

---

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Ideological Dissonance in Gish Jen's *The Resisters***

Shiyue Zheng

Jinan University, College of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou and China

---

**ABSTRACT**

While existing scholarship has emphasized *The Resisters*'s resilient resistance, feminist commitments, faith in human nature, this paper contends that *The Resisters* simultaneously contradicts its own ethical ideals through its narrative construction of resistance: an ambivalent resister, the suffering martyr and the romantic heroin. This narrative construction reveals Gish Jen's dilemma as a writer: on one hand, she continues to uphold a cosmopolitan, pluralist ethical vision; on the other hand, the pressing realities of racial inequality and structural oppression compel her to attend to concrete, context-specific ethical positions.

**KEYWORDS**

*The Resisters*; Gish Jen; narrative dissonance; resistance

**ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 01 June 2026

**PUBLISHED:** 29 June 2026

**DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2026.9.7.4

---

**Introduction**

Gish Jen's writing has long been characterized by a fluid and open approach to ethnic identity, one that embraces contradiction and difference, and seeks to imagine a multicultural society grounded in coexistence, as a perspective that "transcends the limitations imposed by belief, culture, and race on individual vision, approaching other cultures from a worldly outlook marked by openness to alterity and difference" (Xu Gang, 2020). In this sense, Jen's literary vision has often been understood as articulating a form of "cosmopolitan" cultural identity (Xu Gang 2020; Wang Fei, 2014; Liu Dan, 2003). However, at the end of the twentieth century, amid shifting U.S. political, economic, and immigration policies, the collapse of post-racial utopian ideals, and the increasing visibility of systemic racism and social polarization, ethnic literature increasingly revisited cultural roots and traditions. As critic observes, in contemporary Chinese American literature "the search for tradition gradually gained strength, and by the late twentieth century developed into a new trend of 'return'" (Xu Shuangru, 2010). Writing from this historical and cultural context, Jen's novel *The Love Wife* (2004), in which characters are endowed with a high degree of uncertainty and fluidity in their cultural identities, shows new attention to importance of ethnic inheritance and the practical challenges of transmitting cultural tradition.

Published in 2020, *The Resisters* further develops this trajectory, demonstrating "a renewed tendency toward ethnic-centered writing and a return to ethnic traditions" (Ji Cuiping, 2025), carrying an ethical and critical consciousness closely tied to contemporary social conditions in the United States, including widening economic inequality, racialized technological governance, and the precarization of marginalized populations.

In *The Resisters*, Jen constructs a highly institutionalized and automated near-future "AutoAmerica" which has a overcontrolling "Aunt Nettie" (autowork) as the brutal stage on which resistance unfolds. There, society is divided into the privileged "Netted", who reside on secure land, and the marginalized "Surplus", whose jobs have been rendered obsolete by automation. The "Surplus", predominantly people of color, are confined to precarious, state-monitored floating communities like "Flotsam Town". Subsisting on a meager "Basic Income" and suspect "mall-truck food", they endure constant surveillance through implanted "RegiChips" and their listening "AutoHouses". Their existence is haunted by the ever-present threat of brutal enforcement, such as having their houseboats sabotaged, or the ultimate punishment of being "Cast Off" into the open sea for any transgression. It is within this oppressive reality of economic deprivation, bodily control, and existential danger that the novel's central drama of resistance unfolds.

Previous scholarship has tended to foreground the Surplus's "dramatic resistance against totalitarianism, class oppression, and racial cleansing" (Li Hanyue, 2022), emphasizing ethnic demands for justice and equality, and even the "heroism" of resistance

celebrated by mainstream reviews such as *The New York Times* (Walker, 2020). Yet such readings risk overlooking the profound ambivalence embedded in the novel's portrayal of resistance itself. Jen's longstanding commitment to openness, difference, and respect for individual choice is not entirely abandoned. *The Resisters* seems to present a more conflicted stance: one that simultaneously upholds liberal values, while also emphasizing the urgency of ethnic solidarity and political struggle.

### 1. The Ambivalent Resisters

Narrated in the first-person perspective, this novel allows the narrator Grant to articulate his views about resistance directly and assertively. Words such as "right makes might", "either we're makers or just made", and "Give me liberty or give me death!" frame resistance, at least for Grant and his wife Eleanor, as a necessary stance grounded in dignity, survival, and justice (Jen, 2021). Throughout the narrative, both Grant and Eleanor consistently affirm this position, with Eleanor ultimately paying for it with her life.

Yet Gish Jen's pluralistic sensibility prevents the novel from settling into a single resistant position. The most significant ideological tension emerges through their daughter Gwen's sustained hesitation and ambivalence toward resistance. The narrative devotes extensive space to Gwen's wavering from the moment her baseball talent is recognized and appropriated by Nettie, through her recruitment into Net U, and ultimately to her decision to leave. Moments of hesitation and self-doubt recur across the narrative more than a dozen times in direct or indirect discourse, such as "I wanted to do it the way you did [...] But I couldn't"; "Resisters. Right or wrong"; and "Mom believes right makes might, but I don't know" (Jen, 2021). Throughout this trajectory, Gwen oscillates between a sense of moral responsibility shaped by her family's values and her lived awareness of systemic injustice, and the powerful temptations of material security, future opportunity, and the pragmatic recognition that resistance maybe risky, and may ultimately fail. Here, the repeated narration of Gwen's hesitation constitutes a form of iterative emphasis, in which indecision itself becomes the dominant experiential condition.

This emphasis is also accompanied by a redistribution of narrative authority. From Chapter Three onward, once Gwen enters Net U, Grant's narrative function begins to recede. While his role as a worried father becomes more prominent at the level of characterization, the function of advancing the narrative increasingly passes into Gwen's hands through their exchange of letters. Gwen emerges as the primary narrator of her own university experience, and her letters open up the inner world of an adolescent marked by repeated ideological conflict, which becomes a thematic concern that cannot be overlooked in this portion of the narrative. Although her anger toward Nettie's oppression and systemic injustice remains intact, uncertainty rather than resolve comes to define her stance. As Annalisa Quinn notes in her NPR review, she criticized this portrayal, suggesting that "Gwen's own actions never attain the same moral stakes, and the novel's ethics ultimately feel confused" (Quinn, 2020). But this apparent ethical ambiguity may seem to reflect the residual tension within Jen's pluralist value system and her own sustained ambivalence between cosmopolitan openness and the renewed urgency of ethnic and political commitment.

It is precisely this sustained hesitation that most troubles Grant and Eleanor and propels the narrative forward, that the "stakes of the novel are bound up in the question of what Gwen is going to do with her life" (Rockwood, 2021). Notably, however, Gwen's parents, despite being committed resisters themselves, do not demand that she inherit their position as resisters. On the contrary, they repeatedly affirm her autonomy, assuring her that "You have a choice. That You always have a choice" (Jen, 2021), a refrain that once again reveals the underlying pluralism. But commitment to autonomy is also accompanied by hesitation, since they may inwardly hope that their daughter will ultimately stand on the same side as they do. That's why when Gwen decides to enter Net U, Eleanor becomes distracted and cuts her finger, later regretting her earlier decision to allow Gwen to visit the institution at all. These moments make clear that Grant and Eleanor are themselves profoundly divided, caught between their ethical commitment to preserving Gwen's autonomy and their affective desire for her alignment.

The novel's sustained and empathetic portrayal of Gwen's inner conflict, together with her parents' acceptance on freedom of choice, reveals an underlying textual ideology that respects tolerance, plurality, and difference. This ethos extends beyond the family to the novel's depiction of the Surplus baseball team. The team is described as composed of players of "every possible color, shape, and size", dressed in a variety of "baseball attire" (Jen, 2021). Given that baseball uniforms traditionally signify conformity and collective identity, this deliberate rejection of visual uniformity marks the team as what the narrative calls an "all-accepting party" (Jen, 2021). Taken together with the novel's sustained emphasis on plurality, this suggests that even though the Surplus group is portrayed as engaging in bold and persistent acts of resistance, at an underlying and more interpersonal level the implied author foregrounds respect for diversity, individual choice and autonomy, rather than framing the ethical stakes in a crude binary of resistance versus non-resistance.

This textual ideology becomes especially visible in implied author's attitude in depicting Gwen's disapproval and moral judgment in her conversations with her best friend Ondi and Winny, after they self-willingly choose to become PermaDermed (permanent skin lightening). In these interactions, she adopts a harsh and accusatory tone toward Ondi:

"Was it his idea?" Gwen went on.

"I don't just do what guys tell me to do, Gwen."

"They don't need to tell you, you mean. You pick up their cues."

"If you mean I didn't grow up reveling in my weirdness, the way some of us did, you're right."

"Actually, you did," said Gwen. "Actually, you were rebellion personified."

"Maybe I was myself personified," said Ondi. "And maybe I am still,"

"Well, good. Then you've done the right thing. I just have one more question."

Ondi waited.

"Are you going to do your eyes now? Does Open'EmUp come next?" (Jen, 2021)

The exchange begins with Gwen's leading question, which implicitly frames Ondi's decision as externally motivated and non-autonomous. When Ondi directly rejects this implication, claiming "I don't just do what guys tell me to do", Gwen refuses to accept her assertion of agency and instead reinterprets Ondi's choice as a subtler form of compliance: "You pick up their cues". Through this move, Gwen again disqualifies Ondi's self-definition and reasserts interpretive authority over her friend's motives. As the dialogue progresses, the contrast in affective tone becomes increasingly pronounced. Gwen's repeated use of "actually" functions as an intensifier that conveys insistence and domination, forcibly reassigning Ondi to the identity of "rebellion personified". Ondi's response, by contrast, grows more restrained and concise. Her statement "Maybe I was myself personified. And maybe I am still" is the most composed and self-possessed utterance during this dialogue. This line carries particular rhetorical force precisely because of its calmness, quietly insisting on the continuity of the self across change. Gwen, however, refuses to engage with this assertion and escalates the confrontation by posing a final, humiliating question about further bodily modification. Here, Gwen's language becomes emotionally urgent, mocking, and controlling — end of the conversation. At this point, the implied narrator subtly repositions Gwen herself as excessive and ethically compromised. Her confrontational stance stands in clear tension with what has been consistently upheld by her parents and articulated throughout the novel: commitment to autonomy and pluralism, while Ondi's measured tone and her insistence on self-definition resonate more closely with the ethical horizon that the implied author has established.

A similar narrative pattern emerges in Winny's response to Gwen's questioning. When Gwen mocks her decision, Winny replies simply, "It's still my own skin, Gwen" (Jen, 2021). Through such moments, the implied author consistently refrains from condemning Ondi and Winny's choices of "crossing over" as false consciousness or submission. Rather, by granting them controlled, self-possessed voices in moments of confrontation, the narrative affirms their decisions as conscious acts of self-definition. Actually, the novel has been reinforcing Ondi's autonomy by recalling, on two occasions, her earlier refusal to remain bound to Gwen as a sidekick: "I didn't want to be in your confidence. I didn't want to keep your secrets. It's like you want us to still be what we were when we were eight. I'm sick and tired of being your sidekick" (Jen, 2021), as resistance to a fixed relational identity imposed by Gwen.

Taken together, these narrative choices suggest a position that is deeply informed by realist concerns with structural injustice, yet remains thoroughly permeated by an ethical commitment to freedom. What lies behind the novel's ostensibly firm stance on resistance, therefore, is not ideological certainty but sustained hesitation and recalculation.

## **2. The Martyr and the Heroine**

In line with the novel's attitude toward resistance outlined above, is a hesitant affirmation for resistance. While Gish Jen continues to affirm feminism and the value of inherent human capacities, the scale and depth of oppression depicted in *The Resisters* seem to exceed what ordinary human agency can realistically withstand. As a result, resistance becomes imaginable only through the romanticized martyrdom and exceptional heroism. This reliance on symbolic sacrifice and god-like figures reads as ironic self-undermining, that the ideals the novel claims to uphold are subtly exposed as insufficient.

Existing scholarship has approached *The Resisters* from a feminist perspective, emphasizing its critique of patriarchal power and its attention to women's power. As scholar observes, "a form of radical resistance once regarded as male-dominated is now articulated and led by women, while men remain at home undertaking child-rearing labor, an arrangement that subtly but effectively deconstructs androcentrism" (Li Hanyue, 2022). Grant as a male first-person narrator repeatedly articulates admiration for women's strength, endurance "Were all women devastatingly superior to men" (Jen, 2021), directly framing women's lived competence and steadiness through a discourse of male recognition and praise. In addition, the novel foregrounds a tradition of feminine wisdom passed down from generation to generation, frequently invoking phrases such as "my mother said" as a source of lived truth, and "Gwen looked for all the world like her grandmother, and her great-grandmother, and her great-great-grandmother her, and all the other teachers who had come before her in her long line" (Jen, 2021), a lineage of female power and wisdom. However, although *The Resisters* explicitly positions itself as a feminist novel, its narrative practice ultimately contradicts its feminist ideology by marginalizing and sacrificing its most committed female resister, Eleanor. Her story is fragmented, marginalized, and symbolically overburdened with the representational weight of resistance within the narrative progression.

Eleanor's appearance in the novel is strikingly delayed. She does not meaningfully enter the narrative until page 8, after the social background, the narrator's self-characterization, and the introduction of their daughter Gwen have already been fully established. Even then, her profession is disclosed only in a single, offhand sentence "thanks to the herculean efforts of Eleanor and her legal team—an A/V data shutoff to which you could resort" (Jen, 2021), where her identity as a lawyer appears almost as an afterthought, and Eleanor and her team's working is merely alluded to. As a lawyer, the Surplus fields suit Eleanor has been working on is finally mentioned until page 24 ("However, thanks to their emanations, about which Eleanor had been planning to file a suit for some time, we were not"), and its resolution appears still in a brief declarative statement: "The best news of all was that Eleanor and her team won their Surplus Fields suit" (Jen, 2021). Throughout the intervening chapters, Eleanor's labor as a

lawyer and resister is consistently presented in a procedural, report-like manner. In Genette's terms, when story time greatly exceeds narrative time, narration takes the form of summary, which deprives her resistance of complexity, experiential depth, as even Eleanor's suffering is compressed into brief, summarizing statements. Her "ruptured spleen" and "missing toe", inflicted through beatings and interrogations administered by Aunt Nettie, are reported in passing: "Besides the incarceration, she had been subjected to TouchShocks, ToeBombs, and more—what we Surplus called distinguished treatment" (Jen, 2021). The transitional marker "besides" seems to signal an impulse to move quickly past the accumulation of Eleanor's suffering, an narrative "acceleration" of her experience through persistent summarization. Because the novel is narrated through her husband's limited first-person perspective, Eleanor's interior monologue and emotional life remain inaccessible to the reader, and there is little direct representation of Eleanor's own speech. What we encounter instead are her actions, and more insistently, her pain, but even this pain is predominantly conveyed through brief description and summary.

Yet this accelerated narration changes abruptly once Eleanor is incarcerated. At this point, the narrative noticeably slows down, particularly in its depiction of her imprisonment and her forced "mindsharing" with Nettie (a coercive procedure designed to extract and regulate her thoughts). The text devotes extended attention to the detailed jail environment, and long stretches of dialogue between Eleanor and her family. Narrative time approaches story time, marking a transition from summary to scene. Through these scenes, the reader witnesses Eleanor's gradual psychic erosion under systematic mental manipulation, signaling a change in narrative priority that Eleanor's suffering which becomes the primary site of narrative investment. Meanwhile, She "began to spar with the other voice" (Jen, 2021), suggesting an internal division through which she increasingly loses control over her own narrative. Even Grant, the narrator, begins to doubt whether the person he encounters is still Eleanor: "Was that she, in those familiar black pupils?" (Jen, 2021). Under these conditions, Eleanor's individual textual voice is effectively erased. She no longer speaks as a subject, but is spoken about as a site of damage, reflecting Nettie's severe authoritarian control.

Through this fragmented narrative construction and the emphasis on scenes of punishment, Eleanor is shaped more as a symbolic martyrdom figure: a steadfast resister who endures extreme suffering under Nettie's oppression yet remains unyielding. The characterization of Eleanor, in Phelan's terms, functions more as "vehicles to express ideas or as representative of a larger class than the individual character" at the thematic level (Phelan, 1989), while remaining underdeveloped at the mimetic level — a narrative imbalance that transforms her from a lived subject of resistance into a symbolic bearer of its ethical weight. In fact, the baseball team's act of tattooing her name onto their bodies further crystallizes her symbolic status. Ultimately, driven to a fatal extreme by systemic oppression, Eleanor's death at the novel's conclusion finalizes her symbolic role and narrative function that extends beyond herself: it exerts decisive pressure on Gwen to enter the Olympic competition. A symbol finally completed.

In attempting to write feminism through male admiration, female leadership and perseverance, the novel paradoxically reproduces a familiar patriarchal narrative structure: the female resister is transformed into an enduring embodiment of the cause. The very strategy that seeks to elevate and honor women through man's voice becomes, ironically, the condition of Eleanor's narrative silencing. A feminist commitment articulated at the level of ideology is undermined by a narrative practice that converts resistance into female sacrificial symbolism, exposing a contradiction the novel doesn't resolve.

Still, while *The Resisters* tries to affirm people's original human abilities and to resist all technologically mediated forms of posthuman enhancement, and celebrates pre-technological forms of life such as gardening, knitting, and people sitting around the fire talking and sharing stories, as emblems of older and authentic human ability, the novel yet constructs a narrative in which ordinary human capacity proves insufficient to sustain continuous resistance at the same time. Resistance within appears to be viable only for those endowed with extraordinary, almost superhuman abilities, such as Gwen.

Born with an "god-given" (Jen, 2021) throwing arm, Gwen epitomizes this contradiction. She has an exceptional athletic talent that other baseball players, whether technologically "updated" (a process that itself carries significant side effects) or not, are unable to attain through training alone. She is AutoAmerica's most coveted player for the Olympic baseball competition, and the decisive player who reverses the course of the game. The narrative and its spectators alike celebrate her triumph, casting her as a figure of collective salvation, with her name shouted across the field "Gwen-nie! Gwen-nie!" (Jen, 2021), as what one reviewer aptly describes as "the return of the wandering heroine to become the savior of her people" (Rockwood, 2021).

This privilege of exceptional ability is prominently foregrounded through contrast with Ondi, who comes from a normal family. Lacking both economic resources and exceptional talent, Ondi possesses no comparable capacity to challenge or even safely question the system without risking "casting off". The system, in turn, actively works to discard people like her. Faced with structural exclusion, in the baseball team, Ondi is deemed to technological updating as the only viable means of gaining competitive edge, since refusal would result in being completely eliminated by those who have already enhanced themselves that "could jump and run and field as never before" (Jen, 2021). Unlike Gwen, who can declare "I prefer not to", Ondi is effectively deprived of choice. In this sense, while the novel ostensibly celebrates authentic human ability, it simultaneously constructs a hierarchy that venerates exceptional power and renders ordinary individuals disposable, condemned to exploitation, coercion, and impossible choices. This imbalance is reinforced at the level of narrative focus itself. As one review observes:

"The novel's focus on the powerfully magnetic Glenn-Eleanor-Gwen family exchange is extreme. Their glowing trinity of exemplarity washes out the other characters in the book, including Gwen's plot-crucial and troublesome occasional best friend Ondi, who is so jarringly described throughout" (Rockwood, 2021).

## Conclusion

As discussed above, these unresolved tensions permeates the narrative structure itself. While *The Resisters* seeks to confront the fundamental vulnerability of ordinary individuals under systemic oppression and to reaffirm the value of authentic human strength, resistance is inevitably imagined as achievable only through two figures: the courageous yet suffering martyr, or the exceptionally gifted heroine endowed with near-mythic abilities, both capable of sustaining hope for justice and victory. Resistance in this novel thus having an ideological dissonance embedded within the narrative. This dissonance is also reflected in the characters' divergent attitudes toward the choice of resistance itself. Although the novel is driven by an imperative to oppose oppression and to critique an unjust social order, its textual ideology simultaneously allows a degree of ethical flexibility regarding individual decisions. Resistance is affirmed as a moral value, yet personal choice is never entirely foreclosed.

This tension may arise from the fact that *The Resisters* is acutely attentive to the weight and intractability of contemporary conditions. Jen appears increasingly concerned with more immediate and difficult ethical questions, marking a more intense engagement with social reality. But such conditions may be difficult, if not impossible, to fully handle. So as the novel grapples with ethnic inequality and structural injustice within this heavy realism, it simultaneously introduces heroic romanticism into ordinary lives, and an aspirational vision of pluralism within tough racial realities. Gwen's own words articulate this inner fracture: "My younger self who will never forgive you, as opposed to my older self who has no choice" (Jen, 2021), and perhaps Jen herself also harbors this inner struggle: one part of her seems to embrace a cosmopolitan ethical imagination that values openness and plurality, while the other remains attentive to the urgent ethical demands posed by concrete, historically and realistically situated injustices. As one critic aptly observes, "*The Resisters* is, fundamentally, a self-identified and self-limiting humanist novel" (Rockwood). The result is a divided but revealing vision. On the one hand, the novel imagines a community that, even under extreme conditions, continues to honor inherent human capacities and to respect the diversity of individual choices. On the other hand, it simultaneously admits that neither the characters nor the author herself fully possess such freedom, ultimately exposing the limits of its humanist vision in the face of structural oppression.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

## References

- [1] Jen, G. (2021). *The Resisters*. Vintage Books.
- [2] Ji, C. P. (2025). A new paradigm of ethnic writing in Chinese American literature: A case study of *Interior Chinatown*, *The Resisters*, and *Our Missing Hearts* [美国华裔文学族裔性书写新范式探究——以《唐人街内部》《反抗者》和《我们失去的心》为例]. *Journal of Social Science of Jiamusi University*, 43(1), 134–138.
- [3] Li, H. Y. (2022). Resisting "Auto America": Dystopian Narrative in Gish Jen's Latest Novel *The Resisters* [反抗"自动化美国": 任碧莲新作《反抗者》的反乌托邦叙事]. *Study of Literature in English*, (1), 109–120.
- [4] Liu, D. (2003). On Gish Jen's literary creation: Also on the cosmopolitanism of Chinese American English writers [任碧莲创作论——兼谈美籍华裔英语作家的世界性]. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (5), 103–105.
- [5] Phelan, J. (1989). *Reading people, reading plots: Character, progression, and the interpretation of narrative*. The University of Chicago Press.
- [6] Quinn, A. (2020, February 5). The Resisters could use a little more resistance. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/05/802683530/the-resisters-could-use-a-little-more-resistance>
- [7] Rockwood, C. (2021, March 8). The Resisters by Gish Jen. Strange Horizons. <http://strangehorizons.com/wordpress/non-fiction/the-resisters-by-gish-jen/>
- [8] Walker, K. (2020, February 11). The future is here, and uncomfortably close to home. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/books/review/the-resisters-gish-jen.html>
- [9] Wang, F. (2014). The integrator of border cultures: From Jade Snow Wong to Gish Jen [边界文化的融合者——从黄玉雪到任璧莲]. *Literature and Art Criticism*, (7), 103–106.
- [10] Xu, G. (2020). The Global Ethical Perspective on *World and Town* by Gish Ren [任碧莲小说《世界与小镇》的全球伦理视域]. *Literatures in Chinese*, (5), 47–53.
- [11] Xu, S. R. (2010). A New Perspective in the Pursuit of Ethnic and Cultural Identity: Reading Gish Jen's *The Love Wife* [族裔、文化身份追寻中的超越与传承——从任璧莲的《爱妾》说起]. *Jinan Journal(Philosophy & Social Sciences)*, 32(6), 87–93.