

Navigating Cultural Identity in Jean Kwok's *Searching for Sylvie Lee*

Dr. P. Sankavi

Assistant Professor of English
Gobi Arts & Science College
Gobichettipalayam

Abstract:

Jean Kwok's *Searching for Sylvie Lee* presents the intricate life of Chinese immigrants in America through the lens of its main character, Sylvie Lee. Having moved from the Netherlands to the United States at a young age, Sylvie grapples with issues of cultural identity and dislocation. Her limited connection to her ancestral roots leaves her unfamiliar with Chinese traditions and culture. To adapt and be accepted in her new environment, she learns American English and assimilates into American society. This study employs a qualitative approach, using the novel as the primary source of data. Dialogues and narrative elements that highlight themes of identity and dislocation form the core evidence. These are supported by secondary references—books, journal articles, and academic papers—that address the broader concepts of diaspora, identity, and cultural dislocation. The analysis draws on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity to explore how Sylvie's sense of self evolves and how she copes with cultural dislocation. The findings suggest that Sylvie comes to the realization that she no longer identifies as Chinese, having lost touch with the language, customs, and cultural ideology. However, she also finds it difficult to be fully accepted as American due to her physical appearance—such as her slanted eyes, skin tone, and habits—which visibly mark her as ethnically Chinese. Sylvie remains suspended between two identities: she is neither fully Chinese nor completely American. Jean Kwok uses Sylvie's story to portray the broader immigrant experience, emphasizing the ongoing tension and transformation in cultural identity that often comes with immigration.

Key words: Identity, Dislocation, Immigrant, Diaspora, Culture.

Introduction:

Literary works are deeply connected to culture and human experience. As reflections of reality and cultural expression, they offer valuable insights into people's lives and their environments. Novels, as a form of literature, serve as powerful tools for expressing cultural values, often addressing themes like multiculturalism and pluralism—whether explicitly or implicitly.

The novel *Searching for Sylvie Lee* fits into the categories of immigrant literature, diaspora literature, and cultural literature because it contains rich cultural elements and explores the experiences of characters who migrate between countries and cultures. The story follows Sylvie Lee, a Chinese immigrant woman who goes missing after suffering from depression, triggered by conflicts and misunderstandings with those around her. Her disappearance leads her sister on a journey to find her.

The root of Sylvie's struggles lies in her immigration to America. Like many Chinese immigrant families, Sylvie's family moved to the United States in pursuit of better opportunities—seeking education, employment, and a higher standard of living. However, this dream doesn't come true for them. Instead, the Lee family ends up working low-wage jobs and continues to live in difficult conditions.

Historically, as Ted [1] notes, after gaining independence, the United States focused on expanding its land and agricultural resources to improve living conditions. This idea gave rise to the concept of the American Dream—the freedom to explore opportunities and improve one's quality of

life. Sylvie's journey mirrors this pursuit. In trying to establish herself in America, she undergoes significant personal transformation and ends up sacrificing important parts of her life, including her family, husband, career, and beloved grandmother.

This research uses a qualitative method, collecting data in the form of words, sentences, phrases, and statements about cultural identity from the novel. The novel *Searching for Sylvie Lee* is the primary data source, including dialogue and narrative that reflect facts and information about cultural identity. This primary data is supplemented with secondary sources such as journals, books, articles, and news about diaspora, cultural identity, and cultural dislocation.

The study focuses on one work: *Searching for Sylvie Lee* [2] by Jean Kwok. Since this novel is relatively new, it has not been widely researched. However, some studies have examined Jean Kwok's authorship, such as research by Ningtyas [3] and by Ningtyas and Usma [4]. Ningtyas discusses the character Charlie Wong in *Mambo in Chinatown*, analyzing his search for identity through Homi K. Bhabha's diaspora theory. Ningtyas and Usma explore Kimberly Chang's postcolonial diasporic identity in *Girl in Translation*, focusing on language use and postcolonial theory.

Other related studies include those by Jacobs [5], Rananda et al. [6], and Febriani [7], all of which use Stuart Hall's theory but reach different conclusions. Jacobs examines issues in South Africa, highlighting four female writers symbolizing Winnie Mandela's influence. Rananda, Agnes, and Widisanti show that their main character experiences both direct and indirect discrimination, with social discrimination being a form of social identity. Febriani's research analyzes the novel *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* through four perspectives: (1) socio-historical context emphasizing Islamic values, (2) literary structure including themes, plot, characterization, and setting, (3) Islamic cultural identity reflected through cultural elements such as Arabic calligraphy and the influence of Islamic philosophers, and (4) application of the novel as literary teaching material aligned with educational standards.

In analyzing *Searching for Sylvie Lee*, Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity is used. Hall argues that cultural identity is not fixed or clear-cut but is an ongoing process of formation and representation. He identifies two ways to view cultural identity: first, as rooted in one culture; second, as formed through recognition of similarities and differences with others. In this latter view, cultural identity involves both "being" and "becoming." According to Hall [8], cultural identity is never fully fixed. It is something that is continually formed within historical and cultural contexts and is always positioned in specific places and times. Because of this, identity is always evolving and can change over the course of a person's life.

Identity:

Identity is something that constantly evolves over time. Many immigrants undergo changes in their identity as they adapt to a new environment, striving to maintain their original culture while adjusting to a different society. This transformation is often visible through language use and cultural expression. Identity and cultural differences are deeply intertwined. On one hand, cultural differences contribute to the formation of diverse identities—culture shapes individuals, and individuals, in turn, shape themselves through cultural practices. Hall explains that “the word ‘culture’ is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of a people, community, nation or social group. Alternatively, the word can be used to describe the ‘shared values’ of a group or of society.” This suggests that cultural difference plays a key role in distinguishing and maintaining group identities. On the other hand, individuals who share the same identity also tend to share a common culture. As Hall [8] emphasizes, “members of the same culture must share, broadly speaking, the same ‘cultural codes’.”

The protagonist in the novel *Searching for Sylvie Lee* reflects cultural complexity, having been born in China, raised in the Netherlands, and later immigrating to the United States. America is often portrayed as a land of opportunity, attracting people from around the world in pursuit of a better life. However,

what many fail to realize is that the U.S. can be unwelcoming to immigrants, particularly those from minority groups such as the Chinese. These individuals often face challenges in gaining societal acceptance, and without learning the language and culture, assimilation becomes even more difficult. As a result, many Chinese immigrants choose to settle in culturally familiar enclaves like Chinatown. In the novel, Sylvie Lee moves to America to reunite with her family, unlike her time in the Netherlands. Initially, she is indifferent to her immigrant status, but her mother, Ma, is deeply aware of their social surroundings and decides the family should live in Chinatown. This decision creates challenges for Sylvie, especially when navigating environments outside her community, such as school. She begins to feel out of place and struggles with acceptance. This experience motivates her to change her life and seek a better future, realizing that her family may have missed earlier opportunities.

According to Hall [8], the evolution of identity can be observed through changes in behavior. He argues that different environments bring unique histories, cultures, and experiences that significantly shape identity. Therefore, identity is not fixed—it is continuously produced and transformed by these influences. This process is clearly reflected in Sylvie Lee's journey as an immigrant who finds America foreign, both in appearance and in the reality of her experience, which contrasts with her expectations. As stated by Kwok [2] in her novel:

No matter how many years I lived in America, I always dreamed of Dutch. Dutch was something that belonged to me, or so it seemed when I left the only country I had ever known. It was a complex language, filled with challenging sounds and wrapped word order. Despite its intricacy, it was the language of my soul.

In the quote above, Sylvie Lee's feelings of longing and regret reflect common emotions experienced by immigrants as they face the challenges of adapting to unfamiliar places and cultures. Immigrants are often required to put significant effort into adjusting to a new cultural environment, which is a very different experience from that of someone who has never left their home country or who has lived in the same place all their life. Unlike non-immigrants, immigrants are exposed to entirely new experiences that contrast with what they previously knew.

When someone decides to immigrate permanently, it is usually driven by a clear goal—most often the hope for a better life. However, upon arrival, many immigrants are met with disappointment and sadness when the reality of the new country does not align with the expectations they had before leaving. These feelings of regret often stem from a lack of preparation or knowledge, especially in terms of language and cultural understanding. As a result, immigrants frequently face significant struggles simply to survive and adjust in a foreign land.

This kind of experience often leads immigrants to face psychological challenges. Feelings of rejection by the surrounding community in an unfamiliar land can deeply affect their self-esteem, sometimes making them feel isolated or excluded. Anyone who moves to a new place—whether permanently or temporarily—inevitably faces language and cultural barriers. In order to integrate successfully, they must learn, adapt, and respond to new cultural norms and languages. Many immigrants choose to settle in communities made up of people from their country of origin, as it makes assimilation easier and offers a sense of familiarity. This was the case with Ma, Sylvie Lee's mother, who believed that living in Chinatown would provide comfort and support.

However, Sylvie Lee felt differently. She believed that living in Chinatown did not help her integrate into American society but instead exposed her to a culture—Chinese—that she had never truly experienced herself, since she had not lived in China. This added another layer of cultural complexity and identity confusion. Sylvie's psychological struggles were influenced by her experiences outside the

home—in school, university, and work—where she encountered American cultural expectations. At home, she returned to the identity of Sylvie Lee shaped within a Chinese immigrant household.

The contrast between the culture of her childhood in the Netherlands, the Chinese immigrant identity at home, and the broader American culture around her left her feeling confused and displaced. As a result, she began to withdraw from others, redirecting her focus toward building a successful career and financial stability. Her perception of America became shaped by differences in everything—climate, food, fashion, people, and education. Despite the difficulties, she struggled to adapt because she understood that America was now her only home, where her family lived.

According to Mening [9], cultural dislocation occurs when someone is separated from their homeland, language, community, and cultural practices—all of which play a vital role in shaping identity. These cultural differences eventually lead Sylvie Lee to experience cultural dislocation. At school, she feels isolated and struggles to form friendships, believing that her peers judge and discriminate against her based on her physical appearance. Even within the Chinatown community, she feels out of place, as her identity has become conflicted—caught between the expectations of American culture and her unfamiliarity with traditional Chinese culture. Within her own family, she senses a growing emotional distance and lack of open communication. This causes her to internalize her struggles, choosing to keep her thoughts and daily problems to herself.

Cultural dislocation can result in a loss of personal identity and lead to psychological distress. In such situations, individuals may begin to adopt new cultural behaviors and values—not out of personal conviction, but as a means of survival or acceptance. In Sylvie’s case, her emotional turmoil is compounded by inner conflict. She feels a deep sense of emptiness and loneliness, often finding herself haunted by memories of the past—especially the time she spent living with her grandmother in the Netherlands. Her grandmother cared for her with love and attention, leaving her with cherished memories that she clings to in times of difficulty. As described by Kwok [2] in her novel:

I felt as if I was returning to a safe haven—east, west, home was best. I was going back to the place where no one had ever needed me to be extraordinary. How many times had I dreamed of going home over the years? Why had I never returned before now?

Over time, Sylvie Lee gradually becomes influenced by American culture, realizing that in order to succeed, she needs to learn American customs and language at school. As Kwok [2] notes in her novel: “I wanted to escape my poor background and forget about ugly Sylvie with the crooked tooth and eye patch.” Sylvie Lee consistently earns high grades in school due to her determination to succeed and gain acceptance in American society, which she believes will help her transform her life. This experience gradually leads to a shift in her identity.

Cultural identity and dislocation:

According to Kwok [2] in her novel:

When I was nine years old and newly arrived in the United States, I had to wear that hated eye patch and the American kids had laughed at me; for that and my accent and my crooked front tooth. I could speak only a few words of English then. Even after I learned the language, I kept the accent that, for many years, they thought was Chinese — chink, go home to China, you can't even talk right, stupid Buddha head — but was actually Dutch.

Sylvie Lee moved to America at the age of nine, leaving behind the comfort of life in the Netherlands with her grandmother to reunite with her family. Upon arriving in America, she felt lost and confused, as neither her mother (Ma) nor her father (Pa) understood American culture or even spoke English. As

an immigrant, Sylvie aspired to be accepted by both society and her surroundings. She had transitioned from a small, familiar country to a large, liberal one, all while carrying the cultural foundation of her Chinese heritage. As Kwok [2] describes in her novel:

Her warm arms, her smell of Nivea cream and Chinese hair gel, of the rice and meat porridge she made for me and Lukas after school, of warm caramel waffles from the street markets and licorice in long, pointy plastic sacks.

America is known as a liberal country because it offers freedom and opportunities for immigrants to integrate into society. Although Sylvie Lee initially felt fear and disappointment, she gradually adapted by learning about American culture. Her efforts eventually exceeded her expectations, leading to her success in America.

Sylvie Lee's migration journey reflects a complex evolution shaped by cultural shifts, personal struggles, and identity formation. Born and raised in the Netherlands until the age of nine, Sylvie lived with her grandmother and the Tan family, immersed in Dutch culture and fluent in Dutch. Despite the warmth of her upbringing, her uncle and aunt never fully accepted her as part of the family. At nine, she moved to Queens, New York, to reunite with her biological parents, Ma and Pa, and her younger sister, Amy. However, life in America was far from easy. Her parents, preoccupied with making a living, had little time for Sylvie, leaving her to navigate a new culture and language largely on her own. As an immigrant child with Chinese heritage, Sylvie experienced racism and discrimination both at home and in school, which deeply impacted her self-esteem and sense of belonging.

Over time, Sylvie worked hard to adapt, learning American English and culture while also understanding her family's strong Chinese traditions. As she grew into adulthood, she married Jim and lived independently. Yet even in marriage, she faced betrayal and emotional hardship, as Jim was frequently absent and unfaithful. This betrayal, along with financial difficulties and the burden of her family's dark secrets, further influenced her identity, personal choices, and emotional well-being. Despite these challenges, Sylvie transformed from a naive and extroverted child into a more introspective woman striving to find peace within herself. She learned to navigate various cultural environments, becoming fluent in English and comfortable with American norms. Ultimately, Sylvie's journey is one of resilience, marked by her continuous efforts to rise above social and personal struggles and to fight for a better life—not only for herself but for her family as well.

While living in America, Sylvie Lee consciously embraced American ideals in order to become part of the society. She committed herself to her education, attending school diligently and eventually earning a scholarship for higher studies. This contrasts with her parents, Ma and Pa, who lacked formal education and struggled with English. Sylvie's approach reflects her determination to be accepted in American society. She faced numerous challenges—both positive and negative—but persevered to build a stable and successful life in America. As Kwok [2] highlights in her novel:

I was an impoverished, awkward girl who got into Princeton on good grades, unlike another girl I knew whose father had enclosed a check for half a million dollars with her application fee. She could fish with a golden hook. We were so poor, they had even waived my fee — always the scholarship student, the brain of the class, the girl in the illfitting clothes. But those who wish to eat honey must suffer the sting of the bees.

Sylvie Lee's emphasis on achieving good grades and being a model student reflects a shift in her ideology. Because of her awareness of her physical appearance, accent, and cultural background, she avoids socializing with American peers, knowing she may never be fully accepted. As Kwok [2] illustrates in her novel: "I told myself I did not need friendships. When you were different, who knew

if it was because of a lack of social graces or the language barrier or your skin color?”

Sylvie Lee dreams of living a happy life free from the emptiness she has long experienced. At school, she had no friends, and at home, the situation was similar because her parents, who adhered to a traditional Chinese culture that was reserved and lacked warmth and affection, were often busy with work. This cultural environment led Sylvie to spend more time with her younger sister Amy than with the rest of the family. She often felt more like a babysitter than a daughter. Over time, Sylvie began to adopt a more open-minded, American way of thinking through her education and interactions with people around her. Learning English and attending school not only transformed her identity but also reshaped her ideology. From her teenage years into adulthood, she embraced the American values of openness. This shift became evident in how she approached life in America—engaging in activities like attending parties, dating, and having casual relationships before marriage, behaviors that are not typically associated with traditional Chinese values. Sylvie’s actions clearly show that she has evolved from the person she was when she first arrived in America.

Sylvie Lee sees herself as American, having been accepted by many in society and her community. Ultimately, she fulfilled her dreams—securing the career she aspired to, marrying a Native American, owning a luxurious home, and supporting both her younger sibling’s education and her parents’ needs. However, this success was short-lived; she was betrayed by her husband, left her job, and decided to return to the Netherlands to visit her grandmother. After her grandmother passed away, she asked Sylvie to arrange her funeral according to her wishes. This experience forced Sylvie to navigate a complex negotiation between the American culture she had embraced and a blend of Chinese and Dutch traditions. The memories she had suppressed while living in America resurfaced, leading her to decide to remain in the Netherlands. However, being there constantly only deepened her reflections on her past. As Kwok [2] describes in her novel:

It was a risk, returning to what I cherished as my homeland. I dreamed of plaice and yet I ate flatfish; I always expected too much. Yes, that was the reason I had never gone back to the Netherlands on vacation, not even on our marriage trip. I had changed and I was terrified that my dream of the one place I truly belonged would be overwritten and I would have nothing left, no solace at all.

During this period, Sylvie Lee longed to return to the life she had known as a child in the Netherlands. However, after moving to America, that dream faded as she became deeply immersed in American culture and lifestyle. The memory of her grandmother, who remained in America, served as a constant reminder of the warm and cherished moments from her childhood in the Netherlands.

According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is fluid and constantly evolving, shaped by changing contexts. This idea reflects Sylvie Lee’s journey, as her identity continues to shift with time and age. As she grows older, she gradually reconnects with her Dutch and Chinese roots, developing a sense of belonging and feeling more Dutch again. She begins socializing and engaging with others, slowly shedding the habits she formed while living in America. These shifts in her identity are no longer driven by her family or community but emerge from her own evolving mindset shaped during her time in America. As a result, this transformation creates a growing distance between Sylvie and those around her.

Conclusion:

Searching for Sylvie Lee is a novel that explores the themes of identity and cultural displacement experienced by immigrants. The story highlights the challenges immigrants face as they try to adapt to unfamiliar environments and new countries. Moving from one nation to another often brings numerous obstacles, including difficulties in learning the language and understanding the culture, which are

essential for gaining acceptance both by the government and the immediate community.

The novel follows Sylvie Lee, a Chinese immigrant struggling to find her sense of identity in a new setting. Born in China, raised in the Netherlands, and later moving to America before ultimately returning to the Netherlands, Sylvie encounters many hardships on her journey to achieve her dreams. She aspires to succeed in a foreign land, despite feeling like she started with nothing upon arriving in America. The cultural differences between China and America leave her confused, and she realizes that embracing American culture and mastering English—even with an accent—is crucial for acceptance in American society.

Jean Kwok, the author, also uses the novel to reflect on her own experience as the child of migrants. She portrays migration not merely as a physical relocation but as a deeply complex process involving culture, language, religion, ideology, and many other aspects of life. This process requires a negotiation between the immigrant's original homeland and their new environment, leading to the formation of a new, hybrid identity.

Sylvie Lee's character exemplifies this struggle. She gradually comes to understand that she is no longer fully Chinese, as she has lost touch with much of the Chinese culture, language, and ideology. Yet, she is not entirely American either, as her physical appearance—such as her slanted eyes and skin color—marks her as part of the Chinese community. Sylvie finds herself caught between being and becoming, a common experience shared by many immigrants, including Jean Kwok herself. Through Sylvie Lee, Kwok reveals the complex reality of cultural dislocation and identity formation faced by immigrants in *Searching for Sylvie Lee*.

References

- [1] Ownby, T. (1999). *American Dream in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture*. United States of America: The University of North Carolina Press.
- [2] Kwok, J. (2019). *Searching for Sylvie Lee*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
- [3] Ningtyas, C. S. (2016). Charlie Wong's Identity as Second Generation in Jean Kwok's Novel *Mambo in Chinatown*. *Proceedings of International Conference on Language, Literary and Cultural Studies (ICON LATERALS)*, 29 October 2016. DOI: 10.21776/ub.icon_laterals.2016.001.1.10
- [4] Ningtyas, C. S. & Usma N. D. R. (2014). The Dynamics of Kimberly Chang's Post-colonial Identities Seen through the Strategies of Abrogation and Appropriation in Jean Kwok's Novel *Girl in Translation*. *Allusion*, 3(1), pp. 23-31. <https://journal.unair.ac.id/download-fullpapers-allusiondfecb4d1392full.pdf>
- [5] Jacobs, J. U. (2006). *Diaspora Identity in Contemporary South African Fiction*. *English in Africa*. October 2006, 33(2). <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC47919>
- [6] Rananda, M. I., Setyowati, A., & Widisanti, N. M. (2020). Social Discrimination as Part of The Process of Forming The Main Character's Social Identity in The Novel *Wonder* By RJ Palacio. *Journal Albion: Journal of English Literature, Language, and Culture*, 2(1). 10.33751/albion.v2i1.1797
- [7] Febriani, L., Al-Ma'ruf, I., & Hasyim, N. (2016). *Identitas Budaya Islam Pada Novel 99 Cahaya Di Langit Eropa Karya Hanum Salsabiela Rais Dan Rangga Almahendra* *Kajian Antropologi Sastra Dan Implementasinya Sebagai Bahan Ajar Sastra Di SMA (Islamic Cultural Identity in the Novel 99 Cahaya Di Langit Europe by Hanum Salsabiela Rais and Rangga Almahendra A Study of Literary*

Anthropology and Its Implementation as Literature Teaching Materials in High School). [Unpublished Doctoral dissertation]. Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta.

[8] Hall, S. (1990). Cultural Identity and Diaspora in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.). Identity: community, culture, difference. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

[9] Marganingsih, M. (2010). Ashima Ganguli's Diasporic Life in Jumpa Lahiri's The Namesake. [Unpublished undergraduate thesis]. Universitas Negeri Jember.
<http://repository.unej.ac.id/handle/123456789/24322>

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.