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Diasporic Magic: The Paper Menagerie and the Quest for Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Fantasy literature often explores the magical and imagined, with many stories featuring characters from diasporic communities. In The Paper Menagerie, Ken Liu uses magical realism and cultural symbolism to examine the complexities of cultural identity. This paper analyzes the story's portrayal of a Chinese-American boy's struggle to reconcile his Chinese heritage with American culture, focusing on the emotional dynamics of his relationship with his mother. Through the use of symbolism, Liu illustrates how identity is continuously negotiated across generations and cultures. By blending the fantastical with the mundane, the story highlights the challenges of belonging and assimilation, offering a poignant reflection on the tension between cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of migration.

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1. *Introduction*

In *The Paper Menagerie* (2016), Ken Liu transforms magic from a mere whimsical device into a powerful tool as an attempt to unravel the complexities of cultural identity experienced by diasporic individuals. Through the delicate act of folding paper into animals, Liu crafts an emotional narrative that tackles themes of memory, belonging, and loss, elements that are part of every immigrant experience. The paper menagerie, brought to life by Jack's mother, becomes a symbolic representation of the ongoing negotiation between preserving one's cultural heritage and adapting to a new society. By blending the supernatural with the mundane, Liu captures the emotional and psychological tensions of navigating multiple cultural worlds.

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Magical realism, a genre that fuses the ordinary and the extraordinary, offers a profound lens through which to explore identity, memory, and displacement. Rather than disrupting the narrative, Liu's magical elements highlight the internal conflicts faced by characters, particularly those caught between conflicting cultural identities. The paper animals, imbued with life by Jack's mother, embody both the preservation of cultural identity and the struggle to maintain these ties in an increasingly assimilative world. Liu's use of magic provides a rich canvas for exploring the dynamic, often painful, nature of cultural identity and the emotional complexity of diaspora.

This paper will examine how Liu's integration of magical realism with diasporic themes reveals the fluidity of cultural identity. Through the symbolic paper menagerie, Liu illuminates the emotional conflicts that arise when cultural memories are preserved, transmitted, and sometimes lost. By analyzing the tensions between heritage and assimilation, this paper will demonstrate how Liu's narrative strategy raises larger questions of cultural continuity, transformation, and belonging.

2. *Magical Realism in The Paper Menagerie*

Magical realism in *The Paper Menagerie* plays a central role in exploring the complexities of cultural identity and the diasporic experience. By blending the supernatural with the everyday, Ken Liu uses the magical paper animals to symbolize the emotional and psychological tensions between heritage and assimilation. This genre allows Liu to delve into the internal conflicts of the protagonist, Jack, as he navigates the struggle to reconcile his Chinese heritage with his American identity, offering a unique lens to understand the challenges of cultural preservation in a migratory context.

2.1 Definition and History of Magical Realism

Magical realism is a literary genre that seamlessly blends fantastical elements with realistic settings, treating the extraordinary as an ordinary part of life. The term was first introduced by Franz Roh in the 1920s to describe the post-expressionistic style in painting that incorporated surreal elements into realistic depictions (Selvarani, 2022). While initially applied to visual art, the concept was later adopted by literary scholars to describe works where the supernatural coexists with the mundane, creating a narrative in which magic is not questioned but accepted as a natural part of the world (Figlerowicz & Mertehikian, 2023).

In literature, magical realism gained prominence in Latin America, where it became a defining feature of the region's literary identity. Gabriel García Márquez, a pioneer of the genre, described the way his grandmother, Doña Tranquilina Iguarán Cotes whol played a major role in forming his cultural heritage, would tell stories as she "treated the extraordinary as something perfectly natural" (as cited in Sharifzadeh & Zarook, 2013) . Márquez's seminal work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, exemplifies this by embedding fantastical occurrences, such as levitating priests and unending rains,

within the context of a family saga, reflecting both the mythical and the historical realities of Latin America (Jaafar, 2023).

Beyond its Latin American origins, magical realism has become a global phenomenon, embraced by authors from diverse cultural backgrounds. Writers from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have adopted magical realism as a way to delve into their unique cultural landscapes and histories. This broadening of the genre highlights its ability to cross geographical limits while staying deeply connected to the particularities of local settings (Kumar, 2024). For instance, Haruki Murakami and Salman Rushdie are prominent authors who utilize magical realism in distinct ways to delve into profound themes. For Murakami, the blend of mundane with the supernatural is essential for creating a narrative space for exploring memory and individual psychology. Whereas, Salman Rushdie uses it to critique post-colonial identities. According to Faris, this global appeal stems from the genre's ability to "transcend the boundaries of the real and the imaginary, allowing authors to address complex historical, cultural, and emotional truths" (2004, p. 15).

Magical realism is a powerful tool that effectively depicts the lived experiences of marginalized or diasporic groups and communities, in a way breaking of the constant tension between navigating tradition and modernity. As Faris argues that "such a combination of the real and the magical is a central paradox of magical realism" (2004, p. 9). This makes it an ideal medium for exploring themes of migration, cultural memory, and identity negotiation.

In this short story, Ken Liu draws on this tradition to explore the Chinese-American diasporic experience. By imbuing paper animals with life through the protagonist's mother, Liu uses magical realism to highlight the tension between cultural preservation and assimilation. As such, the genre functions not merely as a narrative device but as a means to express the profound emotional and psychological struggles of navigating multiple cultural identities.

2.2 Magical Elements in The Paper Menagerie

Ken Liu uses magical realism as a profound narrative tool to explore themes of cultural identity, memory, and diaspora (Rouabhia, 2024). The magical elements of the story are not mere fantastical embellishments, but serve as symbolic representations of the protagonist's relationship with his heritage and his mother (Jabeen et al., 2022). The most striking example is the paper animals that come to life through the breath of Jack's mother, which Liu uses to reflect the tension between tradition and assimilation, love and alienation (Rouabhia, 2024).

The magic in *The Paper Menagerie* is rooted in the intimate act of creation. Jack's mother, using nothing more than paper and her breath, brings animals to life. This act is described as her "magic": *"She breathed into her paper animals so that they shared her breath, and thus moved with her life.*

This was her magic" (p. 179). These paper animals, especially the tiger, Laohu, become physical manifestations of the love and cultural memory that Jack shares with his mother. The magic is not fantastical in the traditional sense; it is a deeply personal, emotional act, grounded in the traditions of origami and cultural storytelling (Rouabhia, 2024).

As Laura Duncan Fontenot notes in her analysis of magical realism's role in diasporic literature, magic is often used as a vehicle for *cultural memory*, allowing characters to preserve and transmit their heritage in the face of displacement (Duncan Fontenot, 2022). In *The Paper Menagerie*, the paper animals are imbued with life as an act of love and preservation. For Jack, these animals serve as emotional anchors, keeping him connected to both his mother and his Chinese roots, even as he grows more Americanized. The paper tiger, Laohu, for instance, is not only a toy but a companion who follows Jack around and interacts with him in a playful yet meaningful way: *"Laohu put his front paws together at the edge of the sink and rested his head on them. Ears drooping, he made a low growl in his throat that made me feel guilty"* (p. 180). This magic, while playful, also carries the weight of Jack's cultural ties, reinforcing the dual nature of magical realism as both an emotional and cultural tool (Jabeen et al., 2022; Rouabhia, 2024).

As Jack grows older, the magic of the paper animals begins to fade, mirroring his growing emotional detachment from his heritage. This detachment leads to a strained relationship with his mother, exacerbated by his internalized shame and desire to fully assimilate into American culture (Rouabhia, 2024; Yu Hang, 2020). As he begins to reject his Chinese heritage in favor of fitting in with his American peers, the magical paper animals become less significant: *"I packed the paper menagerie in a large shoebox and put it under the bed. The next morning, the animals had escaped…finally, I shoved it into the corner of the attic"* (p. 184). The moment when Jack hides the animals in the attic symbolizes his rejection of his cultural identity and the emotional distance he feels from his mother. The fading of the animals' magic serves as a metaphor for the gradual erasure of Jack's connection to his roots, echoing Rouabhia and Yu Huan's argument that cultural memory, while resilient, is fragile and can easily be forgotten or discarded in the face of assimilation (2024; 2020).

The most poignant moment of magical realism occurs after Jack's mother's death, when the magic is reawakened. After years of neglect, the paper animals, especially Laohu, are rediscovered in the attic, their magic seemingly revived. This moment of rediscovery is both heart-wrenching and redemptive: *"I sat down on the floor, and reached out a finger. Laohu's tail twitched, and he pounced playfully. I laughed, stroking his back"* (p. 188). This revival of the animals' magic symbolizes Jack's reluctant return to his cultural heritage and his reconciliation with the love and memory his mother left behind. As Yu Hang discusses in her analysis of Liu's work, magical realism serves as a mechanism to help characters bridge the gap between loss and reconciliation, allowing them to reconnect with forgotten parts of their identity (2020).

This moment is further emphasized by the appearance of a letter written in Chinese by Jack's mother, which is found in Laohu after he unfolds. The letter, written in the mother's awkward handwriting, serves as a final message of love and cultural continuity: *"...If I write to you with all my heart, I'll leave a little of myself behind on this paper, in these words"* (p. 189). This act of writing with one's heart ties back to the earlier magical act of breath-infused paper animals, suggesting that the mother's magic transcends her death. Hence, magical realism in contemporary literature often involves the return of past memories, where the past is not merely remembered but revived through magical or symbolic acts (Perez & Chevalier, 2020). This interplay between memory, love, and cultural identity, expressed through both the mother's letter and the magic of the paper animals, underscores the deeper purpose of magical realism in the story, setting the stage for a broader exploration of its function within *The Paper Menagerie*.

2.3 Function of Magic in The Paper Menagerie

Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie* utilizes the magical realism of animating paper animals to serve as a profound metaphor for cultural memory, heritage, and the tension between tradition and assimilation. The act of bringing paper to life is not simply a whimsical or fantastical element; it is deeply tied to the emotional and cultural undercurrents of the narrative. Through the magic of the paper menagerie, Liu explores how cultural identity is both a source of strength and a site of conflict, particularly for those navigating the complexities of diasporic existence.

At the heart of the story lies the transformative act of creating paper animals, which come to life when infused with the breath of Jack's mother. The animals, particularly Laohu the tiger, symbolize more than just playful objects; they represent the continuity of Chinese cultural traditions and the love that bridges the gap between mother and son. Liu's magic, therefore, functions as a metaphor for the ways in which cultural memory is transmitted through generations. As Ann Rigney discusses, cultural memory is not static but actively reconstructed and mediated through symbols and acts of storytelling (2012). This magical act allows the mother to pass on not just cultural objects but emotional bonds, memories, and the very essence of her identity to her son.

Liu's use of magic underscores the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and assimilating into a new society. The paper animals symbolize Jack's mother's unwavering commitment to cultural preservation, yet they also reflect the challenges of maintaining those ties amid the pressures of assimilation. This tension is a hallmark of magical realism in diasporic literature, which often transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, allowing characters to confront unresolved tensions between their past and present. For example, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices (1996)*, the protagonist's mystical connection to spices becomes a metaphor for the immigrant's struggle to balance cultural preservation with the need to adapt to a new environment (Anu & Deepa, 2024). Similarly, Liu's narrative uses magic as a vehicle to explore the complex

negotiation of identity, where characters must reconcile the cultural values of their heritage with the demands of a new cultural setting. Hence, contemporary magical realism serves as a powerful tool for exploring these cultural and emotional complexities, offering insights into the global proliferation of this literary mode (Perez & Chevalier, 2020).

The function of magic in *The Paper Menagerie* thus extends beyond the symbolic; it becomes a means of expressing the internal conflicts of diaspora. As Jack grows older and learns to speak English, he begins to feel the distance between himself and his mother, whose limited English and strong accent symbolize her struggle to adapt to American life. His rejection of her language and traditions represents the broader tensions between retaining one's cultural roots and assimilating into a new society: *"I refused to answer her… Speak English!"* (p. 184). The magical realism of the story allows Liu to portray these tensions in a way that is emotionally resonant, showing how the protagonist's internal struggles mirror larger societal conflicts faced by immigrant families. As Zamora and Faris suggest, magical realism is particularly effective in expressing the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in cultural hybridity and displacement (1995), making it an ideal medium for exploring the complexities of identity in the diasporic experience.

3. Diaspora and Cultural Identity

In *The Paper Menagerie*, Ken Liu explores the complexities of diasporic identity through the protagonist, Jack, whose journey reflects the emotional and psychological struggles faced by second-generation immigrants. As Jack navigates the tensions between his Chinese heritage and his American identity, Liu offers a poignant portrayal of the challenges of cultural negotiation and the effects of cultural dislocation. The story delves into Jack's personal struggle with the distance from his cultural roots, his experience of living between two worlds, and the ways in which family, especially the maternal relationship, shapes the formation of identity in a diasporic context.

3.1 Diasporic Experience in the Story

Jack's experiences mirror the struggles of many diasporic individuals who face the challenge of reconciling the values and traditions of their parents' homeland with the societal norms and pressures of their new environment. Born to Chinese immigrant parents, Jack grows up in an environment that is constantly negotiating between his cultural heritage and the dominant American culture. As previously mentioned, the magical paper animals created by his mother are not only an expression of her love but also a tangible connection to his Chinese heritage. These animals, particularly Laohu the tiger, serve as symbols of cultural continuity, embodying the teachings and emotional bonds that Jack shares with his mother (Rouabhia, 2024; Yu Hang, 2020).

As Jack transitions into adolescence, the symbols of cultural memory that once tied him to his heritage begin to lose their significance. The societal pressures of assimilation into American culture and a longing to fit in with his peers gradually pull Jack away from his mother's magic and the cultural practices she represents. This growing distance encapsulates a key aspect of the diasporic experience: the tension between the pull of cultural preservation and the allure of acceptance within a dominant culture. Scholars like Homi Bhabha argue that diasporic identities are formed within a "third space" where cultural negotiation occurs, often resulting in moments of conflict and hybridity (2004). For Jack, the rejection of his mother's traditions, particularly the paper menagerie, marks a painful rupture in his cultural continuity, mirroring the challenges faced by second-generation immigrants as they navigate dual identities. This estrangement underscores the fragility of cultural memory in the face of assimilation, a theme deeply rooted in diasporic literature (Rouabhia, 2024).

This internal conflict deepens as Jack navigates the expectations of his peers and the societal pressures of assimilation. His insistence on speaking English, rather than embracing his mother's native language, signifies more than a linguistic preference, it reflects a desire to distance himself from the cultural heritage that marks him as different. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity highlights the tension diasporic individuals face in attempting to reconcile the values of their parents with those of the dominant culture (2004). For Jack, this tension manifests as a rejection of the symbols of his heritage, such as the paper menagerie, in favor of the perceived normalcy of American life.

This estrangement from his heritage is further illustrated by the way Jack physically and emotionally removes himself from his mother's traditions. By packing the paper menagerie away and relegating it to the attic, he symbolically suppresses his connection to his cultural roots and the emotional bond with his mother. As Min Zhou observes, second-generation immigrants often experience a "cultural bifurcation" in which they must navigate conflicting allegiances to their familial heritage and the society in which they live. Jack's decision to hide the paper menagerie demonstrates the emotional toll of this bifurcation, as he prioritizes assimilation over the preservation of his cultural identity (1997).

The rejection of his mother's traditions and the paper menagerie ultimately highlights the fragility of cultural memory in the face of assimilation. Zygmunt Bauman argues that in a globalized world, cultural identities become fluid, often leading to the erosion of traditional practices as individuals strive to fit into dominant cultural frameworks (2000). For Jack, this erosion results in a profound sense of loss, one that he is only able to confront after the death of his mother and the rediscovery of the paper menagerie. This moment of reconciliation serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring importance of cultural memory, even when it has been relegated to the margins of one's identity.

3.2 Cultural Hybridity and Conflict

Jack's internal conflict reflects the experience of cultural hybridity, where navigating between multiple cultural frameworks creates tension and identity fragmentation. This hybridity is marked by Jack's efforts to reconcile the traditional Chinese values represented by his mother with the American ideals he adopts as he grows older. His rejection of his heritage is symbolized by his decision to hide the paper animals in the attic, an act that encapsulates his struggle to suppress his cultural roots and distance himself from his mother's traditions.

This moment of compartmentalization represents the emotional toll of assimilation, a process that often involves the painful disowning of cultural identity. The attic serves as a metaphor for cultural and emotional isolation, embodying the sense of fragmentation that second-generation immigrants like Jack experience. As James Clifford (1994) observes, diasporic individuals often relegate their heritage to metaphorical "attics," where it remains dormant until rediscovered. Jack's act of hiding the paper menagerie signifies not only his rejection of his heritage but also the vulnerability of cultural memory in the face of assimilation.

Furthermore, the rediscovery of the paper menagerie after his mother's death becomes a turning point for Jack, symbolizing his emotional reconciliation with his roots. The revival of the magical animals, particularly Laohu, reflects his renewed connection to his heritage and to the love his mother sought to preserve through her traditions. Duncan Fontenot argues that magical realism offers a unique lens for exploring cultural memory, enabling characters to reconnect with fragmented identities and bridge the gap between past and present (2022). In *The Paper Menagerie*, the revival of the paper animals functions as a transformative act, allowing Jack to reclaim his cultural identity and confront the emotional loss caused by his earlier rejection of his heritage.

3.3 The Role of Family in Identity Formation

This process of reconciliation underscores the central role of familial relationships in navigating the complexities of diasporic identity. Jack's emotional awakening through the rediscovery of the paper menagerie illustrates how the family serves as a repository for cultural memory, even when such memories are temporarily suppressed. As previously mention, Ann Rigney argues that cultural memory is not static but an active process of reconstruction, often mediated through symbolic acts and personal relationships. In this case, the paper menagerie becomes a bridge through which Jack reconnects with the traditions and emotional bonds his mother sought to preserve (2012).

Moreover, Jack's journey highlights the intergenerational tensions that arise in diasporic families, where the parent's role as a cultural custodian often clashes with the child's desire for assimilation. Identity formation is deeply rooted in the narratives and practices passed down through generations,

yet it is also subject to disruption and transformation in new cultural contexts (Hall, 1990). Jack's initial rejection of his mother's magic and traditions reflects the psychological and social pressures faced by children of immigrants to conform to dominant cultural norms. His later reconciliation, however, reveals the enduring influence of familial bonds in shaping a nuanced understanding of identity.

The revival of the paper animals, particularly Laohu, symbolizes the enduring power of cultural heritage to withstand the forces of assimilation. Through the act of rediscovery, Jack not only reclaims his connection to his mother but also acknowledges the value of the traditions he once sought to suppress. This transformation exemplifies what Homi Bhabha describes as the "in-between" space of diasporic identity, where individuals negotiate multiple cultural influences to create a hybrid sense of self (2004). In Jack's case, the paper menagerie serves as both a physical and symbolic manifestation of this hybrid identity, blending the love and traditions of his mother with his evolving understanding of his place in the world.

Ultimately, the role of family in *The Paper Menagerie* is central to its exploration of diasporic identity. Through Jack's relationship with his mother, Ken Liu illuminates the emotional complexities of preserving cultural heritage within the context of migration. The rediscovery of the paper menagerie reflects a larger truth about the diasporic experience: that while cultural identity may be fractured by time and distance, it remains an integral part of the self, capable of being reclaimed through memory, love, and reconciliation.

4. Conclusion

In *The Paper Menagerie*, Ken Liu uses magical realism as a profound narrative tool to delve into the emotional and psychological intricacies of the diasporic experience. The magical paper animals crafted by Jack's mother symbolize the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to a new cultural environment. Through this lens, Liu portrays identity not as a fixed construct but as a dynamic process shaped by memory, love, and reconciliation. The revival of the paper menagerie encapsulates this journey, offering a poignant representation of how cultural connections, though strained by the pressures of assimilation, can be rediscovered and revitalized.

This analysis has shown that magical realism in Liu's story functions not merely as a literary device but as a mechanism for exploring and resolving the complexities of diasporic identity. By weaving the extraordinary into the ordinary, Liu demonstrates how cultural memory, even when buried or fractured, can be reclaimed as a source of strength and self-understanding. The paper menagerie, as both a literal and symbolic presence, illustrates the resilience of cultural identity and the transformative power of reconciling the past with the present.

Liu's narrative resonates deeply in contemporary discussions of immigration and cultural identity, where global migration continues to challenge traditional notions of belonging and assimilation. The story's themes—cultural displacement, the tension between heritage and acceptance, and the intergenerational dynamics of identity—offer a universal reflection on the human desire for connection and self-definition. By situating these themes within the intimate bond between a mother and son, Liu underscores the enduring significance of familial love in navigating the complexities of cultural identity.

In a world increasingly shaped by migration and cultural exchange, *The Paper Menagerie* serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of cultural heritage in forging a sense of self. Liu's story not only invites readers to reflect on their own identities but also emphasizes the emotional and cultural resilience that emerges from reconnecting with one's roots, even amidst the challenges of a fragmented and interconnected world.

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