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**Assimilation in Ethnic Literature: Ha Jin's *A Free Life*  
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Fulfilment of the Requirements for a Master's Degree in Anglophone Language,  
Literature, and Civilizations.**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation with love to my lovely parents, my sister and my brothers.

To all my beloved friends.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the best partner ever Fatma.

**CHABOUTI Bouthaina**

I dedicate this work to my beloved parents **Djamel** and **Samira** who supported me since childhood, my brothers **Zakaria** and **Mohamed**, my sister **Sara**, and my lovely brothers' wives **Ikram** and **Ines**.

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the theme of assimilation in American ethnic literature. Ethnic writers tend to discuss immigrants' life in America and their capability of assimilating to the new culture. The thesis explores positive as well as negative consequences of assimilation in Ha Jin's *A Free Life* (2007). The study reveals the impact of the notion of the 'American Dream' in shaping the process of assimilation. The desire to assimilate is often triggered by the pursuit of the American dream. The study records the protagonist's journey of seeking a new life in a new country and all the opportunities this country offers him. Moreover, the thesis aims at discussing the pressure Asian immigrants endure. Finally, this study demonstrates the protagonist's awareness about the danger of chasing blindly the American dream embodied in the material success and ignoring his own dream.

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## Introduction

Asian American literature has become popular in the United States since 1970s. Many researches were done to investigate different themes being tackled by Asian writers settling in the United States. Through their works, they introduced their culture to the entire world. The term 'Asian American literature' came to describe works of ethnic writers of Asian origin living in America. Writers such as, Amy Tan, and Maxine Hong Kingston can be categorized as Asian American writers. Their literary products dealt with the issue of immigration, generational gap, discrimination, and racism. All these themes are related to the experience of immigration.

Ha Jin is a Chinese writer who immigrated to the United States. His novel, *A Free Life* (2007) was a shift from discussing Chinese culture to focusing on the issue of immigration in America. This study seeks to investigate the issue of immigration experienced by Asian immigrants. This study deals with the Chinese minority in the United States. Through *A Free Life*, Ha Jin, the Chinese writer, depicts the consequences of immigration in relation to the American Dream. This study aims at showing the impact of the American culture on Chinese immigrants. It also focuses on the effect of the notion of 'model minority' on Asian immigrants' life in America. It is a portrayal of the protagonist's struggles to achieve his own dream. Moreover, this dissertation shows to what extent Asian immigrants can adapt to the American life. The reason behind working on this theme was linked to a desire to explore the difficulties faced by minorities. This work seeks to expose minorities' suffering in creating a new life in the host country. The novel was chosen to detect the reality of the American dream.

Ha Jin's *A Free Life* is analysed through different literary theories. The first theory to be used is ethnic studies. It is a theory that is concerned with a study of race and ethnicity. It examines socio-cultural as well as historical experiences that shape cultural identities. The

theory is employed to examine historical and social consequences of Chinese immigration to the United States. It will accentuate effects of Chinese Americans assimilation to the mainstream culture. Having hyphenated identities is one of these effects.

Both Ha Jin and his story's protagonist Nan Wu are Chinese immigrants with dual identities. Within the ethnic studies theory, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois introduced the concept of “double consciousness” in which the individual possesses two identities; ethnic identity and American identity. In addition to ethnic studies, the postcolonial literary theory appears in *A Free Life* since it contains different themes and concepts such as “marginality”. Ha Jin mainly uses the concept of marginality in explaining the characters’ experience with being always in the second place. The discussed theories are applied to show the living conditions of an immigrant family and its experiences with cultural changes.

The theme of this dissertation is tackled in three chapters. The first chapter is theoretical; it is divided into two sections. The first section will offer different definitions of assimilation. It will discuss the term of ‘assimilation’ from different perspectives. In the second section, the focus will be a discussion of assimilation in the ethnic literature. It will be also an opportunity to learn about different minor writers such as; Julia Alvarez, Amy Tan, Abu Jaber, and Maxine Hong Kingston in addition to their works that highly deal with the theme of assimilation.

The second and the third chapters of the dissertation will be analytical ones. The second chapter is divided into two sections. The first section tends to examine characters’ struggles with cultural dislocation and racism. The second section will deal with the protagonist and his family and the problems they face during their new experience of immigration. The third chapter is also an analytical one; it is divided into two sections. The

first section will explore the success of the protagonist and his family in establishing a new life in their host country, America. However, the second section will deal with the sacrifices that the protagonist makes for providing a better life for his family.

To conclude with, this study concentrates on analysing the issue of immigration and assimilation in Ha Jin's novel. Ha Jin without any doubt succeeded in portraying the issue of assimilation and its positive and negative consequences in immigrants' life through his work. While *A Free Life* describes the protagonist's struggles and frustrations in assimilating to the American culture, it also focuses on the opportunities that assimilation would guarantee.



## **Chapter 1: An Overview of Assimilation**

This chapter will examine the concept of assimilation within and outside the literary field. The chapter is composed of two sections; the first section will discuss assimilation. It will offer different definitions of the term 'assimilation'. The term 'assimilation' is examined through different perspectives such as sociology, psychology, and literature. Finally, the second section will show how assimilation is represented in literature by looking at different works of authors of different minor groups.

### **1.1. Definitions of Assimilation**

Assimilation is a term that has been seen from many different angles. Scholars gave this term various definitions that put it into two different columns. Some relate assimilation to integration (exchanging cultures between the two communities, to affect and to be affected by the host culture), and others think about it as an adjustment. Ruth Johnston in her work, *The Assimilation Myth* 1969, states that many scholars think that assimilation is reducing the cultural differences between the newcomers and the hosts by first, accepting the others' culture and the differences between them. This acceptance can lead to the change of beliefs and attitudes between both cultures (5).

In psychology, assimilation is seen through different ways. Nicole Beasley employs Jean Piaget's idea that, assimilation is considered to be as a cognitive process; it is a way of adding new beliefs, thoughts, and experiences to the existing ones. However, the second view shows that this process is done through accommodation in which the individual erases all the beliefs by displacing them with new beliefs.

Assimilation occupied a great importance in psychology since many psychological problems of immigrants are a result of assimilation. However, assimilation will always be a

crucial issue of culture. It discerns the relationship between minority groups and dominant societies; it is when a minority group absorbs values, behaviors, beliefs of the dominant group. In their article, entitled "Assimilation" Holohan and Siobhan Holohan declare that minorities are forced to adopt the culture of the host society for the sake of benefiting from a proper citizenship. They note that this way leads to full elimination of the original characteristics (2012).

Cultural studies distinguish between forced assimilation and unforced assimilation. The forced assimilation is the type when the dominant society obliges immigrants to practice its morals. The term "forced assimilation" became current in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to World Economic Forum, "Forced assimilation simply does not work. Not for business. Not for society. We need to develop and deploy participation platforms that ensure immigration results not in problems but opportunities" (Par.15). This means that helping immigrants and enabling them to adjust rather than forcing them to adopt will help break the barriers such as language and values. This would be the best solution for immigrants to adopt in their new homeland.

The definition that is offered by Chegg's study defines both Forced and unforced assimilation as follows "In forced assimilation, a person or group is compelled to take on the practices of another culture, such as by adopting that culture's language and religious traditions. In unforced assimilation, a person takes on the practices of another culture but is not forcibly compelled to do so" (Par.2). Forced assimilation is related to the host culture and its power that impose immigrants to practice its values, while in unforced assimilation, the individual embraces the others' cultures practices by his/her own choice.

Because of the forced assimilation that some cultures perform, some people perceive the host culture as negative. The negativity of arguments about assimilation appears on the harsh comments against it. Peter skerry in his article, "Do We Really Want Immigrants To

Assimilate”, argues that immigrants claim that by assimilating to a new culture, their traditions, attitude, beliefs will be erased, and their identity will no longer be known and that decreases cultural differences and diversity all over the world. Immigrants want to keep their culture, practice their beliefs and laws, keep using their language, but the host country always demands that if they want to benefit from their country and its wealth they should assimilate and abandon their culture (57-8).

There are measures to take by some governments against minorities that refuse to assimilate. Libby Nelson and Dara Lind state that, among the actions that America tends to take against poor, ethnic children who study in American schools is “the school-to-prison – pipeline” act. This strategy tends to push away children from schools to Juveniles court as a form of discipline; this act humiliates them and prevents them from having rights as American citizens (Par.17). Elizabeth Fussel in her article, “Warmth of the Welcome: Attitudes toward Immigrants and Immigration Policy” states that, assimilation encourages people to preclude immigrants and create the superiority of one group over another. Therefore, ethnic groups will always have the fear of interacting with others, and this kind of people tends to live with members from the same ethnicity to avoid the host country's rejection (482).

Another dangerous consequence of assimilation is the generational tension. In her article entitled “This is Home Bosnian Refugees Come of Age”, Cassandra barber declares that, these young refugees' assimilation into life in Utica is seen as both a blessing and a curse to their older counterparts, who fear for the loss of their heritage. The older generation's effort to hold on to that culture is visible in the Bosnian-cantered grocery stores, restaurants, nightclubs and mosques that have sprouted along city streets (Par.8). Cassandra tends to make a comparison between both generations and how they deal with assimilation whether they completely adopt within the new culture or to protect their own one.

While some believe that assimilation is nothing but a harmful issue, others believe that it is a good strategy to create a multicultural society and offer opportunities for the Immigrants. In the NBC News, Thomas John Borkaw is an American author and a journalist who suggests that immigrants who live in US should assimilate to the American culture. He states that, "I also happen to believe that the Hispanics should work harder at assimilation ... They ought not to be just codified in their communities but make sure that all their kids are learning to speak English". The idea behind Borkaw's statement is showing that no culture in the entire world is worthier than the American one. This fact encourages people to assimilate to this culture. He argues that young generation should learn to speak English inside and outside houses.

Similarly, Bobby Jindal the American politician declares that, "we need to insist on people that want to come to our country should learn English and adopt our values, roll up their sleeves ,and get to work" he adds, "we need to insist on assimilation , you know on Europe they're not doing that. They've huge problems. Immigration without assimilation is invasion. That can weaker our country". Bobby Jindal insists on assimilation because he thinks that this strategy saves America from being controlled by immigrants.

As assimilation can help the host society itself, it can be a useful method for immigrants. One can give the example of children who can easily be affected by racist acts, assimilation helps them feel members of the society by educating them, teaching them American ways .This act can help them develop love towards American culture and prevent hate crimes in the future. People generally immigrate to America looking for better living conditions. As assimilation gives them the chance to have better job opportunities and a respectful living place, it also makes them feel ashamed of their differences and feel lost between both cultures.

## 1.2. Assimilation in Ethnic Literature

The term ethnic highlights the difference between “White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism” and “ethnic immigrants” or “ethnic minorities”. Ethnic groups are “people of colour” (Andrew R. L. Cayton et al. 441). Consequently, ethnic literature is the body of writing that is produced by ethnic writers. Different writers from different nationalities, races, ethnicities... etc. tend to reflect the concept of assimilation throughout their stories, and in some cases, their representations are based on their own experiences in which they show how assimilation can affect immigrants either positively or negatively. Novels such as, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), and *ArabianJazz* (1993) are novels that draw attention to assimilation and how it is considered as a way of changing someone’s identity.

*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is a novel written by the Dominican-American novelist Julia Alvarez in 1991. This novel reflects somehow the author's life where she emigrated from Dominican Republic to the U. S. at the age of ten. The novel discusses the life of four sisters; Yolanda, Sofia, Carla, and Sandra, who left their country the Dominican Republic to live in New York. While being in America, the girls passed through two different phases; Acculturation and assimilation. Karen Castellucci Cox says, “The Garcia sisters’ initiation into adulthood seems deceptively ‘American’ despite their island roots” (145). At the beginning, the sisters tried to be in line with the Americans by adopting their attitudes and behaviours, but still have their own culture’s characteristics. However, later, their Americanism started to grow up, they felt that there is no need to follow old traditions, they found freedom that American girls have is the thing that they always needed. Castellucci Cox adds “like stereotypical American teenagers, they rebel against parental control, experiment with marijuana, explore their sexuality” (145).

In this case, it is easy for the Garcia sisters to embrace the new way of life, unlike their parents who refuse to abandon their original attitudes and traditions. Their father is always trying to guide them to cling to their own ethnic heritage, but he realizes that his daughters are no longer the same. This is an example of the generational gap that the Garcia family suffers from; it creates struggles between the sisters and their parents.

As Latinos suffer to relate both old and new generations with each other, Asians also found several complications in building connection between the two generations. Amy Tan is a Chinese American Writer who made herself well known by publishing her novel *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989. This novel represents the relationship between two generations; it speaks about four mothers and their Chinese-American daughters, and their experiences between the past and the present. In the past, the four mothers lived a hard life in which they were forced to give up on their country because of military issues. They had to detach from their roots, culture, language, and everything they were used to, just for having a better life, which is why they decided to move to San Francisco (98).

*The Joy Luck Club* is a representation of a two generations' conflict that is created as result of assimilating to a new culture. Harold Bloom states, "By containing half of her stories within the exclusionary frames of daughters who do not wish to address their mothers, Tan builds this phenomenon of acculturation into the structure of her narrative" (98). According to Bloom, the element of communication that can relate the two generations to each other is missing, this struggle is made because of the differences between the two generations, as Bloom says "this script of nativism yielding to assimilation suggests a temporal master narrative, as a movement from China and the past to America and the present... foregrounding the temporal element even further since each generation represents a different age as well as nationality and cultural identity" (98). Both mothers and daughters lived within two different

eras, this shows that the two generations witnessed two different cultures and thoughts that affect their relations and lead to the misunderstanding of each other's.

In the last two decades, Arab-American literature had successfully witnessed a great popularity within the American literary world. Arab-American writers challenge themselves to make their voices heard in the world of literature, like Diana Abu Jaber. In 1993, Abu Jaber published her first novel entitled '*Arabian Jazz*', that shows the conditions that Arab immigrants live in. Unlike the Garcia sisters' case, Ramoud's family struggles in adopting the American life, racism is always facing them, which makes them think of going back to Jordan and live there. The protagonist Matussem Ramoud tries to stay tuned with the American culture without forgetting his own, and adhering to his Arabism.

The question that is raised in Ramoud's family is: 'who they really are?'. Emilia Parpalâ through her analysis of *Arabian Jazz* states, "Matussem and his daughters struggle to secure their position in Racist America trying to cope with their cultural heritage in the new environment. Their existence spans the two cultures, two opposing identities" (105). According to Emilia Parpalâ, Matussem, and his two daughters: Jemorah and Melvina are internally struggling to define a single identity to find themselves. The difficulty here is that they live two different lives; inside the house, they behave according to what they grow up upon (Arabic life, Arabic traditions and culture). When it comes to leaving the house, they face a completely new world (332). American society holds certain beliefs and attitudes that stand in opposition with the Arabic culture. This is what makes them confused about their identity and which culture they should follow.

The same cultural confusion that is found in *Arabian Jazz* also exists in *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, an American writer whose parents are Chinese

immigrants; most of her works are based on her personal experiences. In her novel *The Woman Warrior*, she combines folktales, personal experiences, and family history all together, and talks about the feeling of being a multicultural person (148). In *The Woman Warrior*, it can be noticed that the writer sticks to her traditions in narrating the story. Kingston in her novel focuses on telling the story of five women, her dead aunt, and a mythical woman called Fa Mu Lan, her mother, her aunt, and herself.

The first chapter is about the writer's background, or her family's history. This chapter is entitled 'No Name Woman', which refers to her dead aunt who committed adultery and thus, her name was buried along with her sin. In China, speaking about sexuality, engaging in a relationship without a marriage is forbidden, this act makes the woman despised, pushed away. In American culture, women have more liberties. These differences between cultures make the writer confused.

The second chapter 'White Tigers' speaks about women's power, Kingston shows that Chinese women can be powerful, leading, and controlling. John Alba Cutler in his book *Ends of Assimilation* mentions, "after finishing Fa Mu Lan's story, the narrator relates her refusal to perform the domestic duties expected of a Chinese girl in her working-class" (144). Unlike American culture, it is rare for the Chinese to be open-minded and give the leadership to women; the writer supports more the Americans in the way they deal with females, rather than the Chinese. In fact, she imagines herself replacing Fa Mu Lan, that brave fighter in order to speak up for herself (32).

In the final chapter, Kingston writes about a character who adopts two different cultures, Ts'ai Yen, a princess who was captured by barbarians. To defy her situation, she discovers how to make music that combines two different cultures, and here, the writer shows



how a person can successfully assimilate to any culture without losing the original culture (67). To Kingston, assimilation should not aim at fully immersing herself into the American culture; assimilation is the act of rebelling against shortcomings of both American and Chinese cultures and adopting opportunities that her two cultures offer.

It may seem to immigrants that assimilating to a culture that is totally different is an easy task to do because the reason behind immigration is finding better living conditions. However, when they are confronted with reality, they find that assimilation can benefit as well as it can hurt, it does not have the same results for everyone, some can be lucky, and others can be destroyed. Assimilation is a very contradictory concept that has been discussed by different people, scholars, and writers from different fields to show how it can affect everyone's life. More attention is given to *The Woman Warrior* novel since it is connected to the case study of the dissertation. *A Free Life* (2007) is a novel written by Ha Jin, a Chinese American writer who represents a life of a Chinese family out of their country.

## **Chapter 2: Assimilation and Cultural Shock in Ha Jin's *A Free Life***

The second chapter is an analytical one; it will shed light on the negative consequences of assimilation. This chapter is focusing on the struggles that immigrants face during their new experience of immigration. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section seeks to examine the issue of cultural dislocation and racism. The second section will discuss family problems of immigrants.

### **2.1. Cultural Dislocation and Racism**

Ha Jin's novel, *A Free Life* narrates the story of a Chinese aspiring poet man who comes with his family that comprises of (Nan Wu, the father, Pingping Wu, the mother, and Taotao, the son) to the United States looking to achieve the "American dream". Their immigration was triggered by the Tiananmen Square Massacre of June 4, 1989. The Tiananmen Square Massacre is defined as follows:

Also called June Fourth incident or 6/4, are series of protests and demonstrations in China in the spring of 1989 that culminated on the night of June 3-4 with a government crackdown on the demonstration in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Although the demonstration and their subsequent repression occurred in cities throughout the country, the events in Beijing –especially in Tiananmen Square, historically linked to such other protests as the May fourth movement (1919) –came to symbolize the entire incident. (Britanica Par.1)

The Massacres have greatly impacted the life of Nan Wu and his family. They were in need to make a new and better life. Nan is a graduate student at Brandeis University in political

science that drops out his study for the sake of providing a better life for his family away from China.

The story opens with the union of the Wu family with their six-year-old son Taotao, after he takes the permission of leaving China and lives with his parents in America. Nan after the massacre recognizes that life in China would get harder than before and the only way to make them feel happy and safe is making a comfortable life in U.S. Therefore, he directly left his graduate school to make more time and effort in making in his craft of poetry.

Nan planned to return to China but he changes his mind and starts looking for a new work. The first obstacle that Nan faces is the lack of job opportunities and he just finds menial jobs from security guard to kitchen helper. Moreover, Pingping works as a cook and housekeeper for a wealthy widow. He brings his family from Boston to Georgia and there he starts running a Chinese restaurant with his wife.

The immigrant life is a real struggle for the Wu family; Nan feels homesick and stranger and always keeps attached to his homeland. Moreover, Pingping and Taotao adjust slowly to their new American life. Finally, the novel closes with Nan's decision to sell the restaurant to focus on writing poetry. He struggles with the difficulty and pain of assimilating and adopting to the new culture while trying to cling to his homeland culture and beliefs. There is also a sense of sadness that Nan feels because of the failure of achieving the American dream. The story of Nan carries many similarities with the author's own life story.

Ha Jin, the pen name of Xuefei Jin a Chinese –American author; he was born on 21 February 1956 in Jinzhou, Liaoning province, China. In his article entitled “Ha Jin Chinese American writer” Robert Rauch states that, Ha Jin had an incomplete education because China

closed schools at the Cultural Revolution in 1966. He joined the People's Liberation Army in China from the age of 14. While he was working as a railroad telegrapher, he learned English. Ha Jin received his B.A from Heilongjiang University and M.A from Shandong University. He moved to the United States in 1985 to do graduate work at Brandeis University. He worked at the same time in a Chinese restaurant as a kitchen helper and in a factory as a security guard (Par.2).

After gaining his Ph.D. in English from Brandeis University in 1993, Jin intended to return to China but the Tiananmen Square Massacre changed all his plans. Thus, making a life with his family in U.S was his new plan. Jin has written many novels, poems, short stories and other literary works. Ha Jin's biography shows similarity between himself and the protagonist of his novel *A Free Life*. In his interview with Terry Hong, who writes *Book Dragon*, a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program, Ha Jin talks about some of the similarities with his own life and Nan Wu the protagonist of his novel. Ha Jin discusses the frustrations of immigration to the U.S and the difficulties that faced him in adopting the new culture after the Massacre in China.

Ha Jin and his protagonist share the same passion for "poetry". The journalist asked Ha Jin, "When you moved the setting of your writing from China to the U.S. for the first time in *A Free Life*, was that a decision you had to prepare for? Was it a conscious choice that you decided one day, "Now I'm ready to write about my adopted country..."? Ha Jin answered, "I prepared for it, yes. I do not live in China anymore. I cannot write exclusively about China all the time. Eventually I had to look for my own subject matter. I had conceived the idea for *A Free Life* a long time ago as a graduate student. But I realized I could not write it then; I had to live through the experiences first. I finally started writing it very late, 2002 or 2003, I think." Ha Jin claims that he could never write this novel if he did not face the same struggles as Nan.

Jin's words accentuate the link between his novel and his own life. The novel is inspired by Ha Jin's own life.

In addition, Ha Jin in the interview was asked, "Your protagonist Nan Wu goes back briefly to China in *A Free Life*. Was that an extension of your own wish to return, at least temporarily, to China?" he replied, "I tried to get a visa recently. But, I can't go because the Chinese consulate won't give me the visa. They say it's because of a lot of technical problems. I think the real reason is political". This answer was a clear declaration from Jin that he realizes his wish to return back to China through his protagonist's return.

Assimilation took a place in Jin's life as it happened with Nan. Lezhou Su in his work "Ha Jin: The Writer As Migrant" mentions, "The novel is really semi-autobiographic insofar as the students demonstration is also a turning point in Jin's life. If not for the incident, he would have returned to his former job at Shandong University as a researcher in American literature. The incident is a painful experience for the writer much as for the protagonist (50)". In the novel, Ha Jin depicts the event of the students' demonstration or the Tiananmen Square massacre as a turning point in the protagonist's life. The event was a pro-democracy movement where students went to streets to ask for freedom of speech, political democracy, and rule of law (Lezhou Su Par. 11). The event was also a turning point in Ha Jin's life; it led him to choose America over China. In retrospect, Ha Jin says, "Though we didn't undergo it personally in Beijing, it changed so many lives in the United States. It still hurts me because it has shaped my destiny" (qtd.in Lezhou Su 50). Lezhou Su argues that Jin and his protagonist Nan shares many similarities regarding their new experience as immigrants in a new land.

In their work, *Encyclopaedia of Asian American and Folk Life*, Jonathan H.X. Lee and Kathleen M. Nadeau state that, "Wu's experiences echo the author's. Like Wu, Jin held menial

jobs during his graduate studies and chose to forgo a privileged position in China to start anew in the United States. *A Free Life* signals Jin's transition from being a Chinese writer in exile to a Chinese American writer" (281). The writer claims that Jin through his novel and the protagonist Nan wants to convey his experience as an immigrant in a new land.

Through his work, *A Free Life* Ha Jin wants to tackle many issues that minorities face and deal with in the host country. Those issues are highly presented in the novel such as racism, cultural dislocation, and cultural shock. Ha Jin tries to show how social discrimination, racism, domesticity, and being a part of a new different society make the immigrant feel unaccepted and inferior. *A Free Life* is a full description to most immigrants' struggles in assimilating to the new land culture, values and beliefs. In the host society, immigrants are treated with contempt. In addition, they are supposed to adopt the new culture and totally forget about their traditions in order to be welcomed and accepted by natives. Those discriminating attitudes and systems force minorities to completely lose their identities.

Shuang Liu claims that *A Free Life* is regarded as the first American novel written by the Chinese writer Ha Jin in 2007. The novel shows the cultural dilemmas that immigrants face in the foreign life. It is also the first shift of the writer's subject matter from discussing life in China to that in U.S (16). K. Cheung sees this novel as a challenge to older conceptions of Asian-American identity and points out that the novel is "neither entirely immigrant nor entirely diasporic, but something in between" (17). It discusses life that is affected by China and America.

Among the struggles that immigrants face in any new country, there is racism and cultural dislocation. Grosfoguel claims that, " Racism is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that have been politically, culturally and

economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the “capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system” (10).

However, there are different types of racism that created by the hierarchy. These types marked in different ways with different kinds of humans. According to the global hierarchy, human beings are classified according to their capability of benefiting from human rights.

Through his narrative, the protagonist Nan Wu, Ha Jin reveals his experience with racism as an immigrant in the United States. Nan was obliged to stay in U.S. after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989; all his plans were crushed he was so excited to go back to China after finishing his studies in the University. However, He thought that a degree from Brandeis University guarantees a teaching job for him once he returns to China.

Racism is demonstrated when Nan and Pingping are waiting for their son Taotao to come from China. Their son’s plane delays they keep calling and checking but no one gives a comfortable answer. After waiting and checking for three hours into the hotel, they go to the airport and ask the people at the information desk if their son was on the plane, but nobody gives a certain answer. The narrator says:

A thin, broad-faced woman in a dark blue uniform appeared. She looked Chinese but speaks only English. Hoping there might be another way to find out their son’s whereabouts, they asked her to help. Her stubby- chinned face stiffened. She shook her head and said, “If that lady at the desk can’t do anything for you, I can’t either (5).

However, this statement shows the impact of the American culture on immigrants’ behaviours towards each other. In this case, a woman from their country despised Nan and Pingping.

Ha Jin says,

Distraught, Pingping begged her in English, “please check it for us. He is our only child, just six year old .three years I didn’t see him.” “Like I said I really can’t help you .I have work to do, okay?” The parents were in panic and afraid that they will not find their son. The narrator says, “Nan wanted to plead with her too, but the woman looked annoyed, so he refrained. In her eyes, which had more white than black, Nan had caught a flicker of disdain, probably because she knows they were from mainland China and suspected they were still red inside, if not red to the bone. (5)

Ablah Singh in her article “ Cultural Dislocation and Changing Identities, in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel ‘The Namesake’ claims that, “ for immigrants, the challenge of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienations, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world are more explicit and distressing than for their children” (1). *A Free Life* is a novel that depicts the hardship of an immigrant family with their son in a foreign country and the cultural dilemmas experienced by them.

Ha Jin sheds light on an important point in immigrants life which is the life of children inside schools. He believes that Taotao has new challenges to face in his new school. Taotao faces many problems with his new classmates. There is only Loreen, his schoolmate, who accepts him “Taotao told his parents that Loreen was good to him and even gave him her milk at lunch” (37). However, not all the students were that kind with Taotao “a few called him conehead” (37). School to Taotao is a big struggle he feels alone and alienated. His way in pronouncing the words in the class of reading was not that good and different to them so they mock him. Nan and Pingping go to the school to meet Mrs.Gardener, Taotao’s homeroom teacher. The teacher asks them “Mrs.Wu does Taotao have a bladder problem?” “Not really. He pee in bed a few times when he’s baby, but that’s okay.” “In class he goes to the bathroom every ten minutes. The other students are amused. He must feel embarrassed, I gather. I’m



worried about that.” Nan said, “He may be nervous” the teacher answered, “He could be. I’ve noticed that in the math class he doesn’t go to the bathroom as often.” (38). This can give a clear image about the feelings that Taotao feels in the new school and the struggles because of the different way of pronouncing English that seems weird to his classmates ears. However, Pingping makes efforts with her son to improve his reading skills and that made a lot of progress as his teacher said, but he is still having few problems in reading and that what makes him shy inside the class.

Despite Pingping endeavors to help her son adjust to his new life, she also has her own problems of assimilation. Pingping manifests a sense of inferiority too; when they are having dinner with their friend Heidi and they talked about the difference between life in China and U.S. Heidi asks them “where did you live-I mean, in what kind of housing? Pingping answers, “we have one room” Heidi in a surprised face “really? Do most Chinese live like that?” Pingping says, “Some people” Heidi still amazed “my goodness I guess my house can accommodate a hundred Chinese” Pingping claims “not true, Nan’s parents live in four bedrooms apartment, and my younger brother have three huge rooms for his family.” Heidi with a smile and embarrassment adds, “I was just kidding.”(50) Pingping extremely shows that Heidi’s comments are abhorrent to her. In the meantime, Nan’s amazement is clear that despite Pingping’s preference for American life, her answers about what Heidi said shows the sensitivity that Pingping has about her homeland.

## **2.2. The family problem**

Like many immigrant families, the Wu family experiences many problems regarding their adjustment in the United States. Being away from one’s homeland makes life very heavy and onerous. The process of acculturation and adopting the differences inside the Wu family is

a huge burdensome on them. Individual problems of adjustment lead to family problems because “Moving to a new country may impact children and adolescents in a variety of ways, including their family relationships, and their social and educational performance” qtd. In Laura Carolina 9).

In her work entitled, “Migration and its impact on children’s lives” Laura Carolina Acosta Gomez claims that, “Migration creates so many changes within the family that it creates an entire life cycle for the families that go through it. These changes might affect the family life cycles for generations” (22). However, Migration has a profound impact on the Wu family’s behaviour, stability and life style. Pingping believes that returning to China is a risky decision so the only solution for the Wu family is working hard to afford a comfortable life in U.S.

Among the problems that Nan’s family experiences is the fear of the difficulties their son will face in his new life in the United States. His school would begin in early September, which might be hard for him to adapt. Language could be a burden on Taotao. However, his mother had been helping him to learn English through reading children’s books in English for 5 or 6 hours a day. He starts picking up few words from watching TV. Through Pingping’s efforts, Taotao shows progress in learning the new language and adapting to his new environment.

Though Pingping overthinks about how hard it will be having Taotao with her while working, she is certain if Nan decides to return to China one day; she will stay in U.S.raising their son alone (Jin, 21). There is a difference between the mother and the father’s perspective on immigration, while the wife wants to stay in the United States, the husband refuses this idea

and believes that the only home he has is China. This sense of belonging to China relates to his eternal love for his ex-girlfriend (21).

The tension between Nan and his wife is not only related to their different perspectives on immigration, but Nan's love for his ex-girlfriend widens the gap between him and his wife Pingping (23). She loved him truly and deeply before marriage. Moreover, Pingping father's was against this marriage. The narrator says "before she'd married him, her father had warned her that she might not live a secure life with Nan, who, though a decent young man, was by nature impractical, an incorrigible dreamer" (23). However, Pingping heart is broken and hurt because she knows that Nan would never love her she even tempts to drink to forget this. She is so in love with Nan that she chooses to live with him despite his attitude towards her.

Nan does not care about his wife and he focuses on money. However, the realization of wasting time in collecting money and ignoring his real passion for writing poetry in English is a slap that awakens sadness in Nan's heart (604). Instead of doing, what he really wants to do, Nan keeps being busy with making excuses: "his sacrifice for his son, his effort to pay off the mortgage, his pursuit of the American dream, his insufficient command of English, his family's need for financial security, he expected arrival of a daughter, and the absence of an ideal woman in his life" (605). Nan seizes the opportunity in reading when there is less work in the restaurant. Amidst reading, a passage in a book of Faulkner awakens all this mess inside his mind. A bad feeling of regret kills Nan; he thinks that he spends his life collecting money. The narrator reads Faulkner's quote:

The writer must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is

ephemeral and doomed love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” (604)

In these lines, William Faulkner tells the writers that fear is unnecessary; they should focus on their real love and passion which embodies writing, and forget about the obstacles that may face them, while trying to convey a message through their works. This passage makes Nan angry and realizes that he should reconsider his decision of ignoring poetry.

Nan is overcome by rage after reading this passage, and all the ideas of failure, fear and making excuses instead of writing fill his mind. With this anger, he burns the money before the eyes of Pingping and her friends. The narrator says, “He thrust a five dollar bill on the flame of a candle and instantly the cash curled, ablaze”(605). Pingping and friends attempt to stop him but Nan had a breakdown. Nan yelling, “I hate this manhey, ‘this dirty acre!’” (606). Nan deep down believes that the cause of his problems is the money that does not make sense to him compared to poetry. He comments, “yeah, I’m sick, sick of everyting here, sick of myself, sick of every one of you, sick of zis goddamned restaurant!”(606). After this difficult day, Nan perceives that money is not his overwhelming focus; he decides to give more attention to poetry.

Shubo Gao is a family friend; he always visits Nan and enjoys talking with him when there is less work in the restaurant. Nan opens up to Shubo one afternoon that he should have spent more time in focusing on writing poetry. Shubo said, “You’re supposed to sacrifice yourself for your children, who are an extension of your life and who will do the same for their children”, Nan replies, “Why I should sacrifice myself? - I’m done sacrificing- I’ve had enough. Besides, “Sacrifice” is just an excuse for cowardice and laziness. My son has life and I must have mine” (420-1). Shubo realizes that Nan has a new project in his mind and all he

wants is to achieve his own dream of “poetry”. In this respect, Bouallegue Nadjiba claims that, “While Chinese culture values communal life and gives great importance to certain demands such as obeying one’s parents. American culture focuses instead on individualism and self-fulfilment. In other words the achievement of material success is more important than family ties” (80). In her work, Bouallegue examines the clash between individualism and communal needs in two Chinese American novels: Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. In these two novels, the writers attempt to show that frustration caused by the clash between American value of individualism and Chinese value of filial piety is mark of immigrant life. Nan’s problems are the problem of many immigrants who are torn between individual and communal needs. Nan is influenced by Americans ideals of individualism. He believes that he should focus more on what he wants and stop giving all his attention to his family concerns.

Nan’s uncertainty about his future and what he will do in his life is among the problems that muddle the family’s stability. His marriage is not a love marriage; actually, he never loved Pingping and she knows that. The narrator says, “Pingping knew he was still enamored of his ex-girlfriend, Beina, through that woman was far away in China” (9). The poor wife lives with that certainty, but never felt regret for marrying Nan.

The problem of raising a Chinese son in America is a challenge to the parents. Taotao refusal to learn Chinese language and the uselessness of it in his life is a huge problem for Nan and Pingping. The narrator says, “He could speak and understand Mandarin but no longer read or write the words” (502). All what his parents desire is to show him the necessity of using his mother tongue and that makes him feel tired. Jin says that Taotao “was tired of his parent’s litany of the advantages in being fully bilingual” (505). Taotao said, “it’s too hard,” “I’ve already spent so many years on it and can’t even keep the words I had learned before I was

six” (505). This is his excuse to get rid of his parent’s urgings and to deny the reality that he is fascinated with the American life.

Ha Jin’s protagonist is described in the novel as a desperate man who is hunted by his past life in his homeland. A sense of loss, homelessness and isolation mark his life. Although Nan tries to adjust and accept America as his home, his heart relates and associates with his birth land. The clash between individualism and family’s needs, the pursuit of his passion that he totally forgets about because of focusing on collecting money aggravate his sense of loss. Jon Ask Jacobsen claims that, “Nan’s feelings for his homeland China are on the other hand expressed in his longing to his first girlfriend, Beina...as shown by her name’s phonetic similarity to ‘China’, Beina represents Nan emotional and idealised attachment to his homeland” (37). Jon Ask Jacobsen relates the feelings that Nan’s feels for his land to his ex-lover Beina. The longing for China is expressed through his longing for the ex-lover.

Nan suffers in his new life in the United States and faces many difficulties and struggles. He does not feel at home, and he does not see America as his country. He only wants to settle down in China and raise his family there which is something impossible after the Tiananmen Square. The desire of returning to his homeland fills his mind. Racism, cultural dislocation and alienation push Nan to hate life there. Although he is influenced by American ideals of success, Nan still sticks to China and sees it as the only home for himself.

### **Chapter 3: American Dream: Myth Vs Reality**

The third chapter is analytical one, it focuses mainly on the Wu family's success in America and how they socially and financially manage their life. While the first section will focus on how the family members make their way in the economic world, the second section will deal with sacrifices that individuals pay for the sake of providing an adequate life for themselves and their families.

#### **3.1. Material Success and Acceptance**

American Dream, the goal of every person who intends to leave his/her country and moves to America for the sake of finding better living conditions, Hildegard Schnell defines the American dream as, "the notion of having the opportunity of achieving something without being restricted by social borders developed out of need of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman" (3). Therefore, according to some people, the difference here between America and any other nation in the world is that it is open to any person regardless his/her race, origins, gender...etc.

This definition shows that America does not differentiate between white and black, it does not prefer men over women that is why America is considered the land of opportunities. American dream means gaining wealth, getting a job, having a house..., but to go through all these processes, the person has to be dedicated, because succeeding in building a life in America does not come overnight, in this sense, Gary Knapp argues that "accomplishments never come easy. You need to have a raw hunger, a thirst, a driving ambition and a strong burning desire to go after your goal, and never give up until you have sought your all options. Everyone who has a desire of something they want to accomplish knows it's like having a

flame burning inside” (18). Achieving the American dream means abandoning all desires of life because they may be a barrier between the person and his/her dreams.

When people think of American dream, they expect that a perfect life is waiting for them; they see that their homelands restrict the person and forbid him/her from achieving his/her dreams. However, when they face the reality, they discover the hidden side that may change their perspectives about the American dream. Speaking about social classes, America does not provide opportunities to anyone, its society is divided according to the people's estate; the more you gain, the better you achieve. Larry L. Naylor in his book *American Culture: Myth and Reality of a Culture of Diversity*, discusses the American dream and states that, “it is also true that attaining the American dream is easier for some, more difficult for others. Class stratification produces the circumstance wherein those who « have » will nearly always get more, while those who « have not » (very little) will not get much of anything” (54). So at this point, people realize that achieving American dream is not that easy, in fact, the living conditions are the same as in their homelands, what makes the difference is freedom, people feel free in America more than in their countries.

Discrimination is another issue that is hard to be solved and it is related to the ‘American dream’. The promise of equal chances does not mean that you can be treated like an American citizen. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby write about a play called *A Raisin In The Sun* that symbolizes the life of a black family living in Chicago and tries to ameliorate their financial status after the death of the father. The writers states that, “the play discusses the impact of labour and housing discrimination on the American dreams of this black populations through the experiences of two generations of the Younger family” (171).



Despite all uproar that is made by the American dream, it still hides a dark side that is intended to be hidden to show that America is worth fighting for. With all its negative and positive aspects, the American dream is widely represented in the American literature; it discusses how it can change people's life either to the best or to the worst.

*The Great Gatsby* is one of the most famous novels that represents the American dream with its both sides, Harold Bloom states that, “using Jay Gatsby to exemplify the rise and fall of the American dream, Fitzgerald's novel traces the arc of a life as it begins in wonder, reaches for the stars, confronts society's spiritual emptiness and gratuitous materialism, and ends in tragic death” (67). Within this novel, the narrator tells the story of Jay Gatsby, a poor born man who dreamed of gaining wealth and gaining the love of the girl of his dream. However, this novel shows that achieving the American dream does not mean happiness, despite the fact of the wealth and fame he gained, Jay could not taste the success he made without his love, and eventually, he died sad and alone.

In their book entitled *Positioning the New : Chinese American Literature and The Changing Image of the American Literary Canon*, Tanfer Emin and Elisabetta Marino state, “In *A Free Life*, Jin's protagonist Nan Wu becomes middle class, with a mortgage free home and a thriving Chinese restaurant, through a strict work ethic and personal determination” (216). Deciding to stay in America, Nan gives up his political science PhD and starts searching for jobs that guarantee him a respectful life, he succeeds in making his wishes come true, he starts his own business, buys a new house, in other words, he has the perfect life that any immigrant could ever have. Nan is the personification of the American dream.

It is known that immigrants come to America from all over the world; blacks, Asians, Hispanics... , but Asians in particular are categorized to be smart, hard workers, and obedient.

Asians who live in America represent the concept of 'model minority' in which they are considered academically successful and smart due to their genetics (Daniel Hartlep 237).

While living in America, the society grows expectations directed to Asians that they should be academically and socially the perfect minority group.

For many decades, Asians have been suffering from racism, but unlike other minorities, Americans consider them the only minority group that can overcome discrimination by relying only on themselves and dedicating themselves to the hard work that guarantees them a respectful life. In this respect, Youngsuk Chae states, "the portrayal of Asian Americans as a «successful» minority seems to have begun in the mid-1960s with depictions in the press of Japanese Americans who had gone through the harsh racist reality of internment years, yet survived through their hard work. The media also used the term of «model minority» in order to refer to the «success» that Chinese Americans had achieved without relying on government welfare" (25).

It is thought that the model minority stereotype helps Asians defeat discrimination, but in fact, it puts them under pressure wherever they go; in schools, at work... because expectations always draw them as successful people. Speaking about *A Free Life* novel, Jon Ask Jacobsen argues that, "the novel highlights properties associated with the Wus, for instance their hard work, which is connected to the model minority stereotype" (45). Nan, the protagonist seems to be a very dedicated man, Ha Jin writes "for days, he had been looking for a job but couldn't find one"(24). Nan travels all over the country to find a job that helps him survive along with his family, he works as a custodian, in a factory, as a security guard, as a managing editor, and he also washes dishes at a restaurant, without forgetting jobs that he is rejected for. After working as a dish washer for a while, it seems that luck is smiling to Nan, he was promoted as a chef's assistant at the same restaurant, as the narrator writes, "three

weeks later, Howard hired another busboy and promoted Nan to the chef's assistant" (119). After washing dishes, Nan turns out to food; he learned how to cook and how to organize orders.

In 1991, Nan's attention starts to be driven to different newspapers' advertisements showing restaurants for sales, thinking about money they saved, and searching for an appropriate place to live in, Nan and his wife discuss whether they are able to buy a restaurant or not, and if yes, what areas should they choose. After deep searching, and discussions, the Wus decided to contact the owner of a restaurant located in Georgia, the owner replies trying to convince Nan to buy : « I can guarantee you that you'll make good money here ». (166).

By looking at the material success, it seems that the Wus have fought to achieve it, but the factor that helped them in making that happen is how they succeed in fusing themselves into the American society. Mirjeta Elmazi in her article "Discuss the Meaning(s) of (*A Free Life*) in Ha Jin's novel" argues that, "English is not only liberating for Nan, however, but also for Pingping, his wife: "she felt English was much more expressive and more useful. Back in China she could hardly write anything, but here once she learned a little English, she had found herself able to write a lot, as if whatever she put on paper became interesting" (4).

To assimilate to American culture, the person needs to learn about everything related to that culture; beliefs, attitudes... and the most important factor that should be learned is the English language. In their book *Social Interaction, Social Context, and Language*, Dan Isaac et al. argues that, "language is the means by which members of communities communicate with one another, and how individuals establish that they are, in fact, members of the same cultural community" (435).

While being in America, immigrants are obliged to have knowledge about its language because it gives them the availability to be accepted into the American society. In the Wus' case, language was not obstacle for them. In fact, it was a way of getting out from the shell they were living in back in China, and it also represents a factor that gives them the opportunity to deal with the Americans and live according to their culture. However, looking through a different angle, the English language represents a challenge for Nan and Pingping because it widens the generational gap, Jon Ask Jacobsen states that, "Taotao is scolded in Mandarin, and speaks the language but he also recourses to English, especially when he wishes to signal cultural competencies associated with America. Taotao's mastery of English is part of the characterization of him as the transindividual subject's American future, which is emphasized when he resists learning written Mandarin" (30). The Wus failed in convincing their son to cling to their original language. Because Taotao moved to America at a very young age and was surrounded by English speaking people, he succeeds in assimilating to the American culture through preferring the English language over his mother tongue language.

After achieving the American dream and succeeding in establishing a new life in America, Nan now has to think about himself and turn to his field of interest; literature. Nan has always been interested in literature and poem in particular. In this respect, Mirjeta Elmazi writes, "the concept of intellectual and literary freedom is extremely important for the main character Nan Wu, something which he due to censorship, cannot achieve in Communist China, where a lot of Chinese literature was censored or denied publication" (3). Despite the fact that Nan achieved what anyone dreams of, he internally feels unsatisfied, he always dreamed of writing poems and publishing his works to the world. Nan thinks that unlike China, America helps its citizens achieve their dreams, and as a poet, America gives you the chance to write, to speak freely, and to let the world hear and know about you.

Despite the fact that Nan and his family are living in a strange society, he got opportunities that were impossible to have in his homeland. He succeeds in building a business that holds his name, while living under the pressure of the American society and its standards of the perfect citizen. Materialism and Capitalism that characterize American society leads him to give up his dream of poetry. He assimilated by following American ideals of pursuing money and success. Thus, he has to give up other things.

### **3.2. Immigrants' Sacrifices**

Being an immigrant is a delicate situation that faces anyone living apart from his/her homeland. Parents specifically are the ones who experience the hardships more than anyone else does, because they arrive at a specific point when situations force them to commit sacrifices for the sake of making better future for them and their children. In a case of the existence of adult children in an immigrated family, the first challenge parents' face is overcoming the generational gap.

Parents arrive at a point where they forcibly sacrifice that strong relationship they have with their children to save their heritage. Julia Alvarez is one of the ethnic writers who discuss this issue through her work *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. It is thought that "Alvarez's protagonists share some things in common with the typical Dominican immigrant experience, such as the painful dislocation of family ties and difficult cultural readjustments" ("How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents"). Whenever the time passes, the Garcia sisters adhere more to the American culture. Parents on the other hand, find themselves incapable of guiding their daughters to stay attached to their original culture.

As they settle in America, parents find themselves forced to sacrifice whatever it takes for the sake of their children. On a video titled, “Children of Asian Immigrants Reveal Sacrifices Their Parents Made”, different members of the younger generation admit what their parents made and still make to see their families succeeding in America, “both of them [parents] left their families and came to this foreign country. My mom moved to America and did not get to see her family or her siblings for almost twenty or thirty years, did not get to see her mom's funeral, did not get to see her siblings grow up with their families because she was living in America”(As/Is). For many reasons, parents as immigrants lose control on choices they make. Living in America may sometimes cost loneliness, which means it cuts off contact between the person and his/her family in which he/she grew up with.

Speaking about family, immigrants are obliged to leave behind their families back in their homelands; they may leave their parents, siblings, even their own children, like in the case of Nan and Pingping in *A Free Life* novel. Ha Jin starts his novel by showing that Taotao lives separate from his parents, Ha Jin writes “Finally Taotao got his passport and visa. For weeks his parents had feared that China, even if not closing the door outright, would restrict the outflow of people” (3). Because of the circumstances in China and the difficulty to have their child with them, the parents have to leave him with his grandparents until all the problems are solved. This act may seem to be irresponsible and careless, but at the long term, it becomes clear that it is all about their family and their son, the parents want to guarantee a future for him.

With no doubt both parents commit sacrifices for the benefits of their families, but each one of them has a way in making those sacrifices. Since the mother is the heart of every family, she has a significant role in first, keeping the family together, and second, acting as a second man of the family by helping her husband. Karen V. Hansen and Anita Iltta Garey

argue that “more than half of women in the United States with children under six years of age are in the labour force” (709). In some patriarchal societies, it is known that the mothers' role is taking care of children. In America, situations differ from one family to another, some women are forced to enter the work domain to help themselves and their families survive. Taking Pingping as an example, after moving to US, she is obliged to search for a job that helps her earn enough money for her family's interests. Fortunately, Pingping and her husband find a job at the house of a rich woman, Ha Jin writes, “Pingping was to cook and to do laundry while Nan would drive the children to school in the mornings” (14). This job cannot be compared to Nan and Pingping's previous living conditions. Through looking at their current situation, they are obliged to accept any offer they come across with.

On top of taking the responsibility of working outside the house, women's main job is gathering family members and creating a convenient living environment. By doing so, wives may be forced to sacrifice their own happiness. Talking about sacrifices among immigrants, Roberta Nannucci states that “among new immigrant families settling in North America today, wives and mothers comprise a group with problems and needs which differ significantly from those of other members of a migrant population” (85). Problems are certainly facing all immigrants whether they were family problems, money problems, or even problems at work, but these issues differ from one person to another.

Nannuci adds, “An oft expressed sentiment of immigrant parents is that they have come to North America seeking a better future for their children, and they come prepared to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their children's future” (85). Sacrificing one's own happiness is one of the choices immigrants face at a certain phase. *A Free Life* novel represents the problem of sacrificing happiness and shows to what extent women can bear for their children. Despite the fact that Nan the protagonist still loves someone else, Pingping

accepts to stay married to him for her son's interest. The writer states "Nan and Pingping sometimes quarrelled when their son wasn't around. But they had agreed to stay together until Taotao grew up" (76). Regardless of knowing that Nan will never look at her as his beloved wife, Pingping has to bear all the difficulties for the benefits of her son's psychology.

Most ethnic writers present their protagonists as seekers for the ideal American citizenship. Despite their diverse backgrounds, both Abraham Cahan the Belarusian novelist in his novel *The Rise of David Lavinsky*, and the American writer James Weldon Johnson in his work *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* discusses the need of their both protagonists for chasing the American dream and the desire of assimilating to its culture. In this respect, Sonja Longolius states that, "In their quest for an American identity, both protagonists, the former Orthodox Jew from Russia and the anonymous, light-skinned African American, chose to escape white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hostility towards their minority status by assimilating respectively by passing as far as possible into the dominant culture of white American society" (2). In almost every work, authors justify their protagonists' escape from homelands as a result of feeling of insecurity and antagonism. In their works, Abraham Cahan and James Weldon Johnson show that the motive behind their protagonists' willingness to assimilation is the fear of marginalization. This fear leads them to embrace the American culture and benefit from full citizenship.

In a family composed of two parents, both of them share the responsibilities of the family. However, men notably take the charge more than women do because the more the more obstacles they challenge, the best opportunities they will have. In this respect, Jongsung Kim in his book *Labor Supply and Occupational Structure of Asian Immigrants In The US* argues that "During the past quarter-century, there have been dramatic changes in the structure of the American economy, and Asian immigrants, in particular, have been able to embrace the



opportunities that have opened up in the U.S. labor market” (20). Jongsung Kim adds, “Asians have the highest earnings of any ethnic group in America” (20). Laboris always related to men, that is why most of them head to America looking for economic progress. By looking to the different ethnic groups, Asians gain more job positions due to their dedication and commitment, as in the case of Nan the protagonist in *A Free Life* novel.

Since moving to America, Nan has sacrificed many things, starting from his position back in China, he drops out college and his PhD to chase the American Dream. He devotes himself to work and puts many efforts in working in different jobs, to the point that he is obliged to leave his family for months. Despite the success he made and his achievement of the American Dream, Nan is not pleased with his accomplishments, he is burdened with his own dream that was never achieved; being a poet. Nan dreams of nothing but being a poet, he thinks that being in America guarantees him a spot in American magazines. However, as the time passes, he realizes that all these years, he was living inside a hole of fear of assimilating to a new culture and that he will never be accepted as an American citizen, as Ha Jin states, “it was this fear that has driven him to look for inspiration elsewhere other than his own heart. It was this fear that had misled him into the belief that the difficulties in writing poetry in English were insurmountable and that he couldn't possibly write lines that were natural and energetic” (605).

After many years of struggling, Nan regrets ignoring himself and his dreams and focusing only about how to develop his economic estate. Fred Hobson and Barbara Ladd discuss this point and state that “Nan’s intellectual ambitions are supplanted by the more immediate imperative of securing economic stability for the family by buying and managing the Gold Wok, a Chinese restaurant” (479). The American dream blinded Nan and hindered him from thinking about his own desires, which grew a huge anger in him; this anger led him

to sacrifice all achievements he made. In this respect, Radegundis Stolze, John Stanley, and Larisa Cercel state; “after selling his family business, Nan experiences a feeling of disappointment when he realizes the human price that he has paid for financial success. He finally understands that immigrants cannot become « true American » until certain preconditions have been met” (439). Nan now arrives at a point when he recognizes that achieving the American dream has no sense without achieving one's own dream.

Both Nan and Pingping are tested in many different ways in this novel. Pingping shows that it is worth sacrificing for one's own family because it is the only reason behind parents fight against life's hardships. From Nan's perspective, immigrants are misled by the concept of “the American Dream” when the real struggle between the person and himself is his dreams and how to achieve them.

## Conclusion

Asian American literature is seen as a tool of relating ethnic writers to the worldwide audience. It is the medium through which their voice is heard. These writers mainly deal with assimilation in their works. Their main focus is immigration and its consequences on their lives. Particularly, Chinese American writers discuss issues of marginalization faced by minorities. Through Ha Jin's *A Free Life*, this study reveals assimilation consequences on ethnic population.

This study is concerned with tackling the issue of assimilation experienced by ethnic groups living in the U.S. It shows how assimilation affects those minorities' lives from two different sides; positively and negatively. It also covers immigrants' history with the American society's standards of being an immigrant, particularly, an Asian immigrant. In addition, the work discusses the fact of the American dream in relation to the concept of assimilation.

This study seeks to explore the concept of assimilation from different aspects; psychologically, sociologically, culturally, and literary. Throughout their works, different ethnic writers shed light on the concept of assimilation. Among these writings, Julia Alvarez's *How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Diana Abu Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*. These works drew attention to assimilation as a main theme of their works.

The thesis's main concern is revealing the outcomes of assimilation on minorities existing in America. Ha Jin discusses the issue of racism that mainstream culture imposes on minorities. Racism is one of the issues that aggravate immigrants' cultural dislocation. In

addition, through the Wu family, the writer exposes the problems creeping into immigrant families. These problems are represented in language barriers and raising children.

As an immigrant family, the Wus found difficulties in mastering the English language. Particularly, their son Taotao who was bullied for his strange accent. Raising children in a different country is another obstacle that faced the Wus. Taotao was extremely influenced by the American culture which made it difficult for his parents to keep him attached to the Chinese one.

Moreover, much attention is given to the achievements made by the Wu family. Despite being an immigrant, the main character Nan succeeds in accomplishing the American dream; building business, buying a house, and improving his economic estate. While his focus was the pursuit of achieving the American dream, Nan unconsciously sacrifices his own dream. At the end of *A Free Life* novel, the main character Nan Wu realizes that achieving the American dream is not worth sacrificing the individual's own.

Through *A Free Life* novel and based on his own experiences, Ha Jin examines the phenomena of immigration, assimilation, and American dream. By working on the relationship between all these concepts, the writer reveals minorities' experiences inside the American society from facing oppression to achieving the American dream. At last, the novelist shows the importance of establishing the personal dream rather than tracking the American dream.

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## Résumé

Cette étude examine l'utilisation du concept «Assimilation» dans la littérature ethnique américaine. Les écrivains ethniques ont tendance à discuter de la vie des immigrants en Amérique et de leur capacité à s'assimiler à la nouvelle culture. La thèse explore les conséquences aussi bien positives que négatives de l'assimilation. Les Asiatiques font partie des groupes ethniques qui poursuivent le rêve américain malgré leurs expériences de stratification et de marginalisation. A travers *Une vie libre*(2007) de Ha Jin, cette étude examinera la vie des Asiatiques en Amérique ; leur façon de traiter à la fois les côtés négatifs et positifs de l'assimilation. Il enregistrera le parcours du protagoniste à la recherche d'une nouvelle vie dans un nouveau pays et toutes les opportunités que ce pays lui offre. De plus, la thèse vise à discuter de la pression qu'endurent les immigrants asiatiques. Enfin, cette étude démontre la conscience du protagoniste du danger de poursuivre aveuglément le rêve américain incarné dans le succès matériel et d'ignorer son propre rêve

## المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مناقشة مفهوم الاستيعاب الثقافي الذي يتناوله أدب الأقليات. في الواقع يسعى كتاب الأقليات إلى الكشف عن حياة المهاجرين القاطنين في أمريكا ومدى قدرتهم على استيعاب الثقافة الخاصة بالبلد. كما تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الآثار السلبية والإيجابية للاستيعاب الثقافي. من ضمن الأقليات الذين يتواجدون في أمريكا، يسعى الآسيويون بصفة خاصة لتحقيق الحلم الأمريكي بالرغم من معاناتهم من التهميش والطبقية. من خلال رواية ها جين " حياة حرة" (2007)، تركز هذه الرسالة على حياة الآسيويين في أمريكا وكيفية تعاملهم مع الجانبي الإيجابي والسلبي للاستيعاب الثقافي. كما تسعى لتدوين رحلة البطل لبناء حياة جديدة في البلد الذي يحظى بالعديد من الفرص للمهاجرين أمثاله. إضافة إلى ذلك، تهدف هذه الأطروحة إلى تسليط الضوء على الضغط الذي يعيشه الآسيويون. أخيراً، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى شرح تيقن البطل بخطورة السعي الأعمى وراء الحلم الأمريكي المجسد في النجاح المادي وتجاهل حلمه الشخص