



DIASPORIC DRIFT: HYBRIDITY AND POSTCOLONIAL DISPLACEMENT IN LING MA'S *SEVERANCE* (2018)

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Abstract

Ling Ma is a Chinese-American writer born in Fujian, and raised in China, Kansas and Utah. Her work is imbued with a sense of transnational mobility, cultural hybridity, and the lived experience of immigrant life. The theme of fragmented identity in the diaspora is captured in *Severance*, the latest published novel by Ma. This paper discusses how Ma uses the concept of hybridity as the main narrative process that challenges the ambiguities of cultural belonging, displacement, and self-definition in a globalized world. *Severance* exposes the conflicts between assimilation and cultural preservation through the character of Candace Chen, a Chinese American woman who has to survive in the environment of the collapsing capitalist system and the haunting of the immigrant memory. Based on postcolonial theories of hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha, the analysis identifies the way the novel reimagines this zone as simultaneously a site of alienation and a locus of creative resistance. The narrative's oscillation between monotonous routine and apocalyptic disruption mirrors the psychological dissonance of the diasporic subject, whose fractured identity parallels the broader dissolution of postmodern subjectivity under late capitalism. In the end, this paper claims that *Severance* changes the state of diasporic into an allegory of modern global precarity, and how hybrid identities can serve not only as symptoms of displacement but also as coping mechanisms in a more homogenized cultural environment.

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Diaspora, Hybridity, Displacement, Transnational Identity*

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1. Introduction

Diasporic literature is literature produced by exiled writers, and it addresses the depths of psychological and cultural nuances of migration, foregrounding themes of home, memory, and displacement in ways that reveal both the material and imagined dimensions of belonging. The homeland is viewed as a re-constructed territory via nostalgia, and hostland as a place of negotiation of different cultures, which brings a possibility of new identities but it also creates marginalization and sense of alienation. At the heart of this experience is a fractured self-consciousness, double consciousness, that is characterized by the tension of living in two souls and to view oneself in the eyes of others. Therefore, diasporic narratives grapple with alienation, rootlessness, and the ongoing search for identity, as well as with the blending or fragmentation of cultures when individuals are caught between different places, traditions, and languages

Diasporic Literature is written by authors who live outside their homeland; and is characterized by alienation, nostalgia, loneliness, search for identity and constant displacement of the self. It deals with emigrant sensibility and focuses on the lives of immigrants and their internal and external conflicts in an alien land. (Samuel & Pulizala, 2023, p. 136)

Ling Ma contributes to her fiction a unique sensibility informed by the transnational movement, cultural hybridity, and lived experience in immigrant communities. Her most significant works, *Severance* and the series of stories, *Bliss Montage*, are about the theme of alienation, universal capitalism, displacement of the culture, memory, and the uncanny working of the modern life. Throughout these writings, Ma questions the psychological impacts of globalization, the commodification of identity and the stresses of existing in a world that is rapidly changing between cultures. *Severance* is a complex of dystopian narrative, social satire, and immigrant consciousness that explore the way identity is re-invented in the crossroads of cultural hybridity, the late-capitalist system of labor, and postcolonial displacement. Against the haunting, post-apocalyptic scenario, *Shen Fever*, the novel uses the apocalypse as a potent metaphor of cultural dissipation, economic exploitation and the loss of self in a world that is becoming homogenized. Through the character of Candace Chen, a Chinese-American millennial navigating the sterile world of corporate Bible production, Ma (2018) illustrates the psychological dissonance inherent in hybrid identity, where the pressures of assimilation and the demands of neoliberal capitalism mirror the mechanical stagnation of the “fevered,” whose compulsive routines echo the numbing effects of modern labor. The fragmentation of the concept of home Candace experiences and her identification with the immigrant history of her parents and her own alienated present as an urban dweller is the

result of the ongoing negotiation that is the order of the day in the life of the diasporic caused by modern capitalism. By doing so, not only does *Severance* provide a subtle reflection on the theme of displacement and belonging but it also re-defines the immigrant experience as an allegory of postcolonial alienation in the context of globalization, memory, and the legacies of the colonial modernity.

2. Literature Review

Diaspora is the movement of indigenous people or a population of common people to a place other than their homeland region and its experience or tensions is all about what migrants face while in the diaspora and after they return to their motherland. (Smith, 2014, p. 1)

Diaspora is the term used to denote the scattering of individuals out of their motherland and results in the experiences of displacement, nostalgia, and negotiations of belonging in the foreign cultures. In postcolonial studies, diaspora does not just denote a re-location in the geographical space but also a psychological and cultural state of hybridity and divided identity. Such heterogeneous groups as colonizers, settlers, tradesmen, expelled slaves, tradesmen and others victims, pursuing enhanced opportunities were incorporated into what is now termed the 'diaspora'. Their similarity was that they all shared common identity (David & Muñoz-Basols, 2011). Diaspora has been conceived in the context of contemporary literary and cultural studies to capture not only a dispersal of a geographical nature, but also may be viewed as a state of existence in which a negotiation of conflicting identities, loyalties and affinities to culture is persistent as a characteristic. Clifford (1994) describes diasporas as "dispersed networks of peoples who share common historical experiences of dispossession, displacement [and] adaptation" (p. 309). Moreover, "diaspora discourses" are "experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home, while remaining rooted in specific, discrete histories" (Clifford, 1994, 302). Ang (2005) imagines the idea of diasporas as complex and dynamic units that span both space and time to include transnational communities with common cultural memories and attachments. She refers to them as "transnational, spatially, and temporally sprawling socio-cultural formations of people," whose "blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original homeland" (Ang, 2005, p. 25). Diaspora plays a major role in creating hyphenated identities and is one of the contributors to the experience of alienation exhibited by immigrants (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 596).

Jhumpa Lahiri is commonly considered one of the most prominent Asian American authors whose books focus on the Indian diaspora, especially on the struggles of

immigrants to adapt to the new reality. Her novels are the conflict between cultural demands of India and the demands of the new society and, in many cases, the conflict between generations and identity as well as belonging. Lahiri manages to reflect on the psychology of immigrants, their behaviors and cultural negotiations due to the description of the specifics of the expatriate life, which is reflected in narratives that are insightful and resonant. “[Lahiri’s] stories are not only fictional works that we read; they are actual accounts of the expatriate community in which they live” (Gaur & Mahawar, 2023, p. 144).

Kamila Shamsie and Monica Ali are representatives of the literature of diasporas, so their works are critical and focus on issues of displacement and migration. Throughout *Burnt Shadows* and *Brick Lane*, Shamsie and Ali discuss the complicated issues of identity development in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi diasporic setting. Both novels indicate the consciousness of both authors to the realities of migration, and how the immigrants go through the challenges of negotiating between the Western cultural demands and their ancestral roots. The key issue of these stories is cultural hybridity, which is all about how subtly diasporic people balance between the expectations of the past and contemporary life demands. The selected novels “are the outcome of diasporic experiences. They deal with the problems and struggles of the immigrants’ assimilation of the western identity” (Mortaza et al., 2024, p. 4185).

Despite the wide attention paid to *Severance* by Ma due to its criticism of late capitalism, consumer culture and the modern labor practices, relatively little research has been done to understand how it addresses the issue of postcolonial and diasporic identities. The portrayal of Candace Chen in the middle of her Chinese traditions and the American corporate culture as a subject in the novel provides a subtle discussion of hybridity and displacement which have received less critical scrutiny.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary analysis grounded in diasporic studies and postcolonial theory to examine Ling Ma’s *Severance*. Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity and the “third space,” the paper employs close reading to explore how the novel negotiates identity in migration through themes of cultural and linguistic displacement, intergenerational tension, and psychological estrangement. The analysis synthesizes textual evidence, character development, and secondary scholarship to situate the novel within broader academic discourse on diaspora, hybridity, and the complexities of belonging in a transnational and postcolonial context.

The term ‘postcolonial’ had been first applied to refer to the era that followed decolonization. It was a periodizing term, a historical and not an ideological concept. Erstwhile colonial territories that had been decolonized were just postcolonial states” (Lazarus, 2004, p. 9). Postcolonial theory is not limited to a time marker, however, since it is used to explore the long-term cultural, political and social consequences of colonialism, particularly in the way formerly colonized populations negotiate identity, power and representation in the wake of the imperialist era. The significant ideas that are anticipated in its foregrounding include hybridity, imitation, resistance, and creation of the Other in an effort to undermine continuous colonialism, and it acknowledges the anti-colonial movements as the origin and inspiration of the politics (Rukundwa & Van Aarde, 2007). The postcolonial theory, as a critical theory, sheds light on the complicated mechanisms of liberation, identity formation, and cultural bargaining in the postcolonial period following the colonial domination, and offers the dialectical discourse that generally identifies the historical fact of the decolonisation. “It allows people emerging from socio-political and economic domination to reclaim their sovereignty; it gives them a negotiating space for equity” (Rukundwa & Van Aarde, 2007, p. 1174).

Homi K. Bhabha is one of the pioneering postcolonial theorists whose writings are concerned with the cultural hybridity, the ambivalence of the colonial power and identity formation through negotiations within the liminal spaces. His theories of the Third Space and mimicry reveal the idea of resisting and unsettling the dominant power structures by the colonized subjects who do not follow rigid identities. One of the key ideas that contribute to the theory of postcolonialism is the idea of hybridity of culture and identity introduced by Bhabha that accentuates the fluidity of both identity and culture, as something that is constantly constructed by a process of negotiation and intercultural discourse. Hybridity challenges fixed binaries, hierarchical structures, and the notion of “pure” cultures, thereby revealing the power dynamics between colonizers and the colonized (Saqib et al., 2022). Cultural identity, says Bhabha (1994), cannot exist as a static site, and instead it is continuously negotiated in the social, historical, political situations to create spaces of tension and ambiguity: “It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are structured in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation... that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 54-55). Building on the concept, Bhabha (1994) proposes the so-called third space of enunciation, an intermediate space in which the hybrid identities evolve and the meaning of culture renegotiated, as an expression of the attempts of the colonial power to homogenize the colonized, and at the same time creating “something recognizable and new” (Al-Qassab, 2025, p. 313).

Hybridity is closely related to the concept of mimicry developed by Bhabha to refer to the partial assimilation of the language, behaviors and customs of the colonizer by the colonized as a way of gaining social acceptance. This mimicry is, nevertheless, an incomplete mimicry, creating contradictions, which reveals and destabilizes the colonial power. Ambivalence is the attraction and repulsion of the colonial culture at the same time, the conflict between the assimilation and protecting the unique identity. In the Third Space, the practice of hybridity can be seen as a subversive tool that dismantles mainstream discourses and reveals the falsity of identity. Bhabha (1994, p. 28) explains that “the transformational value of [third space] lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One... nor the Other... but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both.” This liminal space serves as a generative site for reinterpretation, reflection, and transformation, where all social and cultural formations, including nations, ethnic groups, and diasporic communities, are inherently hybrid, shaped through historical negotiation, exchange, and resistance. Theorized as a kind of resistance, hybridity disrupts cultural purity, turns into a zone of empowerment and functions to deconstruct colonial ideologies to legitimize pluralistic and shifting identities. As Bhabha (1994) further observes, hybridity is “a problematic of colonial representation... that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (pp. 112-115). Through these mechanisms, hybridity within the Third Space challenges hierarchical power structures and asserts the presence of the colonized voice in ongoing cultural negotiations.

4. Textual Analysis

Diaspora refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non- hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia... They are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. (Mishra, 2005, p. 1)

Severance is a reflection of subtle form of displacement, migration, and cultural negotiation in the context of interlocked globalization and postcolonial identity. The personal lives of the characters in the novel are framed against a more social and historical backdrop, in processes preempting the experiences of immigrants and their descendants as they struggle against geographic, cultural, and psychological displacement. Ma (2018) explores the voluntary and involuntary dynamics of migration, the American Dream, and the constant struggle between the heritage and assimilation through the lives of Zhigang,

Ruifang, and Candace. The migration of Zhigang is unlike the involuntary migrations which are commonly linked with war, persecution, or war crises of refugees. Zhigang's education "in America through a scholarship from the University of Utah" (Ma, 2018, p. 144) is a great example of a first-generation immigrant trying to achieve the American Dream by means of intentional transnational movement. His emigration was shaped by personal, social, and historical factors, including fractured family relationships—his third brother's contempt, referring to him as "the capitalist" and "some prodigal son" (Ma, 2018, p. 82), and confrontations declaring, "You can't just come back" (Ma, 2018, p. 82)—which prompted Zhigang, as Ruifang recalls, to resolve, "We are never going back" (Ma, 2018, p. 149). Ma situates this migration within post-revolutionary China's turbulent sociopolitical landscape, particularly the Cultural Revolution, when universities were "shut down for several years" (Ma, 2018, p. 146), which forced him to find academic and professional escape in foreign countries.

The economic situation in China which is marked by few employment opportunities and poor payment of intellectuals also encouraged the movement of Zhigang. He regarded migration as an escape of economic stagnation and a way to professional happiness by pointing out that the most viable employment opportunities in China are "government jobs" (Ma, 2018, p. 39). The immigration policies in the west especially after World War II such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which repealed the discriminatory quotas and offered preferential treatment to educated and skilled Asian immigrants contributed to his acquisition of opportunities abroad. In the same context, Zhigang received the scholarship to the University of Utah to become the first student from China "to be admitted into the department" (Ma, 2018, p. 144), which is both a story of his personal success and the inclusiveness of the U.S. academia to Asian scholars. The path of Zhigang is characterised by the interaction of the processes of diasporic consciousness, hybridity and professional success. When he received his doctoral degree, he was able to find as "an analyst position at an insurance firm" (Ma, 2018, p. 39), which is out of this world, because the low-wage workers were the traditional Chinese immigrants. His perseverance secured his finances, which helped to take perfect care of his daughter Candace: "the family coffers or whatever would last me just long enough—maybe, say, for the next ten, fifteen years, for me to be comfortable with not working, long enough to be useless" (Ma, 2018, p. 45). The fact that Zhigang takes Candace to the United States to pursue a higher education is an indication of the economic empowerment of Zhigang and his desire to work towards transgenerational progress.

Immigrants live in a continual process of negotiating the cultural practices of both their homeland and their host society. They are never entirely detached from the cultural origins that have shaped them and their ancestors (Bhandari, 2021). Ma (2018) also notes

that the fact that Zhigang became an American citizen was the symbolic-psychological break with the native land, which served as a kind of self-reinvention that allowed him to view his past without the burden of emotions. Although his assimilation into the US society seems to be smooth, it is a blend of structural privilege, family support and individual tenacity and not due to personal effort alone. His emigration was also accompanied by the opening of the Chinese universities following the Cultural Revolution, “when Chinese universities reopened and accepted only a few students, that he gained admission” (Ma, 2018, p. 146), which created an exceptional learning opportunity that predestined his success in a foreign country. Ma emphasizes that Zhigang “had studied so hard that he had developed ulcers and lay in bed for days” (Ma, 2018, p. 146), and his continued work ethic in the United States. Zhigang had spent his entire life working relentlessly, staying late at the office and returning home to cold leftovers in the refrigerator. His dedication earned him promotion after promotion, helped by the fact that he often went in to work on weekends as well. “His work ethic was like that of many other immigrants, eager to prove their usefulness to the country that had deigned to adopt them” (Ma, 2018, p. 158).

Ma (2018) notes that one of the goals Zhigang had was to become a professor of literature, and he never actually achieved it, but his study of English by himself with *The Red and the Black* shows his intellectual commitment: “[Zhigang] taught himself English using a translation of the French novel *The Red and the Black*. He looked up every single word in a Chinese–English dictionary” (Ma, 2018, p. 159). This interaction with the Western texts helped him internalize the cultural norms of the West. Trying to engage in the study of canonical Western literature, Zhigang subconsciously imbibed the culture of bourgeois cultural ideals, aligning his thinking and behavior with the existing Western paradigms. Ma (2018) highlights that these aspects including policy reforms, education advantage, hard work, and cultural assimilation made Zhigang and other immigrants settle successfully in the American society showing the productive and adaptive possibilities of diasporic subjects and exposing the ideological and cultural changes inherent in the postcolonial displacement and the transnational migration. Although Zhigang kept a cool exterior, particularly in comparison with his wife Ruifang who was openly displaying her nervousness, his internal conflicts were deep. Behind the facade of stability was a deep feeling of homesickness and loneliness, which he tried to reveal by his affinity to Chinese literature. Still, years after moving to the United States, Zhigang managed to amass Chinese literature, maintaining a symbolic connection with his native land. After he died, Candace found this life-long commitment in his treasures: “Most of our family belongings had been placed in storage... The law firm would have then forwarded this last box to the storage facility that held my family’s possessions” (Ma, 2018, p. 35). This long-term

relationship highlights the role of literature as a cultural grounding, as well as a psychological hiding place in the host country. The case of Zhigang can be viewed as a typical case of the two-fold issues of the first generation immigrants: they have to adjust to the new culture and at the same time feel alienated in their own land. His collection of Chinese books provided him with comfort and the ability to recreate the comfort of home in the American foreign environment in the short term. Though assimilated and successful in the material world, the hidden desire of returning to his past was with Zhigang, which is depicted by his visits to China to make peace with the lost family members: “I’d visited Fuzhou during high school. My father had been sick, and the trip was understood as a peacemaking attempt with his relatives, who had felt abandoned after he’d moved to the States” (Ma, 2018, p. 69). His career path shows how voluntary migration, caused by ambition, family conditions, and the world opportunity, brings about both opportunity and continual psychological displacement, bringing out the paradox of the diasporic life: world success and inner alienation.

Ruifang Yang, the mother of Candace, is a representation of the fusion of geographical, cultural, and language displacement. In contrast to Zhigang who adjusts rather easily to the new environment, Ruifang faces an increased cultural sensitivity and an initial hostile attitude to assimilation. Her experience demonstrates the problems of Chinese immigrant women, who go through daily situations that constantly remind them of the gap between motherland and the country of residence, the old and the new self. Such continuous bargaining is the expression of the loss of indigenous cultural identity and the erosion of familiar traditions, and the way that diasporic consciousness is unevenly distributed on gendered and generational lines. The experience of Ruifang is an extreme break of the culture displacement. She is unable to adjust to the life in the United States, as she leaves her life and career behind in China, holding to the traditional practices as a way of preservation to her Chinese identity and her belonging to a new world. The novelist depicts how Ruifang submerges into the life of the Chinese community in foreign land. Among the other wives, Ruifang thrived. She joined the ladies’ committee and helped organize the Sunday lunches. Together, they also arranged Bible study groups on Friday nights. “Whenever a Chinese holiday approached, the committee prepared big, extravagant celebrations, using the church space to worship and to celebrate at the same time” (Ma, 2018, p. 152). These communal activities enabled her to figuratively recreate her homeland in an alien territory, through customary traditions which served as an anchor that kept her to the origins. Through this, cultural ritual served as a preservation process- opposed to assimilation through restatement of her Chinese identity.

Language acquisition stands as a pivotal pillar for the successful integration of refugees and immigrants into host societies. However, conventional language education

methods often lack the adaptability and inclusivity required to cater to the diverse needs and challenges faced by these populations. (Peguero, 2024, p. 135)

Ma (2018) emphasizes that language is the key location of displacement and alienation in immigrants. To Ruifang, the shift to English is a dramatic change of identity: being a skilled professional and speaking her native language, she faces English as the language of dominance and pushes her native language to the background. This language displacement is also most vividly described in her communication with Mormon missionaries, when her poor language skills and accent cause misunderstandings, including using “Sank you” instead of “Thank you,” or miscommunicating her request for the missionaries to remove their shoes (Ma, 2018, p. 147). These instances are evidence of how the linguistic barrier can contribute to social marginalization and increase the feeling of being an outsider among the immigrant in the country, showing the insidious but very noticeable consequences of cultural and linguistic displacement. The gender aspect of migration is also brought out through the experiences of Ruifang. The psychological and cultural cost of relocation is particularly acute in *Severance* where women are faced with the loss of language, community and continuity of the culture. As a communicative and cultural tool, language takes the center stage of maintaining heritage and identity. Ruifang participates actively in the Chinese Christian Community Church despite her problems, and is instrumental in the formation of Mandarin classes to teach their children how to read and write Mandarin. This thing emphasizes her desire to preserve cultural continuity to the next generation and also shows the importance of language in the continuity of Chinese identity in a diasporic situation. Following her disease with Alzheimer, Ruifang tells her story to Candace several times, finally speaking to her daughter “with solemnity in Chinese” (Ma, 2018, p. 160). This tenacity demonstrates her long-term connection with her country of origin, fidelity to her cultural background, and strong sense of appreciation of her native language. Women such as Ruifang tend to feel the effects of migration more intensely than their male counterparts, as they are forced to relocate, they are not adequately prepared, and they are not accustomed to the culture of the new country, which adds to their psychological stress.

“The concept of diaspora... primarily accounts for traumatic experience of forced dispersal of a certain group of people” (Bhandari, 2021, p. p. 107). Ma (2018) also highlights the first material and cultural difficulties experienced by Ruifang when he arrived in the United States. She and Zhigang are put to stay in a poor-quality basement flat, which is characterized as “the beige carpets stank of cigarette smoke and the sweet-sourness of mildew” (p. 145), and the closest grocery store is a mile distant. This physical and social displacement enhances nostalgia and alienation, especially to the women who are forced to move in a foreign land with no proper preparation and guidance. Ruifang is

constantly affected by cultural shocks, social isolation, and job barriers because of the language barrier: “[t]hey left every party early, and soon, they stopped attending such gatherings at all” (Ma, 2018, p. 146). She fails to be socially or professionally integrated as opposed to the ideological optimism of 1960s China which is summarized in the adage that women can hold up half the sky, which is a reflection of her previous professional achievement as a certified accountant... among her clients different officials in the city and region government. The fact that her job was considered significant enough to stay in Fuzhou during the Cultural Revolution, her sisters, as well as other young people, were sent to years of menial labor in the country, etc. Structural barriers, cultural loss, and personal frustration are manifested in the United States, where repeated job rejections, based on “her lack of fluency with English and her lack of a work visa” (Ma, 2018, p. 146). Ma (2018) demonstrates the difficulties of Chinese women migration which is driven mostly by family, underlining emotional, psychological, and cultural stress of adjustment. Their integration is limited by linguistic challenges, restrictive immigration laws, and lack of familiarity with the host culture, which results in continued sense of alienation. On the contrary, Candace is a second-generation immigrant experience, whose early migration makes the practical assimilation less demanding yet creates a complicated dual cultural identity. Her growing up in the United States creates a continual clash between her inherited Chinese roots and her experienced American reality, which is an example of psychological rootlessness.

Ma (2018) shows that Candace represents this broken state of belonging that follows the conflict between two cultural inheritances. The identity crisis that arises because of the navigation between American and Chinese cultural worlds is a common struggle among the second generation immigrants. Due to the unique cultural frameworks that are related to various geographical spaces, displacement is bound to create cultural identity issues. The main cause of her psychological alienation, therefore, is the identity dilemma of Candace, a constant discomfort of being between two worlds. She desires some consistent sense of identity that would de-label her as the other in society, but the concurrent attraction between two cultural matrices makes such oneness impossible. Therefore, she exists in a transitional stage: she is shallowly assimilated into either culture, but deeply alienated to both. Candace, a Chinese born, who was taken to the United States at the age of six, does not accept her new world at first, and longs to go home: “When we moved to the U.S., I had wanted to go back home, there was nothing I wanted more, I got on my knees and begged like a dog” (Ma, 2018, p. 41). Even her initial impressions of America, which include being “dazed at the variety and surplus of the supermarkets, miles of boxes and bottles lit with fluorescent lighting” (Ma, 2018, p. 16) demonstrate fascination as well as alienation. She is portrayed as being calm and obedient in China, but

after moving to a new place, she becomes someone who is “angry, chronically dissatisfied, bratty” (Ma, 2018, p. 155). This psychological transformation is the manifestation of the confusion that comes with forced adjustment to new cultural realities.

Candace absorbs the ambitions of her parents, which are both influenced by the requirements of Confucian filialism and the American Dream. The fact that Zhigang believes that “there are abundant opportunities here. Candace has the potential to truly make a name for herself” (Ma, 2018, p. 39) stresses the weight of success generation by insisting on the fact that her success is not only linked to her personal fulfillment, but also to her family pride, which is rather typical of the conservative Chinese tradition according to which accomplishment is equated with filial piety. Nevertheless, Candace lives her life in New York as a modest person, and even during the disastrous epidemic of the so-called, “Shen Fever,” she performs her work mechanically, “walking around aimlessly, without anywhere to go, anything to do” (Ma, 2018, p. 38), which symbolizes the emptiness of the immigrant in her pursuit of material success. The epidemic also makes Candace even more of an outsider. Her marginalization is racialized when Congress enacts a travel ban targeting Asian nations—“China at the top of the list” (Ma, 2018, p. 177). The efforts to reach out to the family in China fail because of linguistic barriers; being unable to read Chinese characters, she uses Google Translate to talk to her cousin Bing Bing, their communication is limited to “a series of emoticons” (Ma, 2018, p. 179). This loss of communication with ancestors is the slow loss of her Chinese identity, which depicts the psychological and cultural displacement of the second generation immigrants. Candace lives in the middle of the contemporary world but is psychologically marginalized, torn between two cultural homelands, being a member of neither. Although she is not eager to emigrate, she finally does so and takes chances of personal development that her new life provides her with, shaped by the desires of her family. She remarks, “...city was really beautiful” (Ma, 2018, p. 41), which indicates that she is becoming increasingly grateful to her father that he decided to leave China. She is later hired by Spectra after graduation where she passes the U.S citizenship test with her father, which formalizes her acculturation into American civic life. In spite of such indicators of adaptation, Candace is psychologically displaced. She takes part in the games of her American friends at a shark fin dinner party, where she wanders through the rooms, “play[s] at everything and losing, laugh[s] hysterically as [she] scatter[s] the cards, stumble[s] on the mat...” (Ma, 2018, p. 48), but then withdraws, “like a homeless person” and taking solace in the “insulated” solitude of her private space (Ma, 2018, p. 49). This episode highlights the fact that citizenship and assimilation do not necessarily bring about cultural belonging. Candace is a representation of hybridity, as she is negotiating a fluid identity that integrates and alienates her at the same time between Chinese and American worlds. She cannot

completely revert to the cultural paradigm of her parents, but cannot completely submerge into the American paradigm, which is the characteristic of the ambivalence and divided consciousness of the diasporic life. Candace develops a pluralistic and changing hybrid identity by selectively incorporating elements of her inherited and adopted cultures, and in this example, the creative negotiation that occurs as a result of displacement is exhibited.

Ma (2018) demonstrates that Candace eventually does not reach a complete cultural hybridity and does not create a safe psychological third space. Back in China, she feels alienated by her extended family, as “her contact with them has been intermittent at best” (Ma, 2018, p. 69). The appearance of the so-called Shen Fever only breaks these ties, and she regrets that that “the remainder of my family, distant genealogical lines, [is] dimming” (Ma, 2018, p. 179). At the same time, her belonging to America is not stable. Even though she used to see New York as a symbol of freedom, she does not want to move out as Jonathan warns her that “Manhattan is sinking” (Ma, 2018, p. 15), which demonstrates her weak connection to the American identity. The image of freedom and security that Candace has is destroyed as the epidemic spreads. She is immune to the so-called Shen Fever and she is part of a group that tries to recreate the society but is later thrown in prison by their leader, Bob, and faces the weakness of the perceived freedom she had once equated with America. Her subsequent escape is a denial of her made American identity as well as her disjointed cultural identity. At the final moments of the novel, when she still makes progress, “pressing on, at a painful crawl” (Ma, 2018, p. 243), Candace is taken on a trip that highlights the ambiguous and unresolved nature of the diasporic displacement, which is rootless, suspended between two worlds.

5. Conclusion

Severance is a vivid portrayal of how the process of migration and cultural displacement creates a sense of permanent estrangement and hybridity. In the language difficulties of Ruifang and her professional exclusion, as well as the mental alienation of Candace, Ma (2018) questions the issue of adjusting to a new culture and at the same time being emotionally attached to the mother country. The efforts of the characters to balance their Chinese identity with the American modernity end up failing and reveal the challenge of creating a stable third space where dual identities could co-exist and live in harmony. The novel breaks down the American Dream myth and reinvents the life of the diaspora as a constant negotiation, in which belonging is temporary and identity is fluid. On the post-apocalyptic background, *Severance* turns the cultural displacement into a metaphor of the present-day life, and hybridity is not the resolution but the continuous drift between the worlds, which reflects the uncertainty and temporality of the postcolonial diaspora.

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