to name it – by refusing to name her. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 101)

For Han, the modernisation Korea undergoes indicates the breaking down of Korean tradition, for instance women have been upgraded from second class citizen to have the same status with men. This is why when Najin thrives as Korea undergoes modernisation, Han perceives her as representing Korea’s failure in upholding tradition. He then comes to believe that by not naming her, not recognising female has equal rights with male, he is able to resist Korea’s failure. This reflects that Han’s decision of not naming Najin is caused by her gender. By not naming Najin, Han does not recognise Najin’s achievement and does not give her an identity.

Similarly, Korean traditional society also marginalises Najin because of her gender. When the elders’ wives find out that Han decides not to name Najin, one of them says, “Well, yes. Granted, she’s a girl” (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 6). This shows that the elders’ wives, who uphold Korean traditional culture, find scholarly Han’s decision of not naming Najin acceptable because Najin is a daughter, not a son. This not only reflects Korean traditional society’s

marginalisation of daughters, but also confirms Najin's lack of identity. Overall, Najin, who is marginalised by her father, Han as well as Korean traditional society because of her gender, is one without an independent identity.

As Najin grows up, her unconventional inborn traits cause her to be further marginalised by her father, Han, and Korean traditional society. Najin is a very lively and cheerful girl. However, such liveliness and cheerfulness are disliked by her father, which is exemplified by Han and his "stiff back showing disapproval of Najin's aimless singing and intermittent skips and hops" (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 18). Similarly, Najin is constrained by Korean traditional culture:

"... you must learn to control your emotions. Such expressiveness isn't becoming for a young lady." ... "Decorum, quietude, acceptance. Keep these things in your mind always." ... (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 32)

Expressiveness, which is another of Najin's inborn traits, is also unacceptable in the Korean traditional society. Furthermore, Najin's habit of asking questions is also considered improper in Korean traditional society: "Why must you always ask questions? Obedience" (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 39). She has to restrain her inquisitiveness and remain dormant in order to be an agreeable Korean traditional young lady. Hence, it is obvious that the Korean traditional culture upheld by both Han and the Korean traditional society demands and expects females to be silent, submissive, and obedient, in other words, without a stand or identity. Since Najin's inborn traits are contradictory to Korean traditional culture, she is disdained by both Han and Korean traditional society. Undoubtedly, Najin is lack of identity in Korean traditional culture.

4. GAIN IDENTITY FROM WESTERN EDUCATION

Although Najin is marginalised by her father, Han, and the Korean traditional society, she can still find comfort from her mother, Haejung. Haejung, who is a devoted Korean Christian, does not belittle Najin, and even helps her to gain the opportunity of receiving formal education in school. After receiving western education in the missionary school opened by American missionaries, Najin gains the identity and recognition she is unable to obtain from her father and the Korean traditional society she lives in. This is evident as Missionary Gordon, who plays a significant role in encouraging Najin to receive western education, names Najin due to miscommunication,

"... the name of yours is being what?" Miss Gordon said in ... mixed up syntax. ... reminded about my namelessness, I covered my lips with my fingers to hold nervousness inside. Mrs. Hwang... intervened. "... her mother is the woman from Nah-jin." ... "Did you say Najin?" We nodded. "Well, Najin, that's a very pretty name," ... So it was thus, with the missionary's dry baptism and Mrs. Hwang's glibness, that my mother's wintry hometown became my name. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 15)

This incident, which takes place before Najin starts to receive western education, foreshadows that Najin would transform from a nameless girl, marginalised by her father and Korean traditional society or culture, into an individual with a name and identity with the help of western education, which is symbolically represented by Missionary Gordon, who always prompts Najin to receive western education. Even though the word "Najin" has "no meaning" (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 15), it is a foundation for Najin's construction of an identity. This is foregrounded when Yee Sunsaeng-nim, a teacher in the missionary school who inspires Najin to be a modern, educated woman, scolds students that laugh at Najin's name,

"... when my name was called and all the girls tittered and whispered over its oddness. She rapped on the desk and made it clear that such meanness would not be tolerated, and that my name had a lovely and pure sound. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 86)

As Yee Sunsaeng-nim recognises her name, Najin's identity as an individual is indirectly constructed. Hence, Najin is no longer a nameless girl or a girl with a meaningless name, but an individual whose identity is going to be constructed by western education. Furthermore, Najin's lack of recognition from her father and Korean traditional society is also counteracted by western education she receives, whereas Han always finds fault with Najin and criticises her,

With my father, I was like that raspy sliding door – always around but noticed only when something was awry, such as when I dropped a cup, spoke before thinking or skipped on the flagstones. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 38)

This excerpt shows that Najin feels she is seen by her father as a useless troublemaker. This causes her to develop a sense of loss and feelings that she is not loved or recognised by him. In contrast, western education offers Najin the recognition she longs for,

Now in my second year with Yee Sunsaeng-nim, I still looked forward to the special smile like the one she'd given me that day, with which she continued to recognize me as I did well with my lessons. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 86)

The approving smile Najin receives from her favourite teacher, Yee Sunsaeng-nim, makes Najin feel that she is not an inept person but worthy of attention. Therefore, it becomes evident that Najin acquires an individual identity and recognition, which are not provided by her father and Korean traditional society, through western education.

Since western education is a great consolation to Najin, who is marginalised by her father and Korean traditional society, Najin studies enthusiastically. As a result, Najin unconsciously acquires western culture embedded in western education. This is foregrounded in Yee Sunsaeng-nim's advice to Najin on how she should lead her life in modernising Korea,

... You must never stop learning and asking questions. A woman's life is hard. Without a husband it's nearly impossible. But nowadays, with education, a single woman such as myself can at least be of some help to her family. ... So you must study hard, learn a good profession... (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 88-89)

From the excerpt above, it is apparent that Yee Sunsaeng-nim, Najin's favourite teacher tries to instil western culture in Najin. In contrast to Korean traditions, she implores Najin to ask questions, receive education, and have a good profession. Moreover, she urges Najin not to suppress her inborn traits but to apply them correctly,

I was much like you when I was a girl, always in trouble for talking back to grownups. ... Try to take advantage of your willful independence... you can learn to manage them and advance yourself. You must remember not to deaden your natural instincts, but instead hold them living inside of you like a sword sheathed in your intelligence. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 89-90)

In order to convince Najin, Yee Sunsaeng-nim even quotes the famous English writer, Shakespeare,

Think of what Shakespeare says, 'How noble in reason; how infinite in capacity!' You're smart and capable, very empathetic for a girl so young, and with our lives in turmoil, you'll need all your talents developed to their fullest in order to ... succeed. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 90)

Hence, it is evident that Yee Sunsaeng-nim, a teacher of western education, has introduced western culture to Najin. This leads Najin to acquire certain western cultural elements, which then changes Najin's cultural identity.

5. A KOREAN WITH WESTERNISED IDENTITY

Najin selects and only acquires certain western cultural elements. Western culture is the second aspect of culture Najin practises. As Williams has elucidated, the second aspect of culture is the new observations and meanings offered to and tested on its members (“Culture Is Ordinary” 93). It is important to note that Williams uses the phrase “offered to and tested on” because this indicates that people in contact with the foreign culture do not necessarily adopt the foreign culture fully. One of the western cultural elements Najin selects to acquire is to remain single. She is firstly introduced to this idea as her mother, Haejung, talks about Missionary Gordon’s single status,

“You’ve seen Missionary Gordon at church,” said Mother. “She’s old enough to have been married years ago, but she has the respect of the congregation and is free to go about unescorted, thinking her own thoughts, because of her education.” (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 11)

In Korean traditional society, all women are expected to marry, and those who remain single are usually marginalised. However, Missionary Gordon can remain single and still being respected. Haejung reasons that it is because of her education. With the education she receives, she is not only respected by others, but also has a higher degree of freedom compared to married women. Although Najin does not understand the uniqueness of Missionary Gordon’s status in Korean traditional society, she begins to admire and yearn for such status,

Not fully comprehending what she [Haejung] said about the scary American missionary lady or the special place for women, I [Najin] clearly heard my mother’s admiration and yearning,... those feelings grew to be mine. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 11)

Furthermore, when Najin receives western education in the missionary school, her favourite teacher, Yee Sunsaeng-nim continues to strengthen a similar notion in her. Yee Sunsaeng-nim warns Najin,

A woman’s life is hard. Without a husband it’s nearly impossible. But nowadays, with education, a single woman such as myself can at least be of some help to her family. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 88-90)

Much the same as Najin’s mother, Yee Sunsaeng-nim also believes that education is the key factor that enables a single woman to survive in the society. This is why she prompts Najin to study hard. Despite both her mother’s and teacher’s guidance, Najin only truly perceives single woman status that has freedom and being respected as a priceless and invaluable status when her father wants to marry her off at the age of 14. Najin’s father, Han,

... thought that at age fourteen Najin was woman enough. ... A providential harvest moon wedding! And since such a decision was beyond his wife’s role, it mattered little that she would be opposed. The Kabo Reforms said women couldn’t be married until sixteen, men until twenty, but this unenforceable law was generally ignored. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 101)

Han makes the decision of having Najin married according to Korean traditional culture, which is neither asking for his wife’s opinion nor Najin’s consent. Such an arrangement makes Najin clearly aware of females’ lack of rights in Korean traditional society. This leads her to greatly admire and yearn for a single woman status, which is a western cultural identity that allows her to have certain degree of freedom, not being controlled by father or husband yet still being respected and accepted by the society. This is why when Najin is 24, she does not want to get married, “[m]arriage was not among the goals I had cast for my future” (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher’s Daughter* 197). She only decides to marry when she falls in love with the man her father finds for her. Thus, it becomes evident that it is Najin’s father who marginalises Najin, disregards her rights, and drives Najin to yearn for becoming a single woman, which is an identity brought in by westerners.

Aside from staying single, Najin also selects to acquire another two significant aspects of western culture, which are pursuing higher education and having a career. Due to her experience in assisting the midwife when her mother gives birth to her younger brother, Najin wants

... to be an obstetrician but knew ... the practice of medicine was beneath my family's class was a problem I'd face if my wish became a possibility. ... the missionaries, who had started a great many schools, would be most interested in supporting anyone who pursued religion or teaching... "Childhood education," I said... (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 157)

After considering that her father as a conservative aristocrat, who strongly upholds the traditional class system, would not allow her to practise medicine, she decides to study childhood education and works as a teacher. This leads the Gordons, the missionaries who open the primary school she has attended as a child, to offer her jobs, which can help her to raise money for her education in college. However, in Korean traditional culture, aristocratic women like Najin are not supposed to have an occupation,

... Father said it was undignified for his daughter to work as a servant,... he quoted a proverb, "What kind of man would send out his women to work!" And a little later, "Then let her shame this family, but don't speak of it again!" (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 158)

Only after Najin's mother, Haejung negotiates with him, Han reluctantly gives permission for Najin to work with the Gordons. As Najin's savings for the tuition fee is nearly met, she decides to enrol in the college. However, when Najin is accepted by the college, Ewha Professional School, her father refuses to let her pursue higher education. This is due to the fact that according to Korean traditional culture, "...women's lack of talent is in itself a virtue," which means there is no need for women to be educated (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 170). Later, Najin's act of riding a bicycle infuriates Han and he decides to send Najin away from home. Indirectly, Han's decision enables Najin to pursue higher education,

I [Najin] majored in early childhood education, minored in nursing and received special permission to take courses in English literature as a way to improve my language skills. ... The stately Ewha campus had ... impressive Western-style granite buildings ... we all felt privileged, because we were Korean, and women, and thoroughly modern. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 163)

By pursuing higher education, Najin changes into an educated woman, an identity western education introduces to her. Apart from this, since the college she attends is in Seoul, where the Korean society is much more modern, Najin, an aristocratic Korean woman, is able to practise the western cultures of working and earning money in Seoul after graduation. She works as a teacher in a Christian school named "the Hoston School," which "is well established and uses modern methods..." and sends the money she earns home (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 170). This makes Najin to gain the breadwinner identity. Najin's success in gaining identities introduced or influenced by western culture is clearly depicted at the end of the novel,

I thought of my own identity, and now saw that my father, by not naming me, had unwittingly accorded me enormous freedom... my identity had been less encumbered. Without having to confine my dreams to the destiny outlined in one's name and the expectations bestowed during one's naming. I was left free to embrace the natural turns of my character and to determine my own future, drawing from the deepest well of unnamed possibilities. (E. Kim, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* 374)

Therefore, it is evident that Han and Korean society, which uses Korean traditional culture to marginalise Najin, drive Najin to become an educated and independent woman.

6. CONCLUSION

Briefly, the protagonist of the novel, Eugenia Kim's *The Calligrapher's Daughter* (2009), Han Najin acquires foreign culture due to cultural marginalisation. Both her father and the Korean traditional society marginalised her because of her gender and unconventional inborn traits. However, due to the fact that she can still find comfort from her mother, she is helped by her mother to grab the opportunity of receiving western education in missionary school. When she gains identity and recognition she is unable to obtain from her father and Korean traditional society through western education, Najin studies enthusiastically and acquires western culture embedded in western education. Such condition changes her cultural identity. From a nameless girl, who is lacked of identity, she becomes a girl with a name. Then, at the age of 14, she resists the marriage her father arranges for her, fighting to remain single, which is a western cultural identity she picks up from westerners. Most importantly, Najin pursues higher education and works independently. Her identity as an educated and independent woman clearly reflects that Najin's cultural identity has undergone tremendous changes.

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