

Family Dynamics and Imagination in "The Paper Menagerie" by Ken Liu

Assistant. Lecturer. Ruwayda Ahmed Hassan Ali

University of Baghdad/ College of Education for women

/Department of English

Ruwaida.a@coeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq

م.م. رويدة احمد حسن علي

جامعة بغداد-كلية التربية للبنات - قسم اللغة الانكليزية

DOI 10.58564/MABDAA.62.2.2023.434

Abstract

Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie" explores the issues of family dynamics and imagination. This study sheds light on the author and his works taking into consideration the role of this short story as part of the contemporary literature. Additionally, the theme of lost identity is well established in this short story, which can be seen in the protagonist's struggle with his mixed heritage and his self-perception. Furthermore, it explores the intricate family dynamics depicted in the story, as shown in Jack's complex relationship with his mother, and how the Chinese heritage affect the way they deal with each other. This study also investigates the vital role of the cultural revolution in the plot and its relation to the characters' lives and decisions, in addition to the clash between the Chinese and western concepts which is manifested substantially in Jack's identity dilemma. Finally, the study investigates the issue of racial discrimination, emphasizing its concealed presence and effects on the characters' experiences. **Keywords:** family dynamics, Imagination, Lost identity, Cultural revolution, Racial discrimination.

خلاصة

قصة كين ليو "معرض الحيوانات الورقية" تستعرض قضايا ديناميات الأسرة والخيال. حيث تسلط الضوء على الكاتب وأعماله مع الأخذ بنظر الاعتبار دور هذه القصة القصيرة كجزء من الأدب المعاصر. إضافة إلى فكرة الهوية الضائعة والتي حبكت جيدا في هذه القصة حيث تتجلى في صراع البطل مع إرثه المزدوج وإدراكه لذاته. كما وإنها تستعرض ديناميات العائلة المعقدة، والتي يمكن رؤيتها من خلال علاقة جاك بوالدته وكيف أن الإرث أو الحضارة الصينية أثرت في الطريقة التي يتعامل بها أحدهما مع الآخر. كم أن هذه الدراسة تتحرى الدور الحيوي للثورة الحضارية في حبكة القصة وعلاقتها بحياة وقرارات شخصيات القصة مع الأخذ بنظر الاعتبار الصدام ما بين مبادئ الحضارة الصينية مع الحضارة الغربية والتي تتجلى بوضوح في معضلة الهوية الضائعة لشخصية جاك. وأخيرا فإن القصة تستعرض قضية التمييز العنصري، والتركيز على وجودها الخفي وتأثيراتها على تجارب الشخصيات في القصة. **الكلمات الدالة:** ديناميات العائلة، الخيال، الهوية الضائعة، الثورة الحضارية، التمييز العنصري

1- Background Of the Paper Menagerie

Ken Liu is a recognized contemporary Chinese American writer, born in 1976 and is known for his notable contributions to the science fiction and fantasy genres. Liu is a proficient translator and computer programmer in addition to his literary achievements. His extraordinary creativity was recognized in 2012, when his short story "The Paper Menagerie" won three renowned English science fiction awards: the Hugo, the Nebula, and the World Fantasy Award. This short story explores the sufferings of the Chinese American youth as they deal with the complexities of growing up in America, arguing with issues of identity and cultural assimilation. "The Paper Menagerie" follows the adventures

of a little boy whose mother, a mail-order bride from Hong Kong, has the miraculous ability to bring paper animals to life. Initially enthralled by the magnificent creations his mother brings to life with her breath, the boy's perspective on his Chinese heritage changes dramatically after being bullied by one of his classmates. Over time, he started to detest his mother's Chinese identity, blaming her for his own troubles and developing a dislike for anything related to Chinese culture. Following his mother's death, the boy develops a self-awareness, revising his mother's deep devotion for him and the significance of his own identity. Ken Liu carefully explores the intricate dynamics of living dual cultures in this journey, through distancing himself from traditional science fiction stories. His science fiction writings are significant despite being remembered as the translator of "The Three Body Problem" by the Chinese. In fact, some studies of Liu's works concentrate on his interpretation and adaptation of Chinese myths, showing his distinct perspective and creative skill. Identity exploration remains a central theme in Chinese American literature research, particularly among descendants of Chinese immigrants. Which manifests itself When it comes to defining their own sense of identity, these people frequently struggle more than their parents. In this paper, Jack, a Chinese American boy in "The Paper Menagerie," who is deeply influenced by American ideology, cultural conflicts, and racial discrimination. Jack's personal journey is a heartbreaking reflection of the difficulties that second-generation Chinese Americans face in reconciling their dual identities. Despite Liu's somewhat nostalgic perspective on the arts and writing, he does not condemn technology as the opposite of creative expression. On the contrary, he embraces technological advancements and examines their impact on daily life, as well as the moral and philosophical dilemmas they present. The fictional technologies in his works are not inherently good or bad; rather, they provide users with increased opportunities to make choices for better or worse. One notable example is the "Simulacrum," which captures moments in time. Although Anna's arguments against this new technology may seem weak compared to the complications it creates in her relationship with her father, it exemplifies the ongoing debate of "screens vs. being in the moment." The Simulacrum, recreates a person's mental patterns and appearance in hologram form, profoundly impacts Anna's relationship with her father, Paul. He desperately clings to her by projecting a recorded version of her 7-year-old self, hoping to recapture their connection. However, this only widens the emotional distance between them when she confronts it face-to-face. Liu's focus is not solely on the technology itself but rather on the individuals living in this world and the choices they make. He grounds his fantasy in everyday reality. The Simulacrum offers more opportunities to capture a person's emotions and personality in a single, replay able moment, but it is always the people who decide how to act upon those opportunities. This fantastical technology is neither inherently positive nor negative; instead, it amplifies the positive and negative qualities of its users, providing them with a choice. It entangles personal issues within families, making their perceptions of one another more complex and frustratingly relatable. In the collection's final story, "The Man Who Ended History," Liu further explores how new technologies present ethical dilemmas without clear solutions. Through a documentary transcript format, he highlights the real-life implications of a machine that allows users to witness historical moments only once. This raises profound questions about ownership of the past—whether it belongs to countries, governments, historians, or individuals—and who holds the authority to make decisions regarding it.

2- Summary of The Paper Menagerie

"Paper Menagerie" is a poignant short story that delves into the life of Jack, a boy of mixed heritage, with a Caucasian father and a Chinese mother who immigrated to the United States. In the story, Jack's mother gives him an amazing gift when he is young: an origami menagerie that comes to life with her breath and inspires him with its vibrant joy. However, an unfortunate incident occurs when Jack gets involved in a fight with a classmate who makes fun of his Chinese heritage. As a result, he discards his favored menagerie and begins to distance himself from his mother, resulting in deteriorating his close relation with his mother. As Jack gets older, their relationship becomes more strained and uncomfortable, but tragedy strikes when his mother dies. Following his mother's death, Jack discovers the reasons behind his mother's hidden struggles. He discovers a collection of letters she had delicately written and hid within the folds of his discarded menagerie, each one contains one of her own untold story—a story she yearned to share but was unable to convey. This discovery has a profound impact on Jack, highlighting the depths of his mother's love and the hidden complexities of their relationship.

3- Identity in The Paper Menagerie

Chinese American youth who grow up in the United States face a greater identity crisis compared to their first-generation immigrant parents. Despite their Americanized upbringing, Chinese American youth are often still perceived as Chinese by the mainstream American society, subjecting them to direct or indirect discrimination, (Hang, 2020). This discrimination contributes to the possibility of an identity dilemma for the new generation of Chinese Americans (Liu, 2016). Jack, a Chinese American boy, grows up in two cultural backgrounds but begins to despise his mixed Chinese American identity at the age of 10 due to discrimination from his new neighborhood. The cultural conflicts he experiences are portrayed through the clash between Jack's paper tiger and Mark's Star Wars toy, as well as the language gap between Jack and his mother. These conflicts make it challenging for Jack to recognize and reconcile his own cultural identity (Liu, 2016). Jack's vulnerability and shame regarding his Chinese culture become evident when Mark tears apart his paper tiger, symbolizing the fragility of Chinese culture in a society dominated by American culture. This event leads Jack to abandon Chinese traditions and strive to embrace American culture, distancing himself from his Chinese identity (Liu, 2016). The conflict between Jack and his mother is primarily depicted through their language barrier, as Jack refuses to communicate with her in Chinese and even corrects her broken English (Liu, 2016). Growing up in American society, Jack is deeply influenced by American ideology, leading him to adopt an orientalist perspective towards his mother, Chinese culture, and her homeland. He views his mother's origami as a mere fantasy from a distant Eastern country, lacking a genuine understanding and recognition of Chinese culture. Jack's adoption of American values and his disdain towards his Chinese heritage contribute to his identity crisis (Liu, 2016). Racial discrimination worsens Jack's identity crisis. He faces derogatory comments and humiliation from his neighbors and classmates due to his Chinese appearance. This discrimination fuels Jack's self-hatred for his Chinese identity, as he seeks validation from white individuals (Liu, 2016). Additionally, Jack's deep shame regarding his mother's status as a mail-order bride reflects the racism against Chinese people in American society, which he internalizes (Liu, 2016). The combination of cultural conflicts, racial discrimination, and internalized racism pushes Jack into a state of identity dilemma, torn between his Chinese heritage and the desire for acceptance in American society (Liu, 2016).

4- Family Dynamics in The Paper Menagerie

In "The Paper Menagerie," the fragility of familial love is explored, highlighting its vulnerability to both external and internal forces that can lead to estrangement or destruction. The story portrays how larger historical events and personal failings can jeopardize these bonds. Jack's mother, through a letter to her Chinese American son, reveals the devastating impact of historical forces on her own family in China before immigrating to the United States. Despite having experienced love within her family, symbolized by her earliest memory of her mother selflessly sharing the family's only remaining food during the Great Famine in China, the Chinese Cultural Revolution proved to be destructive. The revolution caused her parents' deaths, leaving her orphaned and alone. She sought refuge and escaped exploitation through an introduction service, but Jack's perception that his father "bought" his mother from a catalog hint that the foundation of their family in America lacked authenticity. That was obvious in the following extract: "I pushed the chopsticks and the bowl before me away: stir-fried green peppers with five-spice beef. "We should eat American food." Dad tried to reason. "A lot of families cook Chinese sometimes." "We are not other families." I looked at him. Other families don't have moms who don't belong. He looked away. And then he put a hand on Mom's shoulder. "I'll get you a cookbook." (Liu, 2016). Additionally, American racism further fractures Jack's family as he faces racist gossip from neighbors and bullying from classmates. Overwhelmed by his experiences, Jack turns against his mother, refusing to listen to her when she speaks Chinese and criticizing her English. Their communication breaks down, leading to estrangement that persists until her death, with Jack's father choosing to side with him, indicating that their marriage may not have been rooted in genuine love. Another example about Family Dynamics is the following:

"And then one day, I saw a TV documentary about sharks and asked Mom for one of my own. She made the shark, but he flapped about on the table unhappily. I filled the sink with water, and put him in. He swam around and around happily. However, after a while he became soggy and translucent, and

slowly sank to the bottom, the folds coming undone. I reached in to rescue him, and all I ended up with was a wet piece of paper". (Liu, 2016).

This section is a proceeding example of family dynamics, emphasizing themes of love, loss, and the inherent fragility between family members. This scene was intended to represent the complexities and challenges that both parents and children face as they explore their emotional connections within the context of the story. After being inspired by a TV documentary, the protagonist, Jack, asks his mother for a paper shark. His mother has the gift of bringing origami animals to life, makes the shark for him. The shark appears lively at first and brings joy to Jack as it swims happily in the sink. This scene exemplifies the mother's love and desire to bring happiness to her son. But later the shark becomes damp and transparent over time, losing its energy and vividness, its folds break down and it sinks to the bottom of the sink. The paper shark transformation reflects the gradual deterioration of the mother-son relationship in the story and portrait some of the unavoidable difficulties and stresses that can happen between family members over time. When Jack tries to save the drowning shark, he is only left with a wet piece of paper. This scene serves as a metaphor foreshadowing his failed attempts to save his relationship with his mother in the future. Despite his good intentions, Jack's efforts to reconnect with his mother and understand their common ancestors are too late. The wet piece of paper symbolizes Jack's feelings of grief and disappointment after realizing the irreversible damage caused by their alienation. This passage exemplifies the vulnerability and the fleeting nature of familial relationships. It emphasizes the importance of active communication, comprehension, and appreciation that should be present between family members to maintain the family union. The fate of the paper shark serves as a reminder that both ignoring or taking familial bonds for granted can lead to their breakdown. It emphasizes the importance of nurturing relationships, especially if they are based on cultural heritage and shared experiences. "The Paper Menagerie" also suggests that while rebuilding families may not always be possible, remembrance can help mend estrangement. Even after being orphaned at a young age, Jack's mother continues writing letters to her deceased parents, folding them into magical paper cranes, and releasing them towards China. She involves Jack in this ritual during his childhood. Similarly, after his mother's passing, Jack finds solace and partial reconciliation by reading a letter she had left for him within a paper tiger, cherishing the memories of her. Although Jack showed the opposite attitude at first, as the following extract shows: "Dad bought me a full set of Star Wars action figures. I gave the Obi-Wan Kenobi to Mark. I packed the paper menagerie in a large shoe box and put it under the bed." (Liu, 2016). The story emphasizes that elusive familial love often endures most powerfully through the act of remembering what has been lost.

5- Cultural Revolution in The Paper Menagerie

"The Paper Menagerie" by Ken Liu is a poignant short story that delves into the tumultuous era of the cultural revolution, a dark period in Chinese history marked by widespread devastation and the loss of countless innocent lives. Liu sheds light on the profound impact of this historical event by narrating the life-changing experiences of Jack's mother, highlighting the transformation of ordinary individuals amidst political turmoil. During the Cultural Revolution, a clash of ideologies between Mao and Shaoqi, two leaders of the ruling party, led to the distortion of people's minds and the fragmentation of social relationships. Neighbors and friends became adversaries, and the repercussions of this period were deeply imprinted on China's economy for an extended duration. Through "The Paper Menagerie," Liu offers readers a glimpse into the lives of common people affected by this tumultuous time, particularly focusing on Jack's mother (Jabeen, Khalique, & Anwar, 2022). Jack's mother, as a young girl, endured the tragic loss of her parents due to their connection with a relative residing in Hong Kong. This association made them targets during the Cultural Revolution, resulting in their untimely deaths. At the tender age of ten, Jack's mother found herself thrust into a life of orphanhood. Desperate for survival, she resorted to stealing food from fields but was eventually captured by men who smuggled her away to a family in need of caretakers for their two young boys. For a decade, she endured a miserable existence marked by grueling labor and torment. Each day was a relentless cycle of hardship, and each night she was confined to a cabinet, ensuring her captivity. Seeking an escape from this oppressive life, Jack's mother took a chance and appeared in a catalog, where she ultimately found a way out by marrying his father. This significant turning point allowed her to break free from the chains of her past and carve a new path for herself. Liu additionally includes the Qingming festival,

also known as the festival of the dead, into "The Paper Menagerie," using it as a narrative device to develop the plot. During the Qingming festival, the narrator finds out his mother's writings on a paper doll. In these writings, she expresses the belief that the paper animals, representing her creations, will cease to move once she stops breathing. However, she also imparts the idea that through heartfelt communication, she can leave a part of herself behind, embedding her essence within the words written on the paper. Notably, origami and the Qingming festival play integral roles in crafting the story's irreducible elements. Origami symbolizes the fragility and transience of life, mirroring the delicate nature of the paper menagerie and the ephemeral existence of human connections during times of upheaval. With its emphasis on remembrance and honoring the departed, the Qingming festival serves as a backdrop for the narrator's discovery of his mother's profound sentiments, highlighting the enduring impact of her words and memories.

6- Cultural Conflict in The Paper Menagerie

Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie" examines the impact of cultural tension on a person's sense of identity, resulting in an identity crisis. Throughout the novel, this theme is vividly portrayed through the clash between Jack's Origami tiger and Mark's Jurassic World toy (Liu, 2016). In an effort to foster a connection to his Chinese heritage, Jack's mother lovingly handcrafted an origami creature as a play toy for him. The delicate craftsmanship of the origami symbolized the richness of Chinese culture and traditions (Liu, 2016). Initially, Jack found joy and satisfaction in playing with his Origami creations, appreciating the effort and intention behind them. However, the cultural conflict surfaces when Jack's Origami tiger is pitted against Mark's Star Wars toy. When Jack emerges as the victor, instead of receiving the admiration and recognition he anticipated, Mark reacts with anger and frustration. He tears apart Jack's Origami tiger, hurling hurtful words: "Here's your stupid cheap Chinese garbage" (Liu, 2016). Mark's outburst reflects a clash of cultures and reveals the presence of cultural tension and prejudice. According to Liu, such cultural conflicts can lead to an identity problem (Ching, Renes, McMurrow, Simpson, & Strange, 2017). This rings particularly true for individuals who come from a heritage that is fragile and sensitive to external influences. While Jack initially embraced and cherished his Origami toys, the incident with Mark's Star Wars toy triggers a shift in his perspective. Jack, feeling the weight of cultural expectations and longing to fit in, requests that Star Wars toys be purchased instead. In doing so, he attempts to separate himself from his Chinese identity and to eliminate any relation of Chinese culture from his life. Jack's decision to separate himself from his Chinese heritage illustrates his internal conflict and identity crisis. He feels confused about which subculture should dominate his identity. He is intoxicated as to whether he embraces his Chinese roots and the traditions or whether he conforms to the dominant culture around him.

7- Racial Discrimination in The Paper Menagerie

Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie" examines the profound impact of racial discrimination on the evolution of culture and its consequent identity crisis. The narrative depicts Jack's experiences with racism because of his Chinese appearance, which has long-lasting consequences for his sense of identity. Jack is described in the story as "a little monster" with "slanty eyes and a white face" (Liu, 2016). These insulting descriptions reflect the racism he encounters from his neighbors, friends, and even preschool classmates. His friend Mark mocks him by rejecting his Origami tiger claiming that it is made of garbage. These incidents of racial discrimination left a deep wound in young Jack, leading him to develop a strong dislike for his race. Chinese heritage and an overwhelming desire to gain acceptance from the Caucasian community. The experience of racial prejudice leads Jack to question his true identity, as he grapples with the conflicting messages and expectations imposed upon him by society. Galán et al highlight that race-based inequality remains a significant public health concern, contributing to psychosocial impairment and racial identity impasse (Galán, Stokes, Szoko, Abebe, & Culyba, 2021). Despite the resilience displayed by many minority ethnic adolescents who draw strength from their cultural and family values, persistent encounters with systemic racism can cause substantial harm to their sense of self. Furthermore, racial discrimination also plays a role in damaging self-recognition within Jack's family. Jack's mother, in an act of self-deprecation, claims that she is merely a product purchased from China by his father (Liu, 2016). This revelation shatters Jack's perception of his mother and fosters a sense of contempt towards her, as he views her act as degrading and diminishing her own dignity. This loss of self-recognition within his family further exacerbates

Jack's identity dilemma. Racist societal systems perpetuate discriminatory cognitive structures that undermine one's convictions and weaken self-recognition (Hänel, 2021). Jack's failure to empathize with his mother's experiences of racism and his alignment with those who insult her demonstrate the extent to which prejudice against Chinese individuals has permeated his mind. Despite being subjected to racial bigotry himself, Jack becomes complicit with racist friends, further entangling himself in an identity crisis due to the inconsistency of his self-recognition.

8- Symbols in The Paper Menagerie

In the story, the origami creations can be interpreted in various ways, serving as a metaphor for love, imbued with magical qualities, suggesting an unreliable narrator, or offering commentary on how childhood memories can be romanticized. Although Jack dismisses the movement of these paper creatures as mere imagination, he eventually embraces the animated Laohu, blurring the line between reality and fantasy. The story deliberately leaves the true nature of the situation ambiguous, thereby inviting readers to rely on binary contrasts as a means of deciphering the narrative. While Liu may have intended to convey the life-giving power of unconditional love, he instead presents a haunting scenario in which an emotionally wounded and insecure man is left with nothing but illusions of his past life. The creatures themselves are not real beings; they are simply made of paper, and Jack is revealed to be a broken individual. Han Song's observation about the clash between Chinese and Western ideas, as expressed in his 2013 article "Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization," directly relates to Jack's crisis of identity: "...we turn ourselves into monsters, and that is the only way we can get along with Western notions of progress" (Song, 2013).

9- Conclusion

Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie" explores Jack's journey of self-discovery and identity reconstruction. The story delves into the challenges he faces in recognizing his cultural identity due to cultural conflicts, the influence of American ideology, and racial discrimination. These factors contribute to Jack's self-doubt and self-hatred, causing confusion in his self-perception. However, through listening to his mother's past experiences and understanding the emotional essence of Chinese culture, Jack gradually overcomes his identity dilemma and reconstructs his Chinese American identity. Ken Liu skillfully employs traditional Chinese myth to establish a cultural and emotional connection between Jack and his mother, emphasizing the significance of Chinese culture for individuals of Chinese descent who are born and raised in American society in resolving their identity issues.

In "The Paper Menagerie," Ken Liu masterfully weaves together his personal experiences, cultural traditions, the search for Identity and the family dynamics to create a vivid portrayal of the profound impact of the of ordinary lives. Through the trials and triumphs of Jack's mother, readers gain insight into the far-reaching

References:

- Ching, Y., Renes, S. L., McMurrow, S., Simpson, J., & Strange, A. T. (2017). Challenges facing Chinese international students studying in the United States. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 12(8), 473-482.
- Galán, C. A., Stokes, L. R., Szoko, N., Abebe, K. Z., & Culyba, A. J. (2021). Exploration of experiences and perpetration of identity-based bullying among adolescents by race/ethnicity and other marginalized identities. *JAMA network open*, 4(7), e2116364-e2116364.
- Hänel, H. C. (2021). Epistemic Injustice and Recognition Theory: What We Owe to Refugees. *Migration, Recognition and Critical Theory*, 257-282.
- Hang, Y. (2020). An Analysis of the Reconstruction of Chinese American Identity in The Paper Menagerie. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 10(9), 790-795.
- Jabeen, T., Khalique, S., & Anwar, A. (2022). Magical Realism in Ken Liu's Short Stories. *The Dialogue*, 17(4).
- Liu, K. (2016). *The paper menagerie and other stories*: Simon and Schuster.
- Song, H. (2013). Chinese science fiction: A response to modernization. *Science Fiction Studies*, 40(1), 15-21.