

The evolution of self in asian-american women in the usa



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The conflict of a typical mother/daughter relationship exists in many cultures. This conflict for many Asian-American women was further exasperated as these women were forced to also deal with adjusting as first, second, and third generation Americans in a sometimes unwelcome society. As a child, Japanese-American Janice Mirikitani, was interned, along with her mother, at a “work relocation camp” during 1941 in Rohwer, Arkansas (Americans Who Tell the Truth @ AWTTT).

Despite her unfavorable origins of birth as an interned US citizen of Japanese descent, Mirikitani has gone on to become a self-proclaimed visionary, community activist, leader, poet, and editor in American society (AWTTT). The role of the Asian-American female in society has experienced varying rates of progression in relation to social reform that has taken place in the US is “Breaking Tradition” written by Mirikitani. This poem epitomizes this progression for the three generations of women in the Mirikitani family as Asian-American women.

It also defines how this journey erected barriers within the familial relationships of a mother and a daughter across each generation, “Breaking tradition” is not only a poem about the evolution of a relationship between a mother and daughter through the passage of time, but also a poem about the evolution of repression and persecution that plagued Asian-American women in the US. The poem, “Breaking Tradition”, conveys Janice Mirikitani’s concern that her daughter has made the discovery of self-loathing that many women may have experienced in 1978 as they entered into womanhood (AWTTT).

According to the poet, this self-loathing is characterized by her insecurities and a longing for an identity of self other than the one defined by society. This room of insecurities, and the art of self, which confines each woman is individualistic and changes in correlation to society. Since women from each generation may experience varying levels of oppressive societal restrictions placed on them, Mirikitani implies that this room may exist inside all women. The evolution of this oppression has to begin with a revolution against what is determined by society that begins inside each woman as a longing for self-identity.

As each culture's society goes through the transitions of social liberation, so will the affirmations of women. Until the untimely event of this liberation, Janice Mirikitani, who was coming of age in the 1970s, seemed destined to be confined in; This room we lock ourselves in where whispers live like fungus, giggles about small breasts and cellulite, where we confine ourselves to jealousies, bedridden by menstruation. This waiting room where we feel our hands are useless, dead speechless clamps that need hospitals and forceps and kitchens and plugs and ironing boards to make them useful [sic] (Dr.

Delmendo, Mirikitani). The confines of Janice Mirikitani's proverbial room are partially erected by her value of her self-worth and are also partially defined by her ability to have children and be a dutiful housewife. The proverbial room is also partially erected by the confines of her insecurities regarding the self-deprecating view of her body image. The coming of age of her daughter causes Janice to contemplate the different considerations of what parameters are holding back each generation of women in her family.
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The journey of this social liberation for women in the Mirikitani family began with Janice's mother whose oppression and persecution by American society was tangible, and all too real, as a first generation immigrant to the US (AWTTT). This period of time in 1941, and much of the time proceeding this period, was characterized by anti-Japanese sentiment. The mother of Janice Mirikitani was treated as a second class citizen not only because of her Japanese heritage but also because any discontent she may have felt had no voice in society as a member of the female gender.

The confines of her mother's room were very different than her own as her mother " kept her room neat with silence, defiance smothered in requirements to be otonashii, passion and loudness wrapped in an obi, her steps confined to ceremony" (Dr. Delmendo, Mirikitani). The first generation of Mirikitani women had to potentially overcome the silence of her liberties by the traditions of two cultures.

The culture of Japanese tradition she left behind and that of the unwelcoming American culture. Instead of fighting against this persecution by the United States, she chose to remain silent and hidden within the confines of her Japanese culture. As a Nisei, second generation Japanese-American, Janice begins to question her role as a woman in American in society. She wants to break the tradition of silence and speak out against the defined role that society has laid out for her. She makes attempts to do this in her own mind so that she can pass this knowledge on to her daughter, but she seems unable to do so. In the poem, she expresses her discontent at remaining silent and hopes that she can convey this yearning to break tradition, and be heard in society, to her daughter.

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Before she can express these sentiments to her sansei daughter, she realizes that her daughter was able to break this chain of silence that was passed down to her and find her self-identity on her own. She seems to be unaware of the confinements of either culture and seems to have no problem in expressing herself or in embracing her American culture. A similar progression of the identity of three generations of Asian-American women is depicted in the movie, *Saving Face*, by writer and director Alice Wu.

The film is about a third generation Chinese-American woman named Wilhelmina Pang whose family has one foot shakily planted in traditionalist Chinese culture. The backdrop for this story is based in New York City where Wilhelmina Pang lives and works as a surgeon. Each generation of women in the Pang family seems to be distant from the one that precedes it. The women of each generation have difficulty hiding who they truly are as Wilhelmina's mother is forced to move in with her due to the impending pregnancy of her illegitimate child.

Wilhelmina's mother, Ma, is a widower whose father will not allow her to return home until she marries someone who legitimizes the child that she is carrying. Despite her concern for her daughter, Ma's own mother remains silent about her concern for her and allows her husband to send her to Wilhelmina's apartment. Even when she falls ill, Ma's mother still holds steadfast to her husband's traditionalist wishes not to speak to her own daughter. This faithfulness to her husband's wishes results in the denial of Ma's chance to say goodbye to her own mother before she dies.

Even though Wilhelmina knows that her grandmother was in the hospital, she too decides to listen to her grandfather instead of following her heart. Prior to the death of her grandmother, Wilhelmina and Ma seem to live in the same apartment hiding the true identity of who they really are. Ma seems to be breaking out of the confines of her proverbial room as she evidently is engaging in premarital sex, begins to explore the culture of Manhattan on her own, builds a relationship with the extremely dark African-American neighbor, and even begins to explore her sexuality by watching a porn film. Simultaneously, Wilhelmina is exploring her sexuality literally with a beautiful Modern dancer named Vivian. Both Pang women seem to be elated, yet when Wilhelmina returns home, the porno disappears and the women sit on the couch discussing the mundane details of the day while the elephants in the room rest between them. Up until the death of the grandmother, the women seem to be making progress towards being open about who they are, but the unfortunate death seems to solidify their guilt of not going along with expectations. The death seems to validate their fears and the women seem to regress back towards being bound by tradition.

Now more than ever, both women seem to be intent to find a husband for one another in order to “ save face” and alleviate some of the guilt from the matriarch’s death. All the while, the relationships of the Pang women seem to be in deep contrast to that of the relationship of Vivian and her mother who seem to have successfully navigated the confines of both their Chinese as well as American culture to end up in a room where they are aware of who they really are. Vivian’s mother is aware of her daughter’s sexuality and their

relationship is characterized as talking often and openly throughout the movie.

The thought of losing Vivian is what finally gave Wilhelmina the courage to break down the confines of tradition, in which her and her mother were kept bound from the pursuit of happiness. She first saves her mother's self-identity by stopping her wedding to her father's friend Cho, an uneventful man, and by giving her mother the courage to confess her love for the much younger man, who is actually the father of her baby. Ma was willing to marry a man she didn't love instead of going against the expectations of her father. The movie ends with Vivian embracing her own self-identity as a lesbian in her Chinese-American community.

The evolution of the status of lesbian women in American society had a faster progression than that of the status of lesbian woman in her traditionalist Chinese-American culture. Yet, Wilhelmina and Vivian proclaim their love for each other at the traditional mating dances that are held every Friday night in her Chinese-American community. All the while, it is evident which women have made it out of the confines of their room as some women remain silent, some women immediately leave the dance, and others look on with apparent approval, (including Vivian's and Wilhelmina's mothers).

The influences of their American culture are also apparent from generation to generation on varying degrees of opinions that are expressed, or not expressed, and the continuum of hairstyles and clothing that are present at the dance. The conflicts that present themselves in familial roles of Chinese-American women across generations, and the ensuing conflicts resulting

from the mere existence of the mother/daughter relationship, are also depicted in *The Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan. This tale spans two generations of Chinese-American women in America and the origins, of their confinement within their culture, in China.

One of the relationships that prevail in *The Joy Luck Club* is the relationship of Suyuan Woo and her daughter Jing-Mei "June" Woo. The story begins with the recent death of Suyuan Woo, who died before ever getting a chance to tell her daughter the story of her life, or getting a chance to reveal who she really was to her daughter. One of the obstacles that stands between mother and daughter is due to difficulties in cross-cultural communication between first generation and second generation Chinese-Americans.

The other is due to the conflict that often exists between mother and daughter, which in turn doesn't allow them to bridge this cultural gap. It is even conjectured that Suyuan's need for her self-identity to break out of the confines of the proverbial room in her head is what caused her death (Tan, p. 5). June begins to become more open-minded to her Chinese culture when she takes her mother's place at the table of the Joy Luck Club. She becomes to know who her mother truly was. The remaining mothers of the Joy Luck Club begin to impart the unknown tales of her mother's life in order to bring the mother and daughter together even in death.

Suyuan always told her daughter the first part of the story of her existence in Kweilin but never gets to the end of her story in Kweilin, a village in China. Her mother suffers in silence resulting from insecurities and guilt that cause her to deny the existence of two of her daughter's that she had to leave

behind in Kweilin. These twins are symbolic of the great sacrifices that many first-generation women had to make when coming to the US. Suyuan's story of Kweilin originates during the time of Japanese victories in the war against China.

As a result, Suyuan is reluctantly forced to leave a culture that she clings to, behind. The rift that exists between mother and daughter is due to the Americanization of June and her mother's inability to be able to successfully assimilate into American culture and speak "the perfect American English" (Tan, p. 4). Suyuan's insecurities involving American culture manifest themselves in her hopes for June's ability to assimilate as the product of the perfect American ideal. The result is an Americanized child who has no interest in her Chinese culture and a complete alienation of the mother/daughter relationship.

Their relationship is further stressed over her mother forcing her to aspire to be a piano prodigy and live out the American dream that she could not. June's eventual rebellion of this dream is what causes the permanent rift between the two women that lasts all the way up until Suyuan's untimely death. Yet, by denying the efforts of her mother, June is partly able to deny some of the repression of self that is forced on some women by society while at the same time she is losing the part of herself that is passed down by her mother. "I wish I were dead! Like them," June shouts at her mother, referring to the two daughters she left behind, sealing the fate of their relationship (Tan, p. 153). In order to try to hold on to some semblance of herself, June always manages to always fall short of expectations and the expectations of her Chinese culture to be obedient. June is able to disassociate herself from <https://assignbuster.com/the-evolution-of-self-in-asian-american-women-in-the-usa/>

her mother by hiding behind her American culture. It's unfortunate that it also took the event of death for June to seek out her true self-identity.

While in the pursuit of figuring out whom her mother truly was, June also had to determine how she will let the confines of her culture and community allows her to be repressed. The culmination of this pursuit allows June to break free of her confinements and accept herself for who she really is, Jing-Mei "June" Woo who embraces the duality of her Chinese-American culture and the admirable strength and true memory of a mother she never knew in life. She can now see her mother as a "Queen Mother of the Western Skies" who lost her innocence but never gave up hope (Tan, p. 39). This hope has to exist in all women to aid in the promotion of the ever increasing role of women in all societies. Jing-Mei is able to break the confines of her insecurities when she goes to China to reconcile the Eastern influences she has not been exposed to with the Western influences she has grown up with. She is first concerned that she will not be Chinese enough. Yet ironically, when she finally arrives her guide wants to stay in a hotel and partake in the American fare that the hotel has to offer.

It is in China, where her mother left so many years before, where Jing-Mei finally finds the answers about who she truly is by finally knowing the details of how her mother came to give up her twin sisters and make her way to the US. This allows her to finally break free from all the insecurities that have repressed her all of these years and gives her the privilege to see how much she truly is her mother's daughter. The social liberation of women in any society begins with a self-awareness and progresses as women share this voice and carve out a place for themselves within their community.

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Each generation of women takes strides in the elevation of the status of the female roles in society and paves the way for the progress of the next generation. I too am enjoying the benefits of the strides made by the generation before me, as I navigate my way through life as a biracial Irish/African-American woman. I can only hope that my efforts will pave the way for my own daughter and that she will find her voice, long before the age where I found my own, and not be bound by the insecurities that plagued me throughout adolescence and early womanhood.

Janice Mirikitani has since become a champion of this movement of liberating woman by sanctioning women's health and welfare programs along with job development programs (AWTTT). Essay 3 - The Prevalent Presence of American Culture In 1921, during the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay wrote a poem titled " America" expressing his contradictory love for the culture of an American society who does not necessarily love his. While in pursuit of the American dream and the spreading of this ideal globally, there have been many unfavorable outcomes that many Americans may not take into consideration.

" America" is a rendition of how the promotion and hypocrisy of America's democratic values are overwriting centuries of invaluable culture while managing to leave behind the rewritten values of American culture in its place. Part of this hypocrisy is that the same core values that bind our nation together are the same values that allow disenfranchised citizens to speak out against these values and push for reform. One of the fundamental values that this nation was built upon is the premise that all men are created equal.

Yet, time and time again throughout history, the tolerance and appreciation of other cultures seems to disappear when competing against the dominance of American culture. Also, the same society that is supposed to value equality also seems to discriminate against cultures that are viewed as inferior to their own. McKay expresses some disillusionment with the way he's being treated in America and at the same time proclaims his love of country. He is able to confess his love for America despite the hate and bitterness he evidently feels from American society.

On the other hand, he views America as a maternal figure that he can't help but be swept up and enchanted by. McKay recognizes the irony that the same society that is persecuting him is also the same society that gives McKay the strength to speak out against this hate; a strength which he that he is grateful for. " Her vigor flows like tides into my blood, giving me strength erect against her hate" expresses McKay's sentiments that America fulfills his life-force and at the same time overwhelms his self-identity by " her bigness sweeps my being like a flood" (Dr.

Delmendo, McKay). McKay also recognizes that despite the maternal instincts of his country that the loss of his African-American culture over time will be " like priceless treasures sinking in the sand" (Dr. Delmendo, McKay). The duality of this existence characterizes what inevitably happens to many cultures that are dominated by the influences of American culture and swept over like a flood. In the positive sense, America is referred to as a tide and in the negative sense; America is referred to as a flood.

This domination results in the loss of the present traditional culture a society may cherish, over the passage of time. The author, Claude McKay tries to prevent some of the loss of his culture, by immortalizing this poem as a contribution to the Harlem Renaissance era, in the very poem that exemplifies it. As proud cultures lose their influence over time, some desperately try to hold onto some of their culture through other means. This yearning to hold on to cherished pieces of one's culture still occurs within US borders.

This also continues to occur globally where American culture has influenced other cultures while engaging in humanitarian intervention or colonization. The implied parasitic nature of the influence of American culture is also depicted in the book, *Silver Stallion: A Novel of Korea*, written by Ahn Junghyo. This fictionalized depiction of a small village's loss of innocence during the Korean War occurs at the hands of their supposed saviors, the US military. The US military arrives in South Korea with the intentions of preventing the advancing Communist Army from "liberating" the South and unifying the divided nation (Junghyo, p.). This UN backed plan involved the presence of the US military to aid in preventing North Korea's invasion of South Korea (Wikipedia). The intention was to remain in South Korea while the government in power succeeded in establishing a government based on democratic values (Wikipedia).

The story in *Silver Stallion: A Novel of Korea* illustrates how the US occupation in South Korea resulted in the destruction of a traditional and rigid culture built on custom. The symbolic downfall of the South Korean culture is told from the viewpoint of the rural village of Kumsan that resides <https://assignbuster.com/the-evolution-of-self-in-asian-american-women-in-the-usa/>

out of the line of fire of the town. Until the Communist Army begins to employ air raids in their war strategy, and the ensuing arrival of US soldiers, the villagers of Kumsan “hardly believed that a war was actually going on” (Junghyo, p. 4). It is after the air raids stop, while the US soldiers remain, when the real damage to the culture of Kumsan village begins. Prior to this, this remote village managed to stay largely unaffected by the war.

Before the presence of US soldiers, the village of Kumsan was steeped in tradition. The dominant patriarch of this society is Old Hwang who holds the position of county chief and is a member of “the wealthiest and most educated family in the West County for the last eight generations” (Junghyo, p. 5). The town is able to be self-sufficient with the aid of a communal approach to farming the land. There is also the absence of traditional politics in Kumsan where Old Hwang carries the weight of the law.

Part I of this tale is interlaced with many peaceful images of rural village life such as; the gathering of eggs, children at play on the land dreaming of their hero on the silver stallion, and a system of bartering that allows for people to survive without the use of conventional currency. This peaceful culture’s literal fall from innocence is seen through the eyes of Mansik, one of the village’s adolescents. Instead of the hero general on the silver stallion, the US soldiers arrive as the supposed heroes.

These soldiers, who reside across the river from the village, don’t realize the negative impact of their actions as they manage to obliterate the culture of the village. This illustrates the arrogance of American society in not taking the silver rule into consideration to do no harm. As the preservation of

culture has become more important to the UN, this rule has become part of the philosophy of their doctrine. The downfall of the village begins with the fall of grace of Mansik's mother. When she is raped by the newly arrived US soldiers, she is ostracized by her town.

Her inability to support herself is what allows the seed of US culture to be planted within her that results in infecting the whole town. The resources of the village become more and more scarce and the days of peaceful communal farming seem to be behind them. They have been replaced by going through the garbage dump of the US soldiers to scavenge for food. For Ollye, Mansik's mother, her days of doing chores at the house of Old Hwang are replaced by the crass sexual encounters of a prostitute.

The whole town seems to be infected by the American culture and results in Old Hwang's complete loss of control. The previous humble dress of the Korean women morphs into the garish clothing and makeup of the "Yankee wives" of "Texas Town". The women who previously held positions of respect in the village are now across the river being raped, prostituted, sworn at and treated like property for the mere amusement of the US soldiers. Even the children of the village are calling Mansik's mother a "Yankee whore" despite their taking pleasure in watching the "Yankee wives" and their "Johns" have sex.

Despite all of these negative effects of the transference of American culture, there are still some who are reluctantly grateful for their presence and revel in the new opportunities. The women are reeled in as prostitutes with the idea that their new entrepreneurship will help them get ahead in life. The

villagers are savoring the opportunity to eat “ Yankee soup”, which are actually scraps of garbage, and the children are enticed by the attractiveness of being part of a war. Ollye even begins to look fondly on her ritual of preparing herself for prostitution.

By the end of the book, there is almost nothing left of the culture of the rural Kumsan village and so the villagers choose to leave this village, which has been raped of its culture, behind and become refugees. The culture of the village could have possibly recovered after the war without the overwhelming influence of their saviors from the US military. A similar picture is painted of the downfall of the culture of a rural Vietnamese village, along with the main character, Phung Le Ly, in the movie Heaven and Earth, by director Oliver Stone.

The movie begins with peaceful images of the village with the women and men tending to the land and the swaying of the tall grass in the fields. This peace is short-lived as the arrival of US soldiers causes the Viet Cong to move into the village at night to make allies of the villagers. When Phung Le Ly seemingly helps the Viet Cong she becomes a target for the opposition. One side rapes her while the other side tortures her, causing Phung Le Ly to seek sanctuary in a town that is now overrun by US military. The presence of the soldiers in town plague Vietnam in the same manner that the soldiers plague the village of Kumsan.

Phung Le Ly makes her money selling gum, liquor, and cigarettes, instead of tending to the rice paddies, while her sister succumbs to prostitution. The attack on this town is what finally convinces Phung Le Ly that she has to

leave Vietnam and move to the US and marry Sergeant Steve Butler, the American who was pursuing her. Upon arrival, the overbearing, gluttonous culture of American society is symbolized by the scene with the extremely obese woman with eight dogs, the massive refrigerator stocked full with food, and a trip to the grocery store that occurs later.

The contrast is further illustrated when the former peasant girl is taught the advantages of using a check. Phung Le Ly transitions from a dutiful wife to one who has shouting matches with her husband. When things turn for the worse in her marriage as the result of her children being kidnapped and her husband committing suicide, Phung Le Ly begins to cling to the remnants of her culture. She looks to her Eastern influences for strength and decides to return home to the hut her father built.