



# Transcending the New Woman: Multiethnic Narratives in the Progressive Era

*Charlotte J. Rich*

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The dawn of the twentieth century saw the birth of the New Woman, a cultural and literary ideal that replaced Victorian expectations of domesticity with visions of social, political, and economic autonomy. Although such writers as Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin treated these ideals in well-known literature of that era, marginalized women also explored changing gender roles in works that deserve more attention today.

This book is the first study to focus solely on multiethnic women writers' responses to the ideal of the New Woman in America, opening up a world of literary texts that provide new insight into the phenomenon. Charlotte Rich reveals how these authors uniquely articulated the contradictions of the American New Woman, and how social class, race, or ethnicity impacted women's experiences of both public and private life in the Progressive era.

Rich focuses on the work of writers representing five distinct ethnicities: Native Americans S. Alice Callahan and Mourning Dove, African American Pauline Hopkins, Chinese American Sui Sin Far, Mexican American María Cristina Mena, and Jewish American Anzia Yeziarska. She shows that some of their works contain both affirmative and critical portraits of white New Women; in other cases, while these authors align their multiethnic heroines with the new ideals, those ideals are sometimes subordinated to more urgent dialogues about inequality and racial violence.

Here are views of women not usually encountered in fiction of this era. Callahan's and Mourning Dove's novels allude to women's rights but ultimately privilege critiques of violence against Native Americans. Hopkins's novels trace an increasingly pessimistic trajectory, drawing cynical conclusions about black women's ability to thrive in a prejudiced society. Mena's magazine portraits of Mexican life present complex critiques of this independent ideal of womanhood. Yeziarska's stories question the philanthropy of socially privileged Progressive female reformers with whom immigrant women interact. These writers' works sometimes affirm emerging ideals but in other cases illuminate the iconic New Woman's blindness to her own racial and economic privilege.

Through her insightful analysis, Rich presents alternative versions of female autonomy, with characters living outside the mainstream or moving between cultures. *Transcending the New Woman* offers multiple ways of transcending an ideal that was problematic in its exclusivity, as well as an entrée to forgotten works. It shows how the concept of the New Woman can be seen in newly complex ways when viewed through the writings of authors whose lives often embody the New Woman's emancipatory goals—and whose fictions both affirm and complicate her aspirations.

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