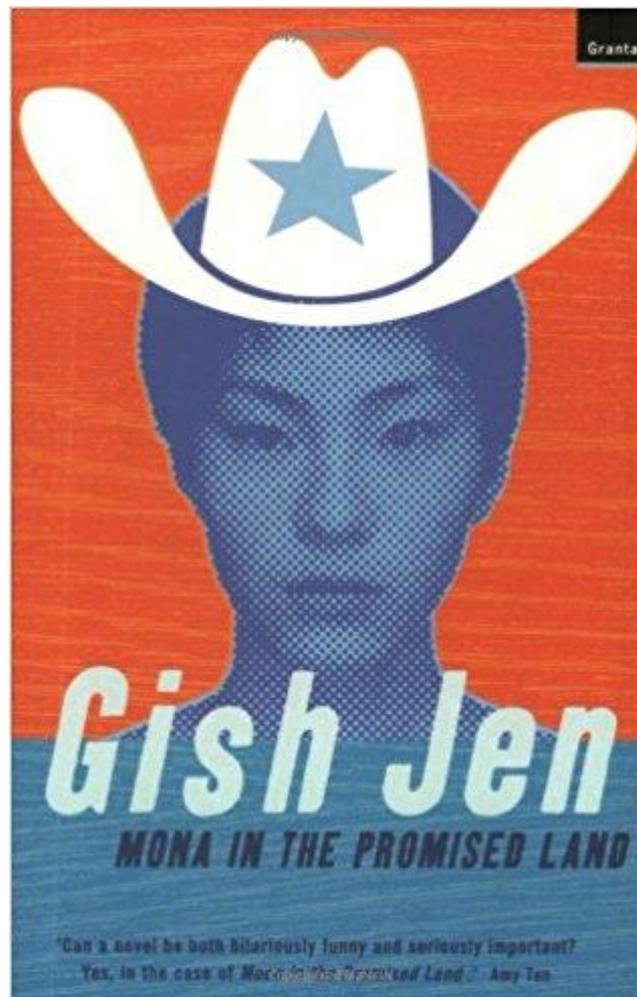


“A Self-made Mouth”
An Analytical Study of Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land*

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Mona-Promised-Land-Gish-Jen/dp/1862070539>

Abstract

For any immigrant ‘America’ is land of hope, land of dreams and land of freedom. They hope that they can fulfill their needs at least for their survival. They try to uphold their native culture, only in their home and living with people who belong to the same culture. At the same time their efforts to show themselves as ‘American’ is required to be mentioned. They feel their children are also attracted towards the dominant culture since its stresses on independent self. The Chinese collectivism is entirely different from America’s individualism. Identity has always been a hitch faced by these immigrants in their efforts of establishing themselves in the Other land whereas for the second-generation immigrants

it is not an issue. To probe the above said statement the second novel of Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promising Land* is chosen.

Introduction



Gish Jen
Courtesy: en.wikipedia.org

Gish Jen is a second-generation immigrant and her parents migrated to US in 1940s. Her works dealt with the themes of immigration, assimilation and occasional tensions with other ethnic communities. Many of her stories have been republished in *The Best American Short Stories*. Her short story *Birthmates* was selected as one of the best American short stories of the century by John Updike. She authors four novels and a collection of short stories and two non-fiction books. Her four novels include, *Typical American* (1991), *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), *The Love Wife* (2004) and *World and Town* (2010).

Mona in the Promised Land

Mona in the Promised Land is a sequel of Gish Jen's first novel *Typical American*. In this novel the protagonist Mona, a second-generation immigrant, is the daughter of Ralph Chang, the protagonist of *Typical American*. Mona navigates to a complicated world in the novel. She is a Chinese ethnically but adopts Judaism as her religion. This shows the influence of American individualism in her. Mona adheres the life of a Jewish ignoring her Chinese values.

Chinese American to a Chinese Jew

“One aspect of Americanization says that Americans are allowed to remember who they were and to insist on *what else they are*” (*What it means to be an American*, 28). As American-born children choosing their way of living is their matter of choice. The children are exposed more to the American way of life, parental ties and control, and influence begins to fade. In case of Mona, a second-generation Chinese immigrant it is her choice to be a Jew. She does not want her parents to discuss or even to know about it. In Chinese culture, the decision making of an individual is a collectivistic thing. First, they will think whether it affects the reputation of the family. If it is so they ignore it even it benefits them personally. There is much cultural pressure to behave in a way that will not embarrass or bring shame to one’s family or cause them to “lose face”.

Aware of the Consequences of Converting to Judaism

If children attempt to act independently against their parents’ wishes, they are labeled as selfish, inconsiderate, and ungrateful. Mona is aware of the consequences if her change to Judaism is revealed to her family. At home, Mona calls it ‘a Chinese way’ when she got complaints about her from Helen, her mother. It is not that she dislikes the Chinese culture and values; it is the American in her which develops when she is exposed to the society. Though Mona loves her mother Helen and her aunt Theresa, she does not want them to interfere in her decision-making process. She wants to live her life to the fullest. Whatever Helen says as ‘that’s Chinese’ for Mona it’s a ‘show of authority’. In many Chinese American families, both the husband and the wife work outside the home, often in the family business. Helen expects Mona to help in their pan cake house after school hours. As an American-born she expects benefits for work. Like Barbara’s parents Mona expects her parents to be paid for her work but for Helen it’s a Chinese way of child-rearing.

Identification with the Families

Chinese youths identify more with their families than with their peers, sexual intercourse before marriage is not common. Out of wed-lock births, abortion, and divorce are also rare. When Mona’s parents see Mona and Seth, her boy friend, in their bed, she cannot take in the fact and she thinks that her daughter is rebellious against her words. Helen avoids any kind of communication with Mona for years. It does not affect Mona’s leading life with Seth. Mona marries Seth legally after the birth of her daughter, Io. She believes that Helen will accept her, and she even plans to give her baby, Helen’s name. Mona’s acquisition of American values does not mean that she dismisses her family.

Change in Outlook

“The American way of life is individualistic, pragmatic... values the dignity of the individual...defines an ethnic of self-reliant, merit and character and judges by achievement...” (Wikipedia).

In the middle of the novel, Helen doubts Mona’s conversation over phone. Mona understood her eavesdropping blaming that’s ‘a Chinese way’. Helen initially tells Mona that Chinese parents “should bend like a bamboo in the wind not stand there stiff like a Telephone pole”. She understands that Chinese strict way of parenting will not work out in her daughter, Mona. But Mona can sense the sudden change in her mother’s attitude. Mona’s stubbornness in her every decision leads her life in her own way. Her dreams and wishes are all fulfilled and there is no sense of longingness in any phase of her life. Because she knows that she is responsible for her decisions and its consequences. Her parents’ efforts to bridge the gap do not solve the rebellious situation existing in their family.

Immigrants’ Goal – Identity as Americans

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M. Subbulakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.

“A Self-made Mouth” An Analytical Study of Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* 382

The immigrants want their generation to establish themselves as American but not belong to any other ethnic community. Helen wants Mona to be American not Jewish. For Mona, “Jewish is American...American means being whatever you want, and I happened to pick being Jewish” (MPL, 49). Mona as second-generation immigrant understands the Americanization better than the first-generation parents.

“He has a right, however, to his anonymity; that is part of what it means to be American” (*What does it mean to be an “American”*, 28).

Teaching Mona What’s Chinese

In the process of teaching Mona what’s Chinese, Helen fails but she has raised her as a good American. The broadening gap between Mona and native culture provide her a good future. For the sake of her personal life she does not neglect her family. This tracing results that there is a widening gap between Mona and her Chinese tradition, there are glimpses of her native culture is reflected in the understanding of her family. This difference from native culture benefits her socially and personally. Acquiring and adapting different cultures will stretch to generations after generations.

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“A Self-made Mouth” An Analytical Study of Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* 383