

# Worlds Apart: Gender Disparity in the Immigration Experience in Voltaire's *Candide*, or *Optimism*

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Comp 103 AS02

13 February 2017

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*Voltaire's Candide, or Optimism*

The world we live in has become increasingly global in nature. As world citizens, the phenomenon of international migration affects us all. An individual may be forced to leave their homeland due to war, political persecution, a search for new economic opportunities or a need to reunite with family. Once in a new country, they are faced with the challenges of integrating into a new society. Integration into a new community may require human and social capital such as learning a new language and cultural acclimatization (Donato, Piya and Jacobs, S340). Often, an inability to communicate effectively, or adapt culturally, affects on one's ability to create ties in the community. Some researchers have suggested that there may be a disparity in the successful integration of an immigrant based on gender (Donato, Piya and Jacobs, 1).

Human migration and globalization are not only contemporary issues. The philosophes of the Enlightenment period pondered the consequences of global migration and multicultural interactions issues as well. The economy during this period in history was expanding outside the boundaries of Europe through colonialization and global trade. For instance, in Voltaire's *Candide*, the two protagonists become swept up in the global migration. Candide and his beloved, Cunegonde, both experience sorrow and pain in their journeys. They both find themselves without family or sense of place. However, there is a disparity in the experience of

each based on gender. It is apparent in their immigrant status, global mobility, and integration in society. In these regards, Cunegonde faces immense challenges over which she has very little control.

The story's protagonist, Candide, is a political refugee. He has been ousted from the courts of the King of Westphalia for challenging the sociopolitical and hierarchical norms of his homeland. His family tree does not, within its branches, hold a sufficiently uninterrupted genealogical link to the nobility. Lacking a genetic link to the aristocracy lowers his social status in the courts making his love for Cunegonde a challenge to country's monarchy. When the romance is discovered by the King, Candide is summarily sent into exile (Voltaire 100). Although he has been forced to leave his homeland, and is not allowed to return home, he retains his self efficacy and free will. His ability to leave his homeland on his own accord and, after much weeping and wandering, to choose the direction he will travel is evidence that he retains his personal liberties (Voltaire 102). In the very nature of his exile, Candide is presented as a human being possessing the ability to think, to feel, to make choices, and have self-agency.

Candide's autonomy affords him a somewhat independent status. He moves relatively freely across geographical borders, leading some researchers to describe him and his travelling companions as "cosmopolitans." As a global traveller, he begins to see the world as one homogeneous whole in which he is a citizen. People and places, and the issues societies face become interchangeable with one another (Kjorholt 62). The brutal devastation of an Albere village by the Bulgars is no different than the aftermath of an Albere attack on a Bulgar village. The bodies of the dead that he is forced to stumble through on the battlefield are

indistinguishable. Candide coldly observes that these atrocities are “in strict accordance with the laws of war (Voltaire 104).” When crossing geographical borders, there seemingly is very little impeding his progress. He crosses independently. When the Anabaptist, who employs Candide for a period, meets his watery demise during the shipwreck, Candide does not require the presence of his employer to enter Lisbon (Voltaire 107).

Admittedly, some of his choices lead him into misfortune. His forced conscription into the Bulgar army, however does not prevent him from rising in the ranks and becoming a hero to the rest of his battalion (Voltaire 103). He is arrested for being a disciple of the Jewish philosopher Pan gloss and becomes the victim of religious zeal and persecution, but survives the process and continues his journey (Voltaire 109). Despite the challenges that these misadventures pose, Candide appears to be able to “move on when the situation requires it” (Kjorholt 70). His success in conforming to the cultural expectations of new countries is aided by his ability to quickly gain the “social capital required for immigrant integration” (Donato, Piya and Jacobs, S340). Often, he can speak the language and uses this ability to make contacts within the societies he encounters. His ability to make connections with others leads job offers, cultural information, food and provisions along the way.

The female protagonist, Candide’s lovely Cunegonde, is not so fortunate. In the aftermath of a war against her country, her father and mother are killed. She and her brother are savagely molested. Unlike Candide, she is physically taken from her homeland (Voltaire 111). Not only has Cunegonde lost her family, she has also lost her humanity. Cunegonde, prized for her beauty and youth, has become the spoils of war. In the global marketplace, she

becomes but another commodity to be traded and sold at her owners' whim. Don Issachar, a Jew who purchases her, keeps her hidden away in his country home. This process isolates her from the rest of society. Her only participation in life outside the country house is to attend church. Eventually, she is shared, along with a country house, between a Jew and the Grand Inquisitor. Even Cunegonde accepts her life as a possession. She describes the men as joint tenants of both the house and her (Voltaire 111). Don Issachar, the Jew who purchases her, keeps her hidden away in his country home. This process isolates her from the rest of society. Her only participation in life outside the country house is to attend church. The only exception in the novel would be her conversation with the governor of Buenos Ares when he approaches her with the proposal of becoming his wife. It is noteworthy, that Candide has already declared that he is betrothed to Cunegonde. In this way, the governors removal of his rival prior to the conversation implies that he wishes to possess her himself (Voltaire 119). Eventually, she is shared, along with the country house, between the Jew and the Grand Inquisitor. Even Cunegonde accepts her life as a possession. She describes the men as joint tenants of both the house and her (Voltaire 111).

As a commodity, her life and mobility become tied to that of her current owner. When Candide encounters her in Lisbon, she describes how she came to be in that area. "After three months, he [the Bulgar captain] had lost all his money and grown sick of me; so he sold me to a Jew named Don Issachar, who traded in Holland and Portugal, and who was mad for women (Voltaire 111)." This pattern of crossing borders as a commodity continues when she is sold from Cadiz to a prince in Constantinopol. Her beauty, however, has faded and she is no longer valuable as a sex slave. She washes dishes for a prince in exile (Voltaire 153). There is even a

correlation between her living conditions and the wealth of her owner. Her life seems considerably more comfortable when she is the possession of Don Issechar than her life as the dishwashing slave in Constantinopol. As such, she has no agency, her life is completely dependent on someone else. Her very freedom depends on Candide finding her and rescuing her.

Candide and his love Cunegonde chart two very different paths through the globe. While Candide becomes a citizen of the world, Cunegonde becomes a tradable asset in the global market. As a cosmopolitan in the Age of Enlightenment, Candide travels through his world with relative ease. His beloved's movements across borders are dependent on supply and demand. Throughout the novel, he is somehow able to retain his agency. He thinks, considers and acts on his own. As he is exposed to, and interacts with, the people and cultures of the world, he expands who he is. He begins to question his former beliefs in light of some of the atrocities he witnesses. Most importantly, because he is free to interact with others through discussions, work, and mutual experiences, he is able to integrate into the globalized world. Cunegonde is excluded from this integration with society. With few exceptions, in the countries she visits, she rarely is seen to leave the presence of her owner or interact with any other members of society.

It would be easy to conclude that Cunegonde's experiences are somewhat understandable considering the historical period in which she is placed. But, are things really all that different in the modern context? Most recently, Syrian refugees have brought new awareness to yet another global migration crisis. Daily, individuals are leaving all they know to

escape persecution, poverty and war. They are left with no sense of place. Many are able to find homes in new countries and Canada has accepted many immigrants over the years. Each migrant must find a way to successfully integrate into their new societies. Many studies suggest that for women, within the immigration experience, may be a “double disadvantage” that makes it more challenging for them to integrate compared to their male counterparts. (Donato, Piya and Jacobs S335).

All immigrants face the challenges of learning a new language, culture and the domestic laws of their new home. For women, however, family composition and marital status may affect their ability to access the education and work experience needed for them to successfully integrate (Donato, Piya and Jacobs S340). I would not go so far as to say that they are slaves. However, many women do take the majority of the responsibility for the family and home whether through their cultural norms or simply due to a lack of affordable childcare. Their domestic responsibilities have chained them to their homes and isolated them from interacting with their new environments. Perhaps we need to be more sensitive to their plight and find more creative ways to integrate immigrant women into our society.

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