

## THE LOT OF THE IMMIGRANT WOMAN

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Seminar: The Immigrant Experience

[Assignment: (students given option of several novels and stories to discuss) The immigrant woman often bears both a physical and emotional burden. In this paper first discuss the qualities that sustain her through her ordeal; then discuss those qualities or aspects of personality that retard her process of assimilation.]

(1) The old saying goes that behind every great man is a great woman. For it is the woman's support and inspiring words that motivate the man to reach his goals. The major female characters of Beret, Mikey's mother, and Consuelo in the respective novels, Giants in the Earth, Jews Without Money, and Pocho fulfill this description to the extent that they went along with their husbands' wishes and encouraged them in times of doubt. But they all had reservations about settling down in a new country. A lot of changes and hardships awaited them and they would have to struggle to make sense of the whole situation and live with it.

(2) Packing up and leaving everything behind to go to a strange land was a great strain for both man and woman. But in some ways that process was even more difficult for the woman because in addition to her traditional duties of housework and child rearing, she now had the added responsibilities of adapting to the new culture as well as helping her family adjust without losing their native traditions, acting as a support for her husband during the rough times, and maintaining and enhancing her own identity through the immigrant experience.

(3) Of the many tasks that faced an immigrant mother, one of the most important ones was to make sure that she and her family adapted to the new lifestyle of the United States while still retaining some of their old world ways. This task was not as easy as it sounds, especially if, as in the case of the first pages of Giants in the Earth, the reader can sense how uneasy Beret felt about leaving Norway to establish a home on the Great Plains. Her first reaction to the "pastures of Goshen" (Giants in the Earth 28) was "Was this the place? . . . Here? . . . Could it be possible? How will human beings be able to endure this place?" (28,29).

(4) The idea of spending the rest of her life on a "formless prairie" (37) was so unappealing to Beret that she withdrew herself from her family and everything concerning their new life. While she continued to do her chores, she was often preoccupied with thoughts of Norway. By not trying to adjust to the new way of life in the United States, Beret was useless to help her children acculturate. In fact, they helped her to cope

with her situation while their father taught them the ways of America. Relocating in a strange land is much harder for a woman in Beret's position because she had no desire to leave Norway. Because of her lack of interest, Beret had to struggle to survive and make life bearable for those around her.

(5) Mikey's mother made the transition into American society much more smoothly than Beret because she had to come to the United States to survive. Since she was able to live with the new culture, she was also able to instill that same tolerance for America in her children. Even though she seemed to fit in, she never abandoned her Jewish heritage. She was always a Jew first. Mikey's mother was very concerned that her children not lose sight of their Jewish roots. Therefore, Michael was sent to a Jewish school after regular school. Mikey's mother also showed that she did not forget her homeland when she told her children about picking mushrooms in the fields of Hungary just as she was doing that day in Central Park. Although she still held onto many of the Jewish traditions, Mikey's mother still managed to somewhat acculturate herself and the family with the rest of the American society of the day.

(6) Just as Mikey's mother fought to find a place for herself and her family in America, Consuelo Rubio also fought, but her battle was far more subtle than Mikey's mother's. Consuelo followed her husband to California with the idea that "next year we will have enough money and we will return to our country" (Pocho 31). As the years passed, it was evident that the Rubios were staying in the United States. In the early years, Consuelo remained faithful to the Mexican way of life and did not try very hard to Americanize herself. Her children were affected by being raised in such a traditional Mexican home, but since most of them were born in the United States and went to school there, the effects were not as long-lasting as they might have been.

(7) Not until she was in the country a few years and learned that American women were much more independent than she, did she revolt. Unlike Mikey's mother, who was concerned with the welfare of her whole family, Consuelo only concentrated on her own Americanization. She struggled between pleasing her husband and her children and ended up by forsaking both and pleasing herself.

(8) The Americanization process for all three women was not easy. They were not as exposed to the outside world as their husbands were and it was hard for them to break old habits and learn new ones. Beret chose never to adapt, although towards the end of her novel she had accepted her fate. Mikey's mother probably made the best attempt of the three women not only because she had adjusted, but had also managed to help her family adjust as well. Consuelo started out slowly, but then went overboard in her efforts to be like American women. In so

doing, she shut out her family and left them to fend for themselves. All three women handled the responsibility differently of adapting themselves and their families into American society, but their success or failure had a lasting impression on their families and themselves.

(9) Along with dealing with the stress of adjusting to the new country's ways and helping her family overcome this obstacle, each woman also had to put up with a husband who was overworked, underpaid, and discouraged some of the time. Each woman's husband was a proud man who worked many long hours each day to scratch out a living for the family. Without the love and support of their wives, the men very well might have just given up and taken to the street. Beret's lack of interest had an effect on Per and was definitely a factor in his decision to leave. She rarely gave Per any encouragement for the farm. She did help with chores, but she was never comfortable in the new land.

(10) Mikey's mother was the complete opposite of Beret. She was always pushing Herman to get motivated and do something other than paint for the rest of his life. She was ambitious and determined that if she had to live in the United States, she would work hard and try to escape the poverty she had known most of her life. She even took a job to help support the family. But in spite of all her other duties, she was always there whenever Herman or anyone else needed her.

(11) As for Consuelo, she remained loyal to her husband in the Mexican tradition. She never questioned his word and nearly always agreed with his decisions. Until she became infatuated with the idea of being the independent American woman, Consuelo always stood by her husband even though he had cheated on her several times. Each woman experienced strain on the family's relationship and each had to carry its weight, thus adding another burden to an already heavy load.

(12) Besides dealing with her husband and his moods and frustrations, each woman had to take time out to reassess herself and take notice of her changing identity as a result of the immigrant experience. No matter how hard they may have tried, Beret, Mikey's mother, and Consuelo could not avoid being changed by their own personal immigrant experience. Beret could not deal with such an experience and quietly went mad for a time until religion brought her out of her stupor and into religious fanaticism. She dealt with America by closing her eyes and trying to pretend nothing had changed. As a result, her husband left and her life remained the same dry existence. Beret did not go with the flow of her new society and that decision was reflected in her life.

(13) Mikey's mother, on the other hand, accepted the situation and tried to make the best of it. She kept the pieces of her life in Hungary which meant the most to her

and filled in the gaps with new American culture. She remained the staunch Jewish mother, nosy and strict, but also kind and loving. While she did stay true to form as a Jewish mother, one area where Mikey's mother was influenced though living in America was in her feelings towards Christians. The woman had always hated them: "Christians did not seem like people to her " (Jews Without Money 164). But through living in the tenements and being forced to mix with them, she realized they weren't as bad as she had thought and that they, too, were struggling just as much as anyone else.

(14) While Mikey's mother created a type of happy medium between her old and new life, Consuelo took a 180 degree turn from the person she once was. She came to the U.S. the faithful Mexican wife who worshipped her husband. While she still adored Juan, she didn't let herself be pushed around as much and stood up for her rights whenever she needed to. Living in the new country did something to Consuelo. Only after they were in America did Juan and Consuelo have their first verbal argument. She wasn't afraid of Juan anymore and wouldn't hesitate to throw him in jail if he hit her. Consuelo eventually lost all of her Mexican traditions. Her once immaculate home turned into a sty and the children ran around with little supervision. Because of her drastic change, Consuelo's family fell apart and was never able to recapture the closeness it once had.

(15) The immigrant experience is a vast undertaking that taxes both the mind and spirit of all who attempt it. Many responsibilities are heaped on both man and woman once the decision is made to immigrate. But after the man finds a job, his share of the load becomes the woman's, thus making her burden twice as heavy. The three women had many obligations when they immigrated. Among them were adapting to the new culture and helping their families adapt, serving as a crutch for their husbands when times got rough, and keeping their own identities constant while adding to them with the new culture.

(16) At the end of each novel all three women are still struggling because they haven't found a place in America for themselves and their families. Their lives were less than what they had expected them to be. Every day presented a new challenge that a man just couldn't understand. The woman had few refuges to turn to and the pressure on her to succeed in the new country was very great. Thus it was a constant struggle that in too many cases did not end until death.