

The Exchange of Men in Mary Chin's *The Woman in Kenzo*

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Abstract

The Woman in Kenzo is a Hong Kong popular fiction written by Mary Chin. Initially published as a serialized fiction in *City Magazine* in 1977, it portrays a westernized generation of young female elites in Hong Kong who could appreciate and pursue a lavish lifestyle. They have been benefited by better education opportunities and broader exposure to foreign culture triggered by rapid economic growth in the colonial era. Specifically, the protagonist Mary is presented as a charming working woman with a lucrative career. However, she leads an unhappy life due to her incapability of finding an eligible bachelor who could meet her standards and most importantly, tie the knot with her. As a contemporary woman who is financially independent, she faces the pressure of marriage as established social norms continue to define successful women with their men.

With the objective of providing a contemporary response to Luce Irigaray's interrogation of "why are men not objects of exchange among women" (Irigaray, 1985: 171), this paper initiates the possibility that men could actually be objects of exchange among contemporary women. This would be done through a textual analysis on the romantic relationships of the protagonist Mary Chin in *The Woman in Kenzo*. I shall demonstrate that

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women with power of financial autonomy would still be living under the eternal pressure of marriage, but this kind of societal urge would not make them forget their individual desire for leading an independent life.

Keywords: Hong Kong contemporary women, the exchange of men, marriage market, women's autonomy

1. Introduction

The Woman in Kenzo is a narrative fiction written by Mary Chin, the pseudonym of the Hong Kong writer Peter Dunn Siu-Yue (1951—). It was first serialized in 1977 in *City Magazine*, a monthly fashion and lifestyle magazine founded by the author and other forerunners of merging the printing media with visual arts in Hong Kong.² These founders of *City Magazine* showed the tendency of writing under various pen names.

Other than characterizing the female protagonist with a luxury fashion brand in the title, the debut release of *The Woman in Kenzo* in *City Magazine* speaks for its depiction of a high-end middle-class lifestyle, the kind that resembles its target reader. Eric Kit-wai Ma, Hong Kong's media specialist, names *City Magazine* “the most established local lifestyle magazine in Hong Kong” (Ma, 2012: 78). Other than this factual description, it is worthy to note how the magazine's pioneering history plays a conceptualizing effect upon many current lifestyle magazines. In 2003, the magazine was sold to Modern Mobile Digital Media Company Limited, a media group in China. Still, the magazine adopts the sub-heading “A Hong Kong Heritage that is ahead of its time” (Modern Mobile Digital Media Co. Ltd., 2021). This serves as a reminder

² Other than Peter Dunn Siu-Yue, *City Magazine* was also jointly founded by John Chan Koon-Chung 陳冠中, Joseph Yau S.M. 丘世文 and Henry Wu 胡君毅 in 1976.

of its tradition to capture the zeitgeist of Hong Kong as a vibrant cultural hub and often, go beyond the corresponding trends.

While the aforesaid traits of *City Magazine* provide a grimace on the stance of the novel's content, it is equally important to dissect the choice of the work's title. The incorporation of a chic fashion label with the female protagonist is far more than an indication of her sensitivity towards clothing and style. Rather, through her awareness regarding apparels, the reader can formulate the attitude of a contemporary woman in Hong Kong. The adoption of Kenzo, a French brand established by the Japanese designer Kenzo Takada (1939-2020), is not a random selection. Vincenzo La Torre, fashion editor of Hong Kong's authoritative English-language newspaper *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, regards Kenzo Takada as "the first Japanese designer to become a household name and build a brand of international stature" (La Torre, 2019). During the time of the novel, Kenzo was a newly risen brand created in 1970. This signifies its deviation from classic brand names, and the quality of versatility to be associated with its wearers.

The novel *The Woman in Kenzo* applies first-person narration to illustrate Mary Chin's consumption lifestyles and strategy of romance, through which a new definition of a successful woman is shaped. In sculpturing Mary's trinity nature as the author, narrator and protagonist of the novel, the real identity of the male writer behind has been concealed. The novel begins with Mary's discussion with an editor of *City Magazine* on a new column. This arrangement has skillfully explained for the birth of this serialized fiction that depicts the love journey of a contemporary Hong Kong woman.

2. Objectives

Although *The Woman in Kenzo* is set in Hong Kong between the 1970s and early 1980s, the role played by Chinese patriarchal culture upon the characters is relatively insignificant. As mentioned in the novel, the protagonist Mary Chin visits hotel lounges much more frequently than dining in conventional Chinese restaurants (Chin, 2011: 3). While Confucian filial obligations were still governing principles during the time of the story, they are not strictly imposed upon the characters. From the way that the obedient and dutiful younger sister of Eric arouses Mary's hatred (Chin, 2011: 104), it is certain that the latter can no way fulfill conventional Chinese ideals in terms of being a virtuous woman:

[S]ince personal dignity is predicted on one's ability not only to establish oneself but also to take care of others, one's level of independence and autonomy is measurable in terms of the degree to which one fulfills obligations and discharges responsibilities to family, community, state, the world, and Heaven. (Tu, 1996: 8)

Mary is envious towards those who fit the standard well as she knows she cannot meet traditional expectation in this aspect. Based on the character of Mary as shown from the novel and her deviation from Chinese conventional norms, it is the main objective of this chapter to investigate how her idea on living an autonomous life is founded upon the pursuit of her true self, rather than satisfying people's presupposition.

3. Research Methodology

Owing to the observations aforesaid about the content of the novel, an up-to-date western philosophical framework is more appropriate in diagnosing the characters' contemporary perceptions towards womanhood and marriage. The plot has an illustration on how Eric, who has a love relationship with Mary, has later become the lover of another female character (Chin, 2011: 145). Being inspired by this, I shall conduct my textual analysis by extending Luce Irigaray's (1930—) notion on the exchange of women by initiating testifying the concept on the exchange of men.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (*Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*), Luce Irigaray confirms how western society is "based upon the exchange of women" (Irigaray, 1985: 170).³ She adds that this sets up "the foundation of the economic, social, and cultural order" (Irigaray, 1985: 170). She negates the possibility of considering men as objects of exchange among women, as the exchange of women being an economic activity "is always referred back to men" (Irigaray, 1985: 171). As an attempt to negate Luce Irigaray's theorization, my research will be divided into two parts. First, I will illustrate that in *The Woman in Kenzo*, the exchange of men is connected to the protagonist's strategy in maintaining her womanhood through satisfying the economic, social and cultural levels of life. Second, I initiate that when women have achieved autonomy, the exchange of women would then become acts of their own choice and determination. While Mary is driven by jealousy rivalry among her peers and the corresponding social ideology for wanting to get married, her idea of needing a presentable man of a pedigreed kind, rather than any man, is a manifestation of blurring the

³ Luce Irigaray's original French version was published in 1977. Its translated English version appeared in 1985.

boundary between fantasy and reality. At the same time, her mentality demonstrates the possibility of reversing women's subordination in a contemporary exchange relationship. In achieving the goal of getting the right man, she has repeatedly engaged in love relationships. Her act of selecting men that would match her own scale gives rise to a discussion on the market value of men.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Marriage Drive

4.1.1 Societal Urge

Though Mary Chin is a member of the educated elite with a promising career and high-quality lifestyle, the opening chapter of the novel accounts for her state of unhappiness. Having graduated from the university for merely three years and still in her mid-twenties, she has been bothered by the urge of marriage. Janet W. Salaff's (1976) research on the marriage age of Hong Kong women in 1960-1970 provides us with hints on Mary's anxiety:

Table 1: Proportion of Chinese women never married by age: Survey and registration data, Hong Kong⁴

Year	Age		
	15-19	20-24	25-29
1961	94%	49%	25%
1971	97%	67%	20%

⁴ Information adapted from Janet W. Salaff's "The Status of Unmarried Hong Kong Women and the Social Factors Contributing to Their Delayed Marriage" (1976: 394).

Driven by better education and career prospects for their gender, more women at the age groups of 15-19 and 20-24 remained unmarried in 1971 in contrast with the situation a decade ago. However, data concerning the age group of 25-29 revealed a different scenario. In this age group, the number of unmarried women was recorded a 5% decrease. This implies that against the social backdrop of allowing women to have more options and greater flexibility, they were still expected to tie their knots before they were out of their twenties. As Mary somehow stands at the conjunction of two age groups, she experiences the stress of leaving her single life for the avoidance of spinsterhood.

4.1.2 Peers Pressure

Besides explaining Mary's anxiety through demographic evidence, another key factor that assists the understanding of her urgency for marriage is the contemporary definition of successful women in her circle of acquaintances. As Mary introduces her closest female peers in the novel, she lists out their academic and family backgrounds, profession and fashion sense. Other than these, she also presents their love relationships. Through her introduction of these characters, it can be generalized that no matter how stylish, knowledgeable or financially viable a woman is, if she has no boyfriend or signs that the relationship is heading towards marriage, she will be looked down upon. As "sex/gender oppression is often understood in terms of what the dominant group 'does' to the subordinate group" (Mac an Ghail, 1994: 10), women who can be defined by men pressurize those who don't by their mere existence. As a result of this cultural ideology, women are forever looking for men, or men who are eligible for marriage.

Despite the conventional taboo revealed from the behavior of these women in avoiding the alignment of womanhood with spinsterhood, a very initiative idea observed is that the women portrayed are not degraded by

their mindset towards marriage. Rather, men could be turned into commodities of exchange. In explaining for the subordinate status of women under patriarchy, Irigaray investigates the appropriation of women:

The possession of a woman is certainly indispensable to man for the reproductive use value that she represents; but what he desires is to have them all. To “accumulate” them, to be able to count off his conquests, seductions, possessions, both sequentially and cumulatively, as measure or standard(s). (Irigaray, 1985: 175)

A reversal of this ideology is seen in the novel when the power of women is measured by means of their abilities in possessing men. Depictions in the novel such as “we used to compete over the number of dolls in our childhood, and now we compete over the number of boyfriends” (Chin, 2011: 18), “she can’t wait to tell us her abilities in picking up men in discos” (Chin, 2011: 18) or “still unmarried at the age of 28, she has few boyfriends” (Chin, 2011: 19) are indications of how men have become a relative standard in evaluating women.⁵ Therefore, no matter how harsh Mary could be in criticizing her friends, she understands well that she could rise above them simply because of having a stable love relationship and more importantly, a presentable boyfriend. She keeps thinking “What would I become if I am not with Andy? Going beyond the life with Andy is a world of darkness, and I cannot perceive that” (Chin, 2011: 34). Though her idea sounds like a devaluation of women, I shall explain in the later part of the discussion on Mary’s eventual transformation after having a break up with Andy.

⁵ Translations (from Chinese to English) of the text have been made by the contributor.

4.1.3 Marriage as a Trophy

The competition among women is thus a race to find out who could first reach the terminal stage of marriage. However, it is actually apparent that Andy is not prepared to lead his relationship with Mary to a different level. Mary also remarks how “He said I am his only love, but he feels like he is not yet ready for that, because he isn’t certain if he could make my life blessed forever” (Chin, 2011: 39). Mary and Andy could not tie the knot because of their different perspectives of the love relationship. For Mary, being engaged in a love relationship is a romanticized vision of life:

As I laid closely on Andy’s shoulder, smelling the familiar scent of cologne, past memories of warmth and intimacy have once again prevailed. I was thinking, how many merry Christmas nights could there be in a lifetime? Although this type of happiness is not of a safe and secure kind, it is in fact intangible and uncertain, not having any protective measures. It is exactly this type of happiness that is the most precious, and most unforgettable. (Chin, 2011: 53-54)

Still, she desires for a more secured recognition of the relationship through legal declarations. Although Mary values her relationship with Andy and has much hope of reaching the next stage of her life with him, Andy does not feel the same. To discuss this in details, we shall first recall Irigaray’s anatomization on the market value of women. She examines their circumstance with relevance to the reproduction of labor power. Therefore, women could be perceived as identical entities with “the same phantom-like reality” (Irigaray, 1985: 175). Under conventional patriarchy, women could be used to indicate the success of men:

A woman can be a trophy, symbolizing and signaling a man's success against and to other men. Most men are far from the top of the patriarchal hierarchy of control and power; women are important as consolation prizes, giving men who have little someone over whom they have rights of power and control. (Becker, 1999: 27)

As gender reversal sets in, Andy regards himself as an object in Mary's stunning wardrobe. His determination of breaking up with Mary is an exemplification of his realization that he has been degraded as a commodity to complete Mary's image as a successful woman. He has pointed out how Mary views him as an object, rather than a human with sentimental needs:

You have never shown concerns over my emotions, or tried to share my troubles. Ask yourself, when I felt distressed, have you ever given me words of encouragement? Never, because you never discover that, you only care whether I have the right look so that your friends can say Mary Chin has a vogueish and refined boyfriend. Tell me, what's the difference between me and leather shoes, handbags, automobiles, clothes or suntan lotion? Can't you see? I'm just one of your accessories! (Chin, 2011: 81)

The dilemma occurs as the contemporary view of gender politics and the power relations give rise to Andy's perception of his degraded role. However, although Mary holds the perspective that she needs a man who would not shame her, but could only enshrine her among her friends, she is viewing the relationship with Andy as an equitable one. This also results in her comparison of other boyfriends with Andy in her future relationships.

4.2 Women Strike Back

4.2.1 The Swapping of Men

Unlike women in conventional patriarchy who are given to men passively in matters related to marriage, contemporary women portrayed in the serialized novel have the desire of getting married, but their role is not a passive one. Having separated from Andy, Mary is then pursued by Eric. I regard Mary's action of continuously looking for another possible partner for marriage when a relationship comes to an end as an act of swapping. As Eric is incomparable with Andy in terms of his upbringing, financial status and taste, Mary admits that he is a substitute and refers to as "an inferior Andy" (Chin, 2011: 102). Therefore, no matter how women in the novel are portrayed as a frustrated group who desperately want to be married, they carefully assess the market value of men in decisions in matrimonial matters. That a successful woman is defined by the means of having possessed a man confirms Luce Irigaray's observation that "Woman thus has value only in that she can be exchanged" (Irigaray, 1985: 176). However, in terms of Irigaray's idea that women are commodities for comparison in the marriage market, a different stance is presented in the book. Irigaray highlights how the comparison of women is made between two persons of no relationship:

It is only her measurement against a third item that remains external to her, and that makes it possible to compare her with another woman, that permits her to have a relation to another commodity in terms of an equivalence that remains foreign to both. (Irigaray, 1985: 176)

The novel demonstrates a contemporary view of placing men as objects for comparison in the market. For instance, Mary compares her ex-boyfriend Andy with her current boyfriend Eric in terms of their eligibility as her future husband. Other than the men's incomes, Mary also shows concern towards their manners and styles:

Every gesture, movement, conversation and smile on Andy reflects his elegant extravagance, whilst for Eric, although his look and body build aren't bad, but they give an ordinary sense that is not special, a man in the next office. I used to be with an extraordinary, and now I have an ordinary, how could I marry? (Chin, 2011: 100)

No matter how frustrated Mary is in terms of her desire of getting married, she demonstrates her contemporary quality as a woman with her own individuality. In other words, she would not get married simply owing to the fact that she has reached the expected age. Though she has adopted some strategies of pressurizing Andy to get married with her, she differentiates well between her desire for marriage from her romanticized vision. Therefore, Eric is a belittled replacement for the absence of Andy.

4.2.2 Men as Objects of Exchange

Different from Luce Irigaray's findings that men take the initiative in the matter of exchange, Mary Chin suggests in the novel on the possibility of circulating men among women. This is solely done by means of women's consent and determination. Based on this assertion, I negate Irigaray's standpoint that "The economy of exchange—of desire—is man's business" (Irigaray, 1985: 177). Rather, I suggest that the exchange of men is possible among women in attempting for a state of equilibrium. To illustrate this, I use the circulation of Eric among Mary and her close friend Martha for elaboration. As stated, contemporary women compete among themselves for raising own confidence, esteem and status among their peers. This can be seen from the situation when Mimi becomes the first woman among her friends to get married:

Right now Mimi shows off in front of me, that she has a husband is a triumph over me, and I won't blame her. Actually I am the same in demonstrating my victory over Martha who doesn't even have a boyfriend? After all, humans are devilish animals, the survival of the fittest has always been a golden rule. (Chin, 2011: 141)

While competition among women is the golden rule, it doesn't necessarily mean that women could compete over men. Rather, women may willingly pass off a man to another for a more appropriate match. This can be seen from Mary's relationship with Eric. As Mary feels that she is not contend with the possibility of marrying Eric, and at the same time, Martha seems to be interested in Eric, Mary generously authorizes Martha to take over Eric. She even encourages Martha forcefully to fight for her own rights:

“Don't cheat yourself anymore,” can't let her escape from the reality anymore, I got to remind her, “I know you really like Eric, so don't just sit there, do something! Protect your interest! There are a lot of women in this world. If Eric does not date me, he would date other girls too, so you must take the initiation. As opportunities won't come often, you should take actions now, use the pictures as an excuse and give him a call. As far as I'm concerned, he's all yours if he so wishes.” (Chin, 2011: 99)

The incident confirms how the anxiety of getting married due to established socio-cultural ideology would not drive a contemporary woman to continue her love relationship with an unsuitable man. Rather, such a woman may place friendship or rationality above the possible triumph of getting married earlier than her peers.

5. Conclusion

While the novel begins with the unhappy state of Mary as her boyfriend does not propose to her, contemporary women in the novel are portrayed as unique entities who have been shaped by the experience that they have encountered, rather than socio-cultural conformity. The novel does not deny the fact that women are living in eternal pressure that urges them to marriage. As a married woman, Mimi happily encourages Mary to share the same marital status with her:

But Mimi seems more than expressing her own joy in marriage, she was stating her suggestion in the name of “an old friend” and “a witness”, “Mary Chin, what are you waiting for? Get married quickly! Take from me, and you will absolutely not regret!” (Chin, 2011: 140-141)

Although Mary knows well how the label of spinsterhood is approaching, this invisible threat would not make her forget the pride that she is still a free woman:

In this society, a woman at the age of 28 who remains single is surely an embarrassing age. People would be shocked, feel weird, mock, sympatric or sarcastic. One sure thing is that people would be envious. (Chin, 2011: 141)

Other than having confidence towards her status, Mary also has a self-comforting mechanism in justifying her “embarrassing” state of being single. She says that she is “too demanding, can’t find an eligible person” (Chin, 2011: 178). Driven by various forms of pressure, Mary has made

several attempts to end her spinsterhood. She has tried to consider getting married with Jo, a new boyfriend of her, even she admits that she does not know him well enough. Later on, as another boyfriend, Richie, proposes to Mary, she finds that too fast (Chin, 2011: 217). As Mary has experienced different romantic relationships and suitors who want to tie the knot with her, she has finally arrived at a point of revelation and decides that she may not want to alter her present status for fear of uncertainty:

I don't know what will become of me, I feel scared out of a sudden. I feel uncertain towards my future, I lack any courage for an adventure. I only know that I don't want to go to New York. I don't even want to get married with Joe. I only wish to return to Hong Kong as soon as possible, hiding in my room and have a great sleep. (Chin, 2011: 253)

Mary has finally chosen to give up the chance of being a married woman and returns to Hong Kong. This decision authenticates that while women acknowledge the social urge of marriage, they may still prioritize the necessity of achieving self-autonomy. It is apparent that they have the abilities to reverse the situation of passivity as depicted by Lucy Irigaray, and it is only a matter of their own determination.

To conclude, although Luce Irigaray's masterpiece *This Sex Which Is Not One* serves as a milestone in the comprehension of some of the current feminist ideologies, including women in the marriage market and female sexuality, my textual analysis on contemporary Hong Kong women in Mary Chin's *The Woman in Kenzo* negates her assertion by showing the possibility of exchanging men among women. While it is true that the desperation faced by the protagonist Mary and her female friends as they reach the expected

age of getting married drives them to seek potential husbands within the sphere of acquaintance, they have not ignored their own wishes as independent women. Though marriage is often seen as a trophy among them, they also willingly circulate eligible bachelor among themselves for reaching the state of equilibrium. Their acts verify how contemporary women have the potentials to reverse established gender norms for fulfilling their own desires.

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