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Female Masculinities in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*: Power, Courage, Leadership, and The Reconfiguration of Gender Identity

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Abstract
This research analyses the portrayal of masculine qualities in female characters in Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians*. Masculinity and femininity are socially constructed gender identities often associated exclusively with men and women respectively. However, scholars argue that masculinity does not belong solely to men and can be produced by women as well. While previous studies have examined gender representation in literature, limited attention has been given to how contemporary Asian popular fiction portrays female masculinity within the cultural tension between traditional Asian values and modern individualism. This study addresses that gap. Using Peter Lehman's masculinity theory as an analytical framework—identifying power, leadership, courage, and heroism—this research examines four female characters. The findings demonstrate that all four masculine qualities are present. Power is portrayed through Rachel Chu's ability to influence others and Eleanor Young's social dominance. Leadership is demonstrated by Eleanor Young's confident command. Courage is exhibited by Kerry Chu's defiance of societal expectations and Astrid Leong's bravery in confronting infidelity. Heroism is shown through Astrid Leong's concern for others and a maid who risked her livelihood to expose a harmful plot. This research demonstrates that masculine qualities are not biologically determined but socially constructed, challenging rigid gender stereotypes and redefining female identity as capable of integrating both feminine and masculine traits.

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1. Introduction

Masculinity and femininity are classified as gender identities used to identify men and women in the social construction of society. The general public often views masculinity as a trait that only men should possess, and femininity as a trait that only women should possess. However, scholars have challenged this binary understanding. Whitehead and Barrett (2001) explain that masculinities are behaviours, languages, and practices existing in specific cultural and organizational locations that are commonly associated with men, thus culturally defined as not feminine. Halberstam (1998) argues more provocatively that masculinity does not belong to men, has not been produced only by men, and is not properly expressed only through male heterosexuality. What society calls 'masculinity' has also been produced by masculine women, gender deviants, and often lesbians.

These theoretical perspectives suggest that masculinity and femininity are traits constructed by society rather than traits determined by biological sex. Masculine and feminine qualities are developed throughout an individual's life. The experiences, events, and people

that influence one's life can shape the qualities an individual needs. The more dominant qualities eventually shape one's identity. Thus, every individual potentially possesses both feminine and masculine qualities to balance and navigate life's challenges. This explains why women may also need and develop masculine qualities such as leadership, independence, and courage.

However, a critical problem remains underexamined: how female masculinity operates within contemporary Asian popular fiction. Current studies tend to overlook how female masculinity manifests within the specific cultural tension between traditional Asian values (such as filial piety, patriarchy, and female subservience) and modern individualism (such as independence, self-determination, and career ambition). This tension is not merely thematic but shapes how female characters develop and express masculine traits in ways that differ from Western representations. Understanding this gap is urgent because popular fiction like *Crazy Rich Asians* reaches global audiences and actively shapes how Asian femininity is perceived and negotiated in transnational contexts.

Female masculinity can be observed in various literary works, including Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013). This romantic comedy novel was written to introduce contemporary Asia to a North American audience. The story follows Rachel Chu, a New York University economics professor, who is invited by her boyfriend, Nicholas Young, to attend his best friend's wedding and meet his family in Singapore. Upon arrival, Rachel faces prejudice from Nick's family, friends, and Singapore's upper class. She discovers that her boyfriend comes from one of the most respected and wealthiest families in Singapore. Added to this is the disapproval of Nick's mother, Eleanor Young, who rejects Rachel as her son's choice of partner. Rachel must navigate these challenges alone in a foreign land and make quick decisions to overcome the problems she encounters.

Rachel Chu is portrayed as an independent, intelligent, and unyielding woman. Raised in America as a Chinese immigrant, Rachel developed an American mindset that differs from traditional Chinese values. This open-minded Rachel meets Eleanor Young, a woman who was forced by her husband's family tradition to abandon her own aspirations. Eleanor had to change her way of life to conceal her weaknesses and ensure her son's comfortable upbringing. The contrast between these two women—one embracing her independence, the other shaped by traditional expectations—provides rich material for analysing how masculine qualities manifest in female characters within Asian cultural contexts.

However, existing scholarship has largely focused on Western texts or theoretical discourse, leaving contemporary Asian popular fiction underexplored. Previous studies have examined female masculinity in Western literature and film (Halberstam, 1998) or focused on gender stereotypes in general (Zuhro, 2018; Wulandari, 2019). Limited research has specifically examined how female masculinity is portrayed in contemporary Asian popular fiction, particularly within the specific cultural tension between traditional Asian values and modern individualism. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the portrayal of masculine qualities in female characters in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Specifically, this research seeks to answer two questions: (1) What types of masculine qualities are found in female characters in the novel? and (2) How are these masculine qualities portrayed on the female characters?

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it contributes to gender theory by demonstrating that female masculinity is not a monolithic Western concept but manifests differently across cultural contexts, shaped by local norms and values. Second, it contributes to Asian literary studies by providing a close analysis of how contemporary Asian popular fiction represents gender identity, an area that remains underexplored compared to Western literary traditions. Third, it contributes to popular fiction discourse by examining how commercially successful texts like *Crazy Rich Asians* negotiate and potentially challenge

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traditional gender roles for global audiences. By shifting focus from moral persuasion to theoretical and disciplinary contributions, this research offers academic justification for examining female masculinity in this specific cultural and literary context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Gender and Masculinity

Gender, as a social construct, has been theorized extensively across feminist scholarship. The World Health Organization (2023) defines gender as the socially constructed characteristics, norms, behaviours, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy. Unlike biological sex, gender varies across societies and changes over time.

While Judith Butler (1990) revolutionized gender theory by arguing that gender is performative—constituted through repeated acts rather than expressing a natural interior identity—Judith Halberstam (1998) extends this argument by decoupling masculinity from male bodies entirely. Whereas Butler focuses on how all gender identity is performed and thus unstable, Halberstam argues more provocatively that "masculinity does not belong to men, has not been produced only by men, and is not properly expressed only through male heterosexuality" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 241). This distinction is crucial: Butler's performativity theory explains how gender norms are maintained through repetition, but Halberstam's framework specifically opens space for understanding female masculinity as a legitimate, coherent identity rather than a mere imitation of maleness.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, developed by Connell (1995), further enriches this theoretical landscape. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally idealized form of manhood that legitimizes men's dominance over women and other marginalized masculinities. However, Connell's framework has been critiqued for focusing primarily on men's bodies and experiences. Halberstam's female masculinity theory directly responds to this limitation by demonstrating that masculine traits—power, courage, leadership, heroism—can be embodied by female-bodied individuals. This study synthesizes these complementary theories: from Halberstam (1998), we adopt the core premise that masculinity is not biologically determined; from Lehman (2001), we operationalize masculinity into four observable traits (power, leadership, courage, heroism); and from Connell (1995), we understand that these traits function within systems of social power, not individual psychology alone.

2.2 Lehman's Framework of Masculine Qualities

Peter Lehman's (2001) framework is particularly relevant for literary analysis because it operationalizes masculinity into observable, measurable traits that can be identified through characters' actions, dialogue, and narrative positioning. Rather than treating masculinity as an abstract essence, Lehman identifies four concrete elements: power (the ability to control people and events), leadership (the capacity to organize and persuade others), courage (the ability to confront fear and difficulty), and heroism (selfless action to help others). This framework enables systematic analysis of female characters' behaviours without reducing them to stereotypes.

Following the framework established by Lehman (2001), the four masculine qualities are defined as:

a. Power: The ability or right to control people and events, or to influence the way people act or think in important ways. Power can be exercised through physical means, intellect, social status, or knowledge (Foucault, 1998).
b. Leadership: The quality or ability that makes a person a leader, encompassing intelligence, self-confidence, emotional intelligence, and the capacity to organize and lead others to accomplish shared objectives (Northouse, as cited in Xayyapheth, 2013).

c. Courage: The ability to control fear and to be willing to deal with something dangerous, difficult, or unpleasant. Courage involves understanding one's fears and handling them effectively (Beard, 2019).
d. Heroism: Acts of compassion and empathy toward others, often involving self-sacrifice or risk-taking to aid those in need (Staats, as cited in Cherry, 2020).

2.3 Female Masculinity

Building on Halberstam's (1998) foundational work, female masculinity refers to the embodiment of masculine traits by female-bodied individuals. This concept challenges the assumption that masculinity is the exclusive property of male bodies and recognizes that women may develop and express masculine qualities through their behaviours, actions, and life choices. The Encyclopaedia of Sex and Gender (2023) confirm that qualities masculine women possess—confidence, assertiveness, independence, and daring—are not scientifically or biologically male attributes; rather, these qualities are socially constructed as masculine despite being commonly found in women.

Recent scholarship has extended Halberstam's framework to Asian and global contexts. In contemporary Asian literature and media, female masculinity often emerges as a strategy for negotiating between traditional feminine expectations (filial piety, modesty, domesticity) and modern demands for independence and professional achievement. Women in Asian societies may develop masculine traits not to reject femininity entirely, but to equip themselves with the tools needed to navigate patriarchal structures while preserving their core identities.

The concept of female masculinity also operates across four analytically distinct levels: behaviour (how characters act, such as taking charge or making decisions), appearance (physical presentation, though not the focus of this study), speech (directness, assertiveness in dialogue), and response to crisis (problem-solving approaches that prioritize action over emotional processing). This multi-level framework enables a more sophisticated analysis of how female characters exhibit masculine traits without conforming to simple stereotypes.

2.4 Gender Role, Stereotype, and Character

Gender roles in society refer to how individuals should behave based on their assigned sex, including how they should act, speak, dress, and present themselves. Traditional gender roles typically expect women to be polite, accommodating, and nurturing, while expecting men to be powerful, combative, and brave.

Several key scholars have identified persistent areas of gender stereotyping, including personality traits (women accommodating and emotional vs. men confident and aggressive), domestic behaviours (women responsible for caregiving vs. men for finances and repairs), occupations (teaching and nursing for women vs. engineering and medicine for men), and physical appearance (women thin and elegant vs. men tall and muscular). These stereotypes perpetuate inequality and affect individuals who may not conform to expected norms.

Character, in literary analysis, refers to the individuals who appear in dramatic or narrative works, interpreted by readers as having moral and dispositional qualities expressed through dialogue and action. Characters are essential elements in literary works that drive the plot, and well-written characters give life to the entire story. The analysis of characters' gender expression—whether conforming to or deviating from traditional gender roles—provides insight into how literature reflects and potentially challenges social norms.

2.5 Theoretical Framework of This Study

This study synthesizes the theoretical perspectives discussed above into a coherent analytical framework. Halberstam's (1998) theory of female masculinity provides the

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overarching conceptual premise: that masculinity can be embodied by female-bodied individuals and that this embodiment is legitimate, not imitative. Lehman's (2001) framework operationalizes this premise into four observable traits—power, leadership, courage, and heroism—enabling systematic analysis of textual evidence. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity provides the critical lens for interpreting why certain traits are coded as masculine and how their expression by women challenges or reinforces existing power structures.

This framework is applied to Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* through close reading of four female characters: Rachel Chu, Eleanor Young, Kerry Chu, and Astrid Leong. Each character is analysed for evidence of the four masculine traits, with attention to the specific cultural context of Asian diaspora and the tension between traditional values and modern individualism. The findings contribute to an emerging body of scholarship on female masculinity in Asian popular fiction, an area that remains under-theorized compared to Western literary traditions.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis with a gender studies approach to examine the portrayal of masculine qualities in female characters in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*. Unlike basic qualitative descriptive methods, textual analysis focuses on close reading of linguistic and narrative elements within a text, attending to how meaning is constructed through dialogue, description, action, and narrative positioning. This approach is particularly suited for gendered literary analysis because it enables systematic examination of how characters' behaviors, speech patterns, and decision-making processes manifest culturally coded masculine traits.

The gender studies approach frames masculinity not as a fixed biological attribute but as a set of socially constructed behaviours and dispositions that can be embodied by individuals regardless of their assigned sex. This theoretical lens directs the analysis toward identifying specific actions and interactions that demonstrate power, leadership, courage, and heroism within the narrative, while remaining attentive to how these traits are framed—whether celebrated, tolerated, or punished—within the social world of the novel.

3.2 Data Source

The primary data source is Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), published by Random House, Inc., New York. This novel was selected for three reasons. First, it features multiple female characters from diverse generational and class backgrounds, enabling comparative analysis of how female masculinity manifests differently across age, status, and cultural orientation. Second, the novel's setting—contemporary Singapore—provides a specific cultural context where traditional Asian values (filial piety, patriarchy, female subservience) intersect with modern individualism and globalized aspirations. Third, as a commercially successful popular fiction that has achieved global readership and cinematic adaptation, the novel carries cultural influence in shaping how Asian femininity is represented and understood internationally.

3.3 Data Selection Procedure

Data were selected through a systematic three-stage procedure:

Stage 1: Character Identification. Four female characters were selected for analysis based on their narrative significance and diversity of social positioning: Rachel Chu (protagonist, Chinese-American immigrant, middle-class academic), Eleanor Young

(antagonist, Singaporean traditional elite), Kerry Chu (Rachel's mother, working-class immigrant), and Astrid Leong (Nick's cousin, upper-class but progressive). These characters represent different generations (mothers vs. daughters), class positions (working, middle, elite), and cultural orientations (traditional vs. modern). This diversity enables examination of how female masculinity manifests across different social locations rather than treating all women as a monolithic category.

Stage 2: Passage Identification. Relevant textual passages were identified through close reading of the entire novel (approximately 530 pages). The researcher read the novel twice: first for holistic comprehension and character mapping, second for targeted identification of passages depicting female characters' actions, dialogues, and internal reflections that potentially demonstrate masculine qualities. Passages were included if they met at least one of four preliminary criteria: (a) the character exercises control or influence over others (power), (b) the character organizes, directs, or persuades others (leadership), (c) the character confronts fear, danger, or difficulty (courage), or (d) the character helps others at potential personal cost (heroism).

Stage 3: Unit Segmentation. From the identified passages, specific quotation units were extracted as data points. Each unit consists of a direct quotation from the novel (ranging from a single sentence to a paragraph) accompanied by its page number. Units were selected based on representativeness (typical of the character's behaviour) and significance (pivotal moments that reveal character development or key narrative events). A total of 12 data units were extracted: three for each of the four characters.

3.4 Coding and Analytical Framework

Data were coded using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach:

Deductive Coding (Theory-Driven). Based on Lehman's (2001) framework, four a priori categories were established:

a. Power: The ability to control people, events, or influence others' thinking
b. Leadership: The capacity to organize, direct, or persuade others toward shared goals
c. Courage: The ability to confront fear, difficulty, or danger
d. Heroism: Selfless action to help others at potential personal cost

Inductive Coding (Data-Driven). During initial coding, the researcher remained open to emergent patterns not captured by Lehman's framework. Two inductive categories emerged: (a) manifestations of power through knowledge and sociability (demonstrated by Rachel Chu) versus through status and dominance (demonstrated by Eleanor Young), and (b) the role of motherhood as a catalyst for courage (specifically in Kerry Chu's character). These inductive refinements were incorporated into the final analysis.

Each data unit was coded using a 2x4 matrix: character (Rachel/Eleanor/Kerry/Astrid) by masculine quality (power/leadership/courage/heroism). Units could be coded for multiple qualities if the passage demonstrated more than one trait. For example, a passage showing Eleanor bargaining with an investigator was coded for both leadership (directing Lorena) and power (controlling the negotiation).

3.5 Interpretation Procedure

Interpretation proceeded through three iterative phases:

Phase 1: Within-Character Analysis. Each character's data units were analysed separately to identify which masculine qualities they exhibit and how these qualities manifest in their specific context. For example, Rachel Chu's power was analysed in relation to her profession (professor) and social background (American-educated), while Eleanor Young's power was analysed in relation to her family status and cultural capital.

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Phase 2: Cross-Character Comparison. Findings across characters were compared to identify patterns and variations. This comparison examined whether the same masculine quality (e.g., courage) manifests differently across generational positions (Kerry's maternal courage vs. Astrid's marital courage) and whether characters with different cultural orientations (traditional vs. modern) exhibit different configurations of masculine traits.

Phase 3: Theoretical Integration. Patterns identified in Phases 1 and 2 were interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of Halberstam (1998) and Connell (1995). This phase addressed broader questions: Does female masculinity in Asian popular fiction differ from Western representations? How do traditional Asian values shape the expression of female masculinity? What does the novel suggest about the acceptability or punishment of female masculinity?

4. Discussion

This section analyses how four female characters in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*—Rachel Chu, Eleanor Young, Kerry Chu, and Astrid Leong—exhibit masculine qualities as defined by Lehman (2001): power, leadership, courage, and heroism. Rather than simply describing what each character does, this section interprets the theoretical and cultural significance of their actions, linking findings to Halberstam's (1998) theory of female masculinity, Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, and the specific cultural tension between Confucian Asian values and Western individualism.

4.1 Power: Two Modalities of Female Authority

Both Rachel Chu and Eleanor Young exercise power, but through fundamentally different modalities. This distinction challenges Lehman's (2001) undifferentiated framing of power as simply "the ability to control people and events."

Rachel Chu's power operates through influence, knowledge, and sociability—a relational mode that enables her to navigate unfamiliar social terrain. When Nick observes that Rachel "charm[s] the socks off everyone- your students, the chancellor, and all the university bigwigs, even that grouchy Japanese sandwich guy on Thirteenth Street" (Kwan, 2013, p.336), this demonstrates a form of power that does not rely on formal authority or financial status. Rachel's position as an Economics Professor at NYU (Kwan, 2013, p.253) further illustrates how institutional knowledge functions as power: she influences young minds through teaching and earns respect through expertise rather than intimidation.

While Lehman (2001) tends to frame power as dominance—the capacity to impose one's will on others—Rachel's case suggests an alternative: relational power, which operates through mutual respect, intellectual authority, and social competence. This finding extends Halberstam's (1998) framework by demonstrating that female masculinity need not replicate male patriarchal dominance; it can manifest as culturally feminine-coded relationality while still functioning as power. This distinction is particularly significant in Asian contexts where collectivist values prioritize harmony and relationship maintenance over individual assertion.

Eleanor Young represents the opposite modality: positional power derived from social status, family name, and the internalized deference of others. The narrative explicitly describes how "the place of honour on Carol's Qing dynasty Huanghuali bed was always reserved for Eleanor... Carol still deferred to her... The others also kowtowed to her, because even among these exceedingly well-married ladies, Eleanor had trumped them all by becoming Mrs. Philip Young" (Kwan, 2013, p.27). Eleanor's power is not earned through competence or relationships but inherited through marriage and maintained through performance of superiority.

Eleanor's mental "social algorithm" that calculates where everyone stands "based on who their family was, who else they were related to, what their approximate net worth might be, how the fortune was derived, and what family scandals might have occurred" (Kwan, 2013, pp.43-44) reveals a hyper-vigilance that aligns with Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity legitimizes male dominance through cultural consent rather than overt force. Eleanor, despite being female, operates within a patriarchal system by internalizing and reproducing its logic. She polices boundaries between worthy and unworthy, acceptable and unacceptable, with the same ruthlessness that a patriarch would exercise.

The contrast between Rachel and Eleanor reveals that power modalities are shaped by cultural orientation. Rachel, raised in America as a Chinese immigrant, embodies Western individualism and meritocratic assumptions that power should be earned. Eleanor, representing traditional Chinese elite values, embodies a Confucian hierarchical worldview where power is inherited, deference is obligatory, and questioning hierarchy is unthinkable. Neither woman is more or less masculine; rather, they demonstrate that within the same cultural contact zone, female masculinity takes different forms depending on class, generation, and diaspora positioning.

4.2 Leadership: Eleanor's Confident Command

Eleanor Young's leadership is demonstrated most clearly in the bargaining scene with an investigator. When Lorena fails to negotiate a reasonable price, Eleanor abruptly declares, "No ten thousand, or I leave" (Kwan, 2013, p.211). When Lorena protests—"Eleanor, I think you've gone too far with your bargaining tactics this time"—Eleanor responds with absolute confidence: "Lorena, trust me keep walking and don't turn around!" (Kwan, 2013, p.212). Lorena obeys, and ultimately the investigator accepts their terms.

This scene illustrates Lehman's (2001) leadership criteria: self-confidence (Eleanor never doubts her judgment), fluency (she articulates commands clearly and decisively), emotional intelligence (she reads the investigator's desperation and refuses to be manipulated), and the capacity to compel others' followership (Lorena obeys despite scepticism). Notably, Eleanor leads without any formal authority over Lorena; her leadership emerges purely from others' perception of her competence and status.

What makes Eleanor's leadership distinctively female and Asian is its performance within Confucian constraints. Traditional Confucian gender ideology discourages female assertiveness, valuing women's silence and deference. Eleanor has learned to lead not through open authority—which would violate expectations of feminine modesty—but through subtle direction that allows others to feel they are following voluntarily. She does not order Lorena; she frames her command as advice: "trust me." This culturally inflected leadership style suggests that female masculinity in Asian contexts may require indirection and face-saving strategies that Western models of female leadership do not fully capture.

The absence of leadership traits in other female characters is equally telling. Rachel, despite her intelligence and social competence, never organizes or directs others. She solves problems individually. Kerry Chu, despite extraordinary courage, never commands others; she acts alone. Astrid, despite heroic concern for Rachel, leads no one. This distribution suggests that leadership may be the most culturally contested masculine quality for Asian women, perhaps because it most directly challenges Confucian patriarchal hierarchy where only senior males lead.

4.3 Courage: Maternal Protection and Marital Confrontation

Courage manifests in two radically different contexts: Kerry Chu's maternal defiance of Chinese patriarchy and Astrid Leong's confrontation of marital infidelity.

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Kerry Chu, raised in China where "patriarchy and filial piety form life's foundation" and where "girls have lower standing and must follow parental guidance," demonstrates courage through three escalating acts of resistance. First, she runs away from home to marry a man her parents disapproved of, abandoning her education and future security. Second, when her husband proves abusive, she develops strategies to protect herself—crushing sleeping pills into his wine, inviting his friends over to keep him occupied until he passes out. Third, when she discovers her mother-in-law's plot to blind her newborn daughter with acid to circumvent China's one-child policy, she resolves: "I was determined that nobody was going to blind you, nobody was going to hurt you" (Kwan, 2013, p.406). She escapes with nothing, carrying her baby to a foreign country.

What makes Kerry's courage theoretically significant is its specific cultural embeddedness. Halberstam (1998) emphasizes individual agency in decoupling masculinity from male bodies, but Kerry's case reveals that courage for Asian women is rarely individualistic; it is relational, specifically maternal. Kerry does not fight for her own freedom or self-actualization; she fights for her daughter's survival. This maternal framing of courage complicates Halberstam's framework, which tends to prioritize Western individualist notions of self-determination. In Confucian cultural contexts, female virtue is traditionally defined through sacrifice for family. Kerry's courage, while undeniably masculine in its defiance of fear and authority, is simultaneously hyper-feminine in its motivation—maternal protection. This suggests that female masculinity in Asian contexts may be less about rejecting femininity and more about strategically deploying masculine courage to fulfil feminine obligations that patriarchal systems refuse to protect.

Astrid Leong's courage operates within a different domain: marriage and social reputation. Born into Singapore's elite, Astrid married a lower-status man for love, defying her family's disapproval. When she discovers evidence of his infidelity, she experiences intense internal struggle, even attempting to normalize his behaviour: "Every man cheats. This is Asia. Every guy has mistresses, girlfriends, flings on the side. It's a normal thing. A status thing. Get used to it" (Kwan, 2013, p.97). This internalized voice—speaking in the idiom of patriarchal permission—represents precisely the cultural logic that keeps many women trapped in unhappy marriages.

When Astrid finally asks, "Have you been... are you having an affair?" (Kwan, 2013, p.221), she confronts not only her husband but the entire social apparatus that tells her to look away. Her courage lies not in fighting or fleeing but in refusing pretence—refusing to continue the performance of marital happiness that protects everyone's reputation except her own. This form of courage—truth-telling in the face of social pressure to maintain harmonious appearances—is particularly salient in Asian contexts where "face" (mianzi) dictates that private suffering remain concealed publicly.

Comparing Kerry and Astrid: both demonstrate courage, but Kerry's is physical and materially risky (life-threatening danger, economic precarity), while Astrid's is social and emotionally costly (reputation, family standing, self-concept as a desirable wife). This suggests that for Asian women, courage may be required in both survival contexts and social performance contexts; the form looks different, but the psychological structure—acting despite fear—remains consistent with Lehman's (2001) definition.

4.4 Heroism: Unacknowledged Sacrifice

Heroism, defined by Staats (cited in Cherry, 2020) as selfless action to help others involving potential personal cost, appears in two forms: Astrid's protective concern and the special maid's whistleblowing.

Astrid's heroism is indirect but strategic. Unable to attend Araminta's bachelorette party herself, she asks her cousin Sophie to watch over Rachel: "Astrid was so perceptive when she asked me to look out for you. She was a little worried about you tagging along with this particular crowd" (Kwan, 2013, p.215). Astrid, herself in crisis over her failing marriage, nevertheless remembers Rachel's vulnerability in a hostile social environment and quietly mobilizes protection. This form of heroism—network-based, preventative, gendered—reflects what feminist scholars call "relational heroism": action that prevents harm rather than responding to crisis.

The special maid who reveals the blinding plot against Kerry's baby represents a more dramatic heroism. Hired specifically to care for pregnant Kerry, she learns the family's plan and chooses to expose it, knowing this jeopardizes her employment and potentially her safety. The maid's nine-month relationship with Kerry, an employee-employer bond that could easily have remained professional, instead becomes friendship and protection. Her heroism is structurally significant because it demonstrates that female solidarity can transcend class boundaries even in highly hierarchical contexts. Neither the novel nor scholarship has sufficiently appreciated this character's role; she remains unnamed, mentioned only briefly. This narrative marginalization may itself be worthy of critical attention: who gets recognized as a hero, and whose sacrifices remain invisible?

4.5 Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

Across all four characters, three cross-cutting patterns emerge.

First, no character exhibits all four masculine qualities. Rachel has power only (not leadership, courage, or heroism). Eleanor has power, leadership, and perhaps strategic intelligence but no courage or heroism. Kerry has courage only. Astrid has courage and heroism. This suggests that female masculinity is not a unified identity package but a toolkit; women in Kwan's novel select and deploy specific masculine traits situationally without adopting the full ensemble. These finding challenges assumptions that female masculinity requires wholesale rejection of femininity or consistent performance of dominance.

Second, power modalities differ systematically by class and cultural orientation. Rachel (middle-class, American-raised) uses relational power (influence, knowledge, sociability). Eleanor (elite, Chinese traditional) uses positional power (status, dominance, deference). This suggests that women's access to and expression of masculine authority is shaped by their position within multiple intersecting hierarchies—not just gender, but class, generation, and cultural capital.

Third, the Confucian cultural context significantly shapes how female masculinity is performed and received. Kerry's courage is maternal rather than individualist; Astrid's courage is truth-telling rather than confrontation; Eleanor's leadership is indirect rather than commanding; Rachel's power is relational rather than dominant. Each woman adapts masculine traits to a cultural environment that penalizes open female assertiveness. Female masculinity in *Crazy Rich Asians* is, therefore, not a rejection of Asian femininity but a negotiation with it—a strategic deployment of masculine tools to fulfil goals that traditional feminine norms do not adequately protect.

4.6 Cultural Context: Confucian Values and Diaspora Identity

The tension between Confucian Asian values and Western individualism is not merely thematic background but a primary engine of female masculinity in the novel. Confucian patriarchal hierarchy assigns women subordinate roles: daughters obey fathers, wives obey husbands, mothers sacrifice for sons. Women who internalize these norms fully—like the Bible study women who "kowtow" to Eleanor—do not develop masculine traits because they never need to. They are protected (or constrained) by the system.

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Women who develop female masculinity in Kwan's novel are those positioned at cultural boundaries. Rachel, as Chinese-American, has internalized American meritocratic individualism; she assumes she can earn her place through competence. Kerry, despite her Chinese upbringing, chooses to defy patriarchy when her daughter's life is threatened; motherhood becomes a legitimate justification for transgression. Eleanor, trapped within the system, internalizes it so thoroughly that she becomes its enforcer; her female masculinity is not rebellious but neoliberal—she exercises dominance within patriarchal rules, never challenging the rules themselves.

This analysis reveals that female masculinity in Asian diaspora literature cannot be understood through Western frameworks alone. Halberstam's (1998) model, developed primarily through analysis of Western texts, emphasizes individual rebellion against gender norms. Kwan's Asian characters demonstrate that female masculinity may also emerge through filial obligation (Kerry), maternal protection (Kerry again), or internalization of patriarchal logic (Eleanor)—none of which fit neatly into Western feminist narratives of liberation. This study therefore argues for an expanded theoretical framework that recognizes multiple, culturally specific pathways to female masculinity.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that female characters in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* exhibit four masculine qualities as identified by Lehman (2001): power, leadership, courage, and heroism. However, beyond merely identifying these traits, the analysis reveals three significant patterns that extend existing scholarship on female masculinity.

First, this study adds to scholarship by demonstrating that power modalities differ systematically by class and cultural orientation. Rachel Chu exercises relational power (influence, knowledge, sociability), while Eleanor Young exercises positional power (status, dominance, deference). This finding challenges Lehman's (2001) undifferentiated framing of power and extends Halberstam's (1998) framework by showing that female masculinity need not replicate male patriarchal dominance. Second, this study contributes to Asian literary studies by revealing that female masculinity in Asian diaspora contexts is shaped by Confucian values (filial piety, patriarchal hierarchy, face-saving). Kerry Chu's courage is maternal rather than individualist; Astrid Leong's courage is truth-telling rather than confrontation. This finding suggests that female masculinity in Asian popular fiction is not a rejection of femininity but a strategic negotiation with it—a deployment of masculine tools to fulfil goals that traditional feminine norms do not adequately protect. Third, this study adds to popular fiction discourse by demonstrating that commercially successful texts like *Crazy Rich Asians* actively engage with gender politics rather than merely reproducing stereotypes. The novel presents female masculinity ambivalently: Eleanor's power is socially respected but morally questionable; Rachel's relational power is admired but insufficient to protect her from Eleanor's hostility; Kerry's courage is heroic but economically unrewarded; Astrid's heroism goes unacknowledged. This ambivalence reflects real-world complexities: women who exercise masculine authority gain effectiveness but risk social punishment.

This study is limited to a single text (*Crazy Rich Asians*), a single author (Kevin Kwan), and a specific cultural context (Singaporean-Chinese diaspora). Findings may not generalize to other Asian popular fiction, other diaspora contexts (e.g., South Asian, Southeast Asian), or other genres (e.g., serious literary fiction, young adult literature). Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on female characters' demonstration of masculine qualities without examining male characters' demonstration of feminine qualities, which would be necessary for a complete analysis of gender fluidity in the novel. The study also

does not examine reader reception; we cannot determine whether audiences interpret these female characters' masculine traits positively, negatively, or ambivalently.

Future research should pursue four directions. First, comparative studies across Kevin Kwan's trilogy (*Crazy Rich Asians*, *China Rich Girlfriend*, *Rich People Problems*) could examine whether and how female masculinity evolves across the series. Second, cross-cultural comparisons between Singaporean-Chinese diaspora fiction and other Asian diaspora contexts (e.g., Korean-American, Vietnamese-American, Indian-British) could identify whether the patterns observed here are specific to Chinese cultural values or generalize across Asian contexts. Third, reception studies examining how different audiences (e.g., Asian-American readers, Singaporean readers, white Western readers) interpret female characters' masculine traits could illuminate whether cultural background shapes gender perception. Fourth, comparative studies between popular fiction and literary fiction could examine whether genre affects the representation of female masculinity. Serious literary fiction may present more radical or complex gender performances, while popular fiction may resolve gender tensions more conservatively to satisfy mainstream expectations.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that female masculinity in *Crazy Rich Asians* is not monolithic but varies across class, generation, and cultural orientation. The novel neither fully celebrates female masculinity nor punishes it completely; instead, it presents ambivalent portrayals that reflect real-world complexities. While the findings are specific to this text and context, they contribute to an emerging scholarly conversation about how contemporary Asian popular fiction engages with gender identity, diaspora, and the negotiation between traditional values and modern individualism.

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