

Chaos of Picture Brides: Deception, Displacement and Resilience in Alan Brennert's *Honolulu*

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Abstract: Picture marriage is a widespread practice among immigrants in countries that adopt immigration policies such as Japan, China, the United States of America, the Philippines and Okinawa. The primary motivation for entering such marriages is the desire to secure a better life. However, many picture brides are deceived by matchmakers, who exploit their dreams for profit. Alan Brennert's novel *Honolulu* vividly portrays this reality through the life of Jin, a Korean picture bride whose story reflects the sorrow, disillusionment and the hardships experienced by many immigrant women. Brennert enlivens the narrative by presenting themes of ambivalence, poverty, abuse and discrimination endured by picture brides in Hawaii. Although Hawaii is often idealized as a paradise for its natural beauty and unique culture, for immigrant women it becomes a place of shattered dreams and oppressive struggles. Instead of finding the promised prosperity, many picture brides find themselves trapped in abusive marriages and harsh living conditions. This paper explores the turmoil in the lives of immigrant picture brides, presenting their experiences as both a humanitarian crisis and a testament to resilience. Despite their suffering these women show a remarkable courage, rebuilding their lives and rising above trials with strength and hope.

Key Words: Korean Diaspora; Picture Marriage; Immigrant Women; Displacement; Trauma and Resilience.

Introduction:

Korean diaspora in Alan Brennert's *Honolulu* refers to the community of Korean immigrants who leave their own homeland in search of a better life in Hawaii during the early twentieth century. Here, the immigrants are picture brides who carry their cultural tradition, hopes and expectations of freedom but instead encounter disillusionment, exploitation and displacement. The diaspora experience in the novel highlights the struggles of preserving

cultural identity while adapting to a new environment as well as the resilience of Korean women who, rebuild their lives in a foreign land.

Picture marriage a form of arrange marriage where prospective couples exchange photographs before solemnizing their union. Yet, the harsh reality upon arrival is profoundly different. Women often found themselves married to older, impoverished laborers rather than the educated and prosperous men they have been promised. Matchmakers manipulate women in to marriages by painting exaggerated images of life in abroad. Jin the protagonist of the novel *Honolulu*, becomes a victim of false promises. This leads to the theme of displacement.

Immigration is a process in which people move from one place to another place in search of jobs, ethical education for the better life. It is an impressive thing, in which people evolve with different kinds of emotions on migrating from their native soil. The immigration of Koreans is divided in to three period of waves, the first wave from 1903-1949, the second wave 1950-1964 and the third wave from 1965-1990. There are different reasons for immigration that is ignorance in the society, scope to up come with the ambition, mistreat of Korean women and economic instability. The Korean author Kim states that, "The period of rapid industrialization and development, the Republic Korea made substantial strides toward gender equality in education and employment opportunities. Korean women have a strong perception that there is gender inequality in various parts of society" (1). Economic oppression, famines, turbulent political changes, gender inequality remains as a significant reason for migration, also it focuses the dark life of a Korean women which rendered in the American history. D.B. Grigg, tells that "The major reason for migration is economic" (43) and he reveals about the high unemployment, insecurity and military dictatorship. Likewise, in order to escape from the situation, the native Korean women decide to leave their house and begin their adventurous journey of immigration with the hope towards the land Hawaii. Immigration is a process with full of risks and hardships in ones' life. The Korean immigrants arrive at Hawaii through the huge shipload and they work on the pineapple and sugar plantations also some for their betterment they make a self-employed business-like laundry, stores and nail salons. Thus, it is difficult for the Korean women to obtain a job in plantation is not easy that, the owners need a cheap labor based on contract but with hope they overcome all struggles to life.

The novel *Honolulu* opens up with a mistreated independent-mind Korean girl, a plucky heroine "My parents named me 'Regrettable' eventually shortened to simply Regret" (*Honolulu* 2) who travels to Hawaii as a picture bride and explore her experiences as an immigrant. The Korean author Lee states, "Between 1907 to 1923, more than 20,000 Japanese and 951 Korean picture brides came to Hawaii, while between 1908 to 1920 over 10,000 picture brides came to the West Coast" (113). Immigration happened throughout the history that picture brides played a vital role in many unique ideologies connecting to different place they live and also it tries to evoke what made Korean women to come out of their home especially the protagonist Regret who comes out as a picture bride and travel to Hawaii.

The Korean women were suffering immensely that they lack in the desire of self-realization, proper education and towards the better economic attainment. In Korea, new born girls were not deemed in giving formal names, instead they are call out by nicknames like, "Some personal characteristics: Cheerful, Pretty, Little one, Big one. Sometimes they

presume to be commandments: Chastity or Virtue, Golden calf, little flower, Anger, Sorrow and Sadness” (*Honolulu* 2). Through these lines the harsh oppression, pressure in their own house can be keenly present out by the protagonist. These values which affect the population of young women in their homelands. The protagonist opens up that the following line states,

In truth, my father was merely old-fashioned and conservative, a strict adherent to Confucian ideals, on of which was the inherent precedence of man over woman: The wife must regard her husband as heavenly, what he does is a heavenly act and she can only follow him. I was a girl, I would eventually marry and become part of someone else’s family as such my existence was simply not of the same consequence as that of my three brothers, who would carry on the family line and provide for our parents when they became old. (*Honolulu* 3)

The above lines focus Confucian ideals which means an adherent teaching codifies the traditional Chinese principles of ethics, morals and politics. Thus, through the passage the entry of picture brides to Hawaii is dependent on their marital status in which they choose to become a picture bride is to escape from the pressure of patriarchal and colonial oppression.

The young brides push up across the Pacific Ocean and the societies were largely made of contract laborers who work for plantation farms, trans-continental railroad work, and a few other industries that requires cheap labor during the process of nation building in the United States of America. According to the Korean professor Lee states “Because of discriminatory immigration policies and laws, such as the Gentleman's agreement, Chinese exclusion law, as well as a ban on interracial marriage, the Asian laborers of bachelor societies had very few choices left in creating families except to utilize their homelands' customized courtship: arranged marriage” (113). Sunny the friend of Regret says “ ‘Have you ever heard’ of a place called Hawaii? No I answered truthfully. They say it’s a paradise where no one needs money to live and the streets themselves are paved in gold” (*Honolulu* 38). By asking matchmakers and family members back in their own particular homelands to find the young brides who are willing to travel across the oceans, they could start a new family in the United States.

The particular piece of work, *Honolulu* in which Alan Brennert traces the origin of Korean picture bride Regret her grandmother, her journey, and finally the image of her living in Honolulu, Hawaii, when she unites with her husband. The space that picture brides' s existence holds in our everyday life is a seldom visible. Their story is rarely told and taught, neither inside nor outside of the classrooms. In other words, under colonialism, imperialism, and hegemonic power, picture brides' narrative is a little-known history in which it exists as a mainstream narrative. In the work *Honolulu* tracing the picture brides' collective voice requires an act of telling the history from below, where picture brides fought for their space in the system of power. The history of picture brides exists as a narration of subaltern voices from a literary theorist Gayatri Spivak, tells that "Subaltern women the narratives of this group cannot be heard because of their position within the patriarchal, white, and heteronormative system in their reality” (73). Therefore, the images of picture brides that only exist in how the events of life before their departure, immigration, settlement, and about their assimilation.

Women in Korea reveals through the lines that, “Koreans place a high value on never revealing their emotional state through their facial expressions. Korean men believe that to

display emotion is to be seen as frivolous” (*Honolulu* 44). Immigrant women has numerous emotions such as resentment, anxiety, regrets, rage, ironic comforts in their particular reality during twentieth century. The protagonist’s father always yell at her and says,

“A women without ability is virtuous! Father shouted down at me. You are not virtuous! You dishonor your clan. My mother rushed in from the kitchen and saw me covering on the floor. The color drained from her face. Father says there is an old proverb: Women who read become foxes and by your deceit you are the proof of it. Mother knelt by my side, daughter are you alright gently she touched the swelling on my right cheek. Come we will tend to that bruise” (*Honolulu* 45)

The above line speak about the frustrations of the protagonist through her father ideal nature in behaving with foolish acts. Her voice is trembling with anger, fear, pains and torture that make Regret to escape from the homeland to other country with the paradigm of sacrifice as a journey of a picture bride in her life.

Brennert, uses multiple historical recordings of Hawaii, such as immigration files, newspaper articles, and transcription of court trials to create a novel, *Honolulu*. The protagonist’s husband introduced as “Noh Clan of Pyongyang. I am righteous son, welcome to Hawaii” (*Honolulu* 68). The fictional character, Jin (Regret) comes to the island of Oahu as a picture bride from her homeland, Korea. Only to find out that her husband who she expects to build a better life with is nobody than a drunken gambler. Soon after her arrival, she realizes that her husband could not care less about her adapting to a new environment. consequently, she struggles to make ends meet with a job at a factory. Eventually, she falls in love with another Korean man whom she finds the typical 'happily ever after' with, after winning a divorce from her formal abusive husband.

The characters encounter the obstacles that many picture brides actually went through oppressions from patriarchal exploitation from her family and troublesome marriage with an abusive husband. Regret says “My trying to staunch the flow of blood, even the slightest pressure hurts. He took a step toward me and kicked me in the side, the tip of his boot stabbing like a dagger in my ribs and I screamed in pain” (*Honolulu* 98). They are brave enough to embark on a journey to foreign space and endure the unexpected hardship; however, their bravery and resilience are limited. The picture bride characters in the novels, who are beautiful yet strong, find a meaning of life which they could not gain in their homeland, through simply falling in love. Their sufferings are saved by the heteronormative romance. In the fictional spaces Brennert create, such romance gives a new hope to sad and beaten-up Korean picture brides. In other words, since the sufferings of the picture brides character Jin, are measure and mild in a token of sacrifice, their lives are easily 'saved'.

Brennert's one-dimensional story, there is no room for discussing the true pains that picture brides pay in her life. Complicated emotions such as melancholia, agony, homesickness, and even an ephemeral state of happiness that helped picture brides to sustain the harsh reality. Romanticise of their pains and sufferings in the single story, there is no challenge of addressing picture brides' sexuality, gender, and cost of survival in these literary works. The practice of picture marriage as a bridge between tradition and modernity and often turns out in to the trap of disillusionment and suffering. Alan Brennert’s *Honolulu* powerfully illuminates the historical reality by presenting the struggles and triumphs of Korean picture brides.

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