The Construction of Identity through Food and Sex - Transference of Desire in Katherine Min’s “Courting a Monk”

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Abstract

“Courting a Monk,” a story written by Katherine Min and rich with autobiographical elements, deals with the construction of self through transference of desire. In the story, Gina, a second generation Korean American who, in her attempt to integrate herself in the main-stream culture, is intent on seducing Micah, a white boy who wants to be a Buddhist monk, and eventually succeeds. On the surface, Gina defies everything her father represents, namely Korean culture and its values, including the Korean language and Korean food. However, her desire to identify with the surrounding white culture by taking over Micah’s body and subverting his religious faith, implies her unconscious search of an Oriental identity and recognition as a subject by her father, the authority, the Law of the Other. From this perspective, Micah is a complex symbol of double meanings in the process of Gina’s search for subjectivity. Moreover, in his own search for establishing his subject through his identification with Oriental culture in his determination of becoming a Buddhist monk, Micah can also be viewed as a child-subject who desires
presumptive unity with the other by metonymically displacing his desired object with other concepts and images, namely, the Buddhist concept of renunciation of desire and Korean food, chained together through associated meanings, but in this he ultimately fails.

Appropriation of Lacan’s concepts of the unconscious, the other and the Other, the Imaginary and the Symbolic with his emphasis on language and desire, has been proven to be fruitful in the interpretation of literary works dealing with construction of self. This paper tackles the complex issue of cultural identity in a world of mixed values with a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach.

**Keywords:**

subjectivity, desire, transference of desire, the unconscious, the other, the Other, the Imaginary, the Symbolic