
The Politics of Subjugation: Intersectional Oppression in Jean Kwok's *The Leftover Woman*

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Article Received: 20/07/2025**Article Accepted:** 22/08/2025**Published Online:** 22/08/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.08.323

Abstract

This research paper critically explores Jean Kwok's *The Leftover Woman* through the lenses of feminist theory, postcolonial discourse, and subaltern studies, focusing on the intersectional experiences of immigrant women. The novel powerfully captures the emotional, psychological, and structural subjugation of its female characters, particularly Lucy, a Chinese immigrant, who navigate oppressive systems rooted in patriarchy, racial discrimination, and legal inequality. By examining the manifestation of female subjugation, sexual exploitation, and systemic marginalization within both public and private spheres, the study highlights how transnational identities complicate the search for autonomy and selfhood. The paper further investigates how language barriers, cultural displacement, and legal bias reinforce women's invisibility in male-dominated and racially stratified societies. The analysis draws upon the theories of Ranjit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and bell hooks to expose the silencing mechanisms embedded in dominant narratives and to illuminate the resilience of immigrant women in reclaiming agency. Ultimately, this study argues that Kwok's narrative serves as a vital site for contesting hegemonic power structures and articulating a counter-discourse of resistance, identity formation, and female empowerment within a globalized, postcolonial context.

Key Words: Subjugation, Sexual exploitation, Transnational Identity, Female empowerment, Autonomy

Introduction

Jean Kwok's highly successful novel, *The Leftover Woman*, is a heart-wrenching and compelling work of fiction that profoundly examines the experience of the female, especially the subordination of women and sexual exploitation. As a ground breaking novel in today's literature, Kwok's work is a serious exploration of the complex issues that women, especially immigrant women, face in a globalized world. Against the historical background of

transnational migration and cultural displacement, Kwok's story reveals the brutal realities of racial, gendered, and socioeconomic oppression.

This research seeks to examine the rich layers of subjugation of women and sexual exploitation within the text, exploring the complex interplay of race, gender, and power relationships. The contexts of immigration history and transnational identity provide significant lenses through which to view the social norms governing the systemic discrimination and exploitation of women, particularly Chinese immigrant women. Kwok's representation of personal conflict, intricately interwoven into the tapestry of her story, is a window through which the wider issues confronting women in dealing with patriarchal dominance, cultural expectations, and economic disparities can be explored.

The goal of this analytical study is to disentangle the intricate webs of Kwok's story by examining the ways in which sexual exploitation and female subjugation appear and interact with larger social structures. By delving deeper into the text, this study seeks to shed light on women's resilience and power in the face of hardship and the long-term effects of such experiences on both individual and collective identity.

In *The Leftover Woman*, the challenges faced by immigrant women is examined through the lens of marginalization and silencing, especially within transnational and postcolonial studies. The subalternity as theorized by the Subaltern Studies Group led by Ranajit Guha in the 1980s offers an explanation of how some accounts remain marginalized due to the existence of dominant narratives. Even today, within a globalized context, the voices of immigrant and working-class women, especially from racial and ethnic minority groups, are systematically erased within the dominant narratives that shape history.

In this sense, as Bhagwat and Arekar contended, 'subaltern histories concern silenced people, vote-less people, and people who lie outside the caste system but are not part of the ruling classes' (38). The same statement can be made in regard to *The Leftover Woman*, in that it tries to represent women who are living 'in between' their homeland and adopted countries. Kwok empowers women by portraying their narratives through the lens of systemic oppression and resilience to challenge the dominant discourse that perpetually silences them, thus enhancing narratives on womanhood, migration, or identity construction.

Discussions of the subjugation of women have been encountered for centuries, as subjugation stems from the oppression and violence inflicted upon women for the mere fact of them being women. Subjugation is defined by the Oxford dictionary as gaining control over someone or something. For a woman, subjugation becomes visible when she begins to seek for basic amenities which are at times considered a privilege. Ever so often, women were denied these opportunities exclusively because of their sex. Opportunity were crafted and placed in a system but were provided to men only due to the pre-existing biases.

However, patriarchy patriarchal implies the presence of a man's world where he dominates women. They face oppression of autonomy on economic, private and public levels with the suppression of a woman's control over her own life, outside of her household. Within the walls of a patriarchal family, the husband holds all the power which further strips the wife of her means of autonomy making her dependent. Primarily basic human rights of freedom, movement and expression are fundamental need for everyone. Without the ability and means to voice their opinion, women are relinquished to the status of a slave which will not enable any progress. Gender stereotypes and traditionalism assign the role of the homemaker entirely to a woman who gets to enjoy legal and social discrimination as well as supremacy.

After receiving relentless oppression, women began to speak up and claim their right to exist in the space constructed for them. In the course of seeking for balance and for the pursuit of self-sufficiency, feminism came into existence. It is said, 'Feminism as a sociological paradigm is a reaction inflicted on women. Employment equality, wage gaps, and political representation are some of the suppressed challenges that feminism seeks to address.' As stated in Ranjan, "Feminists fight for equality to eliminate the difference between men and women. To bring equality, they make an effort to put a stoppage over the advocating words being used in our language, like mailman over mailperson. Feminists are struggling hard to bring women into the public scenario, by demanding jobs in the political sector, better healthcare for women, leadership positions in churches, and many more fields" (Ranjan 2019). The developing troubled consciousness of women led to the late nineteenth century women's movement resulting in the birth of different waves of feminism focusing on women's political and social rights.

Feminism has a strong connection to race, as racism has a big impact on how society treats women of color. Women who moved from China to other countries have often faced rejection and unfair treatment throughout history. The system in these new places has often kept them down. This has put them in tough spots and made them feel lost. They often struggle to balance their own culture with what their new home expects from them. Women worldwide face discrimination, but Chinese immigrant women deal with two types of unfair treatment - as women and as people of color. Crawley points out, "Subaltern women are affected by marginalization" (Crawley 172-184). Their day-to-day life is different from women born in the country. To give an example Chinese immigrant women have to handle both racial and gender bias, while native-born women struggle with gender issues. This double challenge of racism and sexism has made it necessary to create special movements to stand up for immigrant women's rights.

These works of literature didn't just make Chinese American writing richer, they also stood up to unfair treatment based on race and gender. Chinese feminism started to grow pushing the idea that Chinese women who moved to America shouldn't be seen as family members or workers. Instead, people should see them as individuals with their own rights and who they are as people. As feminism changed over time, women tried to show how

racism and unfair treatment of women often happened together. They fought for more people to be included and heard those who were often left out. The ongoing struggle to be seen, to have rights, and to be treated is still a big part of what feminists talk about. This helps make sure that Chinese immigrant women can speak up and be part of talks about gender and fairness in society.

Manifestation of Female subjugation and sexual exploitation

Slavery cemented racism, but this belief system grew within a structured racial order that had an impact on marginalized groups in America. Even after the plantation slave system ended, the mistreatment of marginalized women, once rationalized through racial prejudices, continued in different institutional ways. The political and social structures Europeans brought to America were steeped in sexism, which affected the lives of enslaved marginalized women. At first, the transatlantic slave trade focused on male slaves for their work value. But as plantation communities expanded marginalized women were forced into sexual relationships to create future generations of workers.

Americans came to believe that people of colour were not as good as them. This idea took root and spread. It made people think that oppressing these groups was okay because of their race, not because of how slavery worked. This way of thinking kept minority groups down even after slavery ended. Women who came from other countries had it tough. They faced unfair treatment from white people because of their race. At the same time, men in their own communities treated them because they were women.

As Spivak argues, "Third-world women are segregated. They are oppressed both by their male counterparts and by the American superior class. They are deemed inferior not because of their gender but also due to their class and caste." (Spivak 66-111). The ongoing oppression of immigrant women has an impact on their political clout and shapes social, economic, and cultural frameworks. American political institutions show clear signs of racism in how they strip subaltern women of their power and standing. The cultural hurdles these women face show how different forms of oppression, based on race, gender, and class overlap and intersect.

Bell hooks explains this relationship saying, "To both parties, I expressed my belief that the fight against racism and sexism were linked and that to separate them would be to ignore a fundamental truth of our existence. Gender or race, both are unchangeable aspects of our identity" (Hooks 1984). Immigrant women face unique challenges that American women or immigrant men don't. They must deal with white patriarchy and American racism as well as sexism within their own communities. In America, women of colour encounter many forms of discrimination, including racism, classism, and sexism. Subaltern women need to assert their individuality and demand recognition to overcome these obstacles, which fuels their fight against systemic unfairness. The push for an anti-slavery society paved the way for immigrant women to speak up, which led to the start of the feminist movement in America.

Representation of Racial Subjugation in *The Leftover Woman*

Jean Kwok's *The Leftover Woman* shows the racial pecking order in American society where women, immigrant women, face systematic domination. Rebecca and Lucy serve as examples of the racial gap in a male-dominated world. Even though Lucy tries to fit in, she knows she will never belong in Rebecca's world of privilege. We see this in her words, "I wasn't one of them even if I wanted to be" (179). This points out how racial rankings stop immigrant women from gaining complete social acceptance.

In Rebecca's social circle, language serves as a marker of smarts and skill. Lucy though bright, faces judgment due to her limited English skills. She admits, "In English, I was a different person, stuttering, slow and clumsy, inarticulate unintelligent" (179). This shows how language barriers don't just make talking tough, but also make people feel less than others.

Rebecca can't see Lucy for who she is because of her racial biases. These biases make her think of Lucy as a stereotype instead of a real person. Lucy thinks about this saying: "Rebecca, for whom appearances meant so much wasn't able to see past any of that to the woman I was in Chinese" (179). White people often put simple strict identities on immigrants, not seeing how complex they are. Lucy knows this and says: "My features were as impenetrable as a mirror reflecting back what she expected to see with her white gaze" (179). As time goes on, Lucy stops showing her wants and decides to become invisible. She admits, "it was easy to be invisible around Rebecca" (179). This shows how people who are pushed aside often accept society's limits instead of fighting against them.

Subjugation of Women in Male-Dominated Spaces

Rebecca's experiences in the publishing industry show how women struggle in male-dominated fields. Women must always balance being good at their jobs and fitting in. People watch them more than men, their reputations can be ruined by scandals, and they have fewer chances to stand up for themselves without facing criticism. Rebecca sees this tough situation: "She's a woman competing in a man's world, and she can lie down and conform, or she can stand up for herself" (230). This quote sums up the unfair system that makes women either follow what men expect or fight back and risk being pushed out. Unlike men, women in work and social settings face much more scrutiny about their personal lives.

Rebecca's public judgment becomes clear when a story about her personal and professional life shows up in mainstream media. She thinks, "Even though the article is short, that the story is big enough to make it into mainstream media bodes ill" (229). This hints that people often blow up and use women's actions against them, no matter the situation. The way they show her supposed scandal in pictures makes this problem even clearer: "A male hand draped close to her breast" (230). This shows how people turn women's private lives into public topics and judge their morals. Rebecca's experience is like what many women go through in male-dominated systems where their good name is easy to ruin, people always question what they achieve, and standing up for themselves comes at a big price.

Legal Subjugation of Immigrants in *The Leftover Woman*

The legal system often seen as fair, has a history of discriminating against certain groups immigrants. Lucy knows about these unfair practices. She understands that even though she acted to protect herself, the courts will not handle her case like they would for a white citizen. You can see how upset she is when she says, "But I am foreigner. And I kill somebody. Police not treat me like they treat you" (246). Rebecca feels sure the law will protect her. But Lucy thinks the police will assume she's guilty without giving her a fair chance.

Rebecca points out this difference when she tells Lucy, "Don't worry about me. I'm a white well-educated woman attacked in my own home. No jury in the world is going to convict me" (246). This comment reveals the built-in biases of the legal system where your race and social standing decide if people see you as innocent or guilty. Rebecca's power to protect Lucy from the system highlights the uneven balance of power even more—Rebecca can change the legal story, but Lucy can't control what happens to her. This situation shows the bigger picture of how immigrants are kept down where people on the edges of society don't get the same rights and protections as those with more advantages.

Conclusion

Jean Kwok brings to life powerful events in her book *The Leftover Woman*. The study looks at these events linking them to the ongoing struggles of immigrant women today. These events show biases and racial control demonstrating how women face both racial and sexual abuse. People often see women as less capable, with men and society as a whole limiting their rights. Women get fewer chances than men because many think they should do housework and can't handle bigger jobs.

Lucy and Rebecca come across as tough women, but they still give in sometimes. They want to fight back, but they choose to wait it out. They know how hard life can be for women of color. Jean Kwok stands up against keeping women down. She speaks for women of color who society has kept quiet for a long time.

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