

Good example of young immigrants and cultural traditions essay

[Sociology](#), [Immigration](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Filial piety and familism](#) \n \t
2. [Rituals and traditions](#) \n \t
3. [Finding one's identity](#) \n \t
4. [Conclusions](#) \n \t
5. [Works Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Children of immigrants are alienated from the traditions of their culture of origin. This is evident in the two literary texts on which this paper has focused. The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri explores the Indian culture while The Moths by Helena Maria Viramontes gives a glimpse of traditions in the Mexican culture. In terms of form and setting, the two literary texts are in contrast. The Ganguli family in The Namesake originate from India and they reside in Massachusetts, in the East Coast while the Mexican family in The Moths live in Los Angeles in the West Coast. The main similarity of these narratives is the theme of the stories. Both talk about the experiences of children of immigrants to the US. The protagonists in these texts show a disconnect in their families' traditions and these are discussed in the succeeding sections.

Filial piety and familism

Filial piety or the respect for one's parents and caring for them is an important value that is emphasized in both Indian and Mexican cultures. This

translates to children's obligations to personally care for their parents and elders when the latter becomes sick or too old to care for themselves. In *The Namesake*, both Ashoke and Ashima felt guilty for being across the world and not being able to care for any of their parents who got sick and died. In *The Moths*, the teenager's mother (Ama) was in deep sorrow with Abuelita being very sick and this was shown in the scene where Ama was crying in Abuelita's kitchen. Earlier in the narrative it was also mentioned that every afternoon, the mother would send her child to attend to the grandmother. Both texts mentioned the grandmother. The elderly women in these families occupy a very important role in the lives of the characters, for instance the privilege of naming each new member of the family in *The Namesake*. They are deeply involved in the lives of their grandchildren. In *The Moths*, the teenager explains

Abuelita had pulled me through the rages of scarlet fever by placing, removing and replacing potato slices on the temples of my forehead; she had seen me through several whippings, an arm broken by a dare-jump off and my first lie. (Viramontes 27)

The grandmothers are pictured as a source of security for the younger members. Ashima's dida (grandmother) showed her support by taking the time and effort to cook for her grandchild days before Ashima left for Boston.

Ashima recalls that

She had fed her sweets with her own hand. Unlike her parents, and her other relatives, her grandmother had not admonished Ashima not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the moment she landed in Boston. Her grandmother had not been fearful of such signs of betrayal.

(Lahiri 37)

The female teenager relates that despite the silence when she and her grandmother worked together, she would always felt her abuelita watching her and this made her feel “ in a strange sort of way, safe and guarded and not alone” (Viramontes 28).

The wisdom of the grandmother was highlighted in *The Namesake* when the author mentioned that she “ was the only person to predict, rightly, that Ashima would never change” (Lahiri 37). She had only words of encouragement for her granddaughter. She told Ashima to “ enjoy it” (37) and to “ do what I will never do” because the trip to the US would “ be all for the best” (38). These words were never forgotten by Ashima. Reverence for the advice of the elders is an integral part of the culture of South Asians. According to Shariff (37), the culture of South Asians has a collectivist orientation which “ promotes primary importance of the welfare of the family” and this includes the extended family members—aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. This cultural value has resulted in “ parents and grandparents [exerting] significant amounts of influence in all aspects of life, with elders being respected and revered as wise authority figures” (Ibrahim et al. qtd. in Shariff 37).

The grandmother represents the sense of familism within these cultures. Familism includes “ feelings of obligation, solidarity, and reciprocity within the family” (Contreras 343). In the study of Josefina M. Contreras about parenting, which touched on the role of the grandmother, she mentions Mexican-American mothers as having “ more daily contact with extended family and perceive their mothers as providing more support” (Becerra & de

Anda qtd. in Contreras 343). Ashima felt extremely lonely on the day she gave birth to her son at Mt. Auburn Hospital because she longed for the company of the female members of her family who, if she was back in India, would be with her on that event.

In *The Moths*, the feeling of obligation towards one's family has created a challenge in children of immigrants. Although the teenager performed the duty of caring for her sick grandmother, there are indications in the text that show the teenager not fully accepting this obligation. The protagonist has to convince herself that she really has to do it. Right at the first paragraph, the second statement was " And it seemed fair" and that paragraph ended with " Really it was only fair." The teenager did not just tell her mother that she would now go to her grandmother, she has to explain that saying yes to her grandmother's request for help is justified. The reason for it being fair was because her grandmother had shown her good deeds in the past, and agreeing to help was just returning the favor. Such hesitation or the need to convince oneself is already an indication of the tension between two values; filial piety and fairness. As a child of an immigrant, the teenager has already been exposed to the American culture where the value of individualism is very strong. In this country most older Americans would " not wish to be dependent on their children" (Lee et al. 100). When she convinces herself that taking care of the grandmother is fair, the dominant culture is already contradicting her culture of origin.

Rituals and traditions

Mexican immigrants are deeply religious and attending Church activities is an important aspect integrated into their culture. Children's inability to follow such traditions would reflect negatively on one's parents. In *The Moths*, the father was very adamant that the teenager "go to mass every Sunday to save [her] sinning soul" (Viramontes 29). He would even inflict pain on the teenager to emphasize his point and in addition he admonished his wife "for her lousy ways of bringing up daughters, being disrespectful and unbelieving" (29). The father's angry outburst indicates that he could not understand why this particular daughter is so unwilling to go to mass when such action is a duty of every Christian person. He would want all members of his family to continue the tradition of going to mass. This is necessary to transmit values and beliefs that would "continue the family heritage" (Cortez 97).

According to Abouguendia and Noels (qtd in Shariff 36), since "first-generation immigrant parents and second-generation children are raised in different cultural contexts", conflicts between them tend to be quite strong. In *The Moths*, it was to pacify everyone, including her sisters who threatened her and calling her selfish, that the teenager agrees to go to the chapel. However, she does "not like going to mass" (Viramontes 29) and "left the chapel without blessing [her]self" (30). The conflict within the teenager is further emphasized with the phrase "to destroy my guilt, and my tears were gone" (30). In this situation, the teenager followed her parents to perform the religious ritual of attending mass reluctantly. She does not completely believe in the ritual, but she still felt guilty for acknowledging that she does

not want to go to church. This is another evidence of traditions resulting in a sense of disconnect among children of immigrants because religiosity does not only mean being able to go to the chapel, it also “ includes many aspects of community life other than prayer” (Ladd and Spilka qtd in Thanissaro 295).

One of the traditions that has been highlighted in *The Namesake* is the rice ceremony which each child goes through on his/her sixth month. This is the time when solid food is introduced. On this occasion, a child would be shown several objects from which he/she has to pick and whatever object chosen would be an indicator of his/her destiny in life. When Gogol was introduced to the objects, he did not pick any. It was also the same case with his sister Sonia who did not choose anything as well. These scenes were symbolic of the alienation of the children of immigrants to their culture of origin. Gogol grew up changing his name, preferring to stay in the company of his American girlfriend and her family, and rarely visiting his parents.

Finding one's identity

The children of immigrants, represented by Gogol in *The Namesake* and the 14-year old female teenager in *The Moths*, both went through the process of finding their identities. Another similarity of both texts was the instrument through which they were able to come to terms with themselves. It was the experience of the death of a loved one that brought in the realizations. In the case of Gogol, when his father died, he slept in his father's apartment rather than stay at a hotel as suggested by her girlfriend Maxine. He also personally attended to the things of his father. When Maxine suggested during Ashoke'

funeral that they go to her family's home in the New Year to get away from "all these" referring to Gogol's family life, the answer of Gogol was "I don't want to get away" (Lahiri 182). This was the first indication of Gogol feeling connected to his culture of origin as an adult. In the case of *The Moths*, the teenager finally acknowledged to herself the difficulties she experienced and she cried, "the sobs emerging from the depths of anguish, the misery of feeling half-born until finally the sobs rippled into sadness and relief" (Viramontes 32). Portes and Rivas (219) recognize that although there are barriers challenging immigrant families in the US, these can still be overcome by children of immigrants through the "learning [of] the language and culture of the host society while [at the same time] preserving their home country language, values, and customs." Discarding the culture of origin is not the answer, children of immigrants need to find the balance between the two cultures to survive and even gain upward mobility living in the dominant culture.

Conclusions

The difficulties that children of immigrants experience in finding a balance between their culture of origin and the culture they are born into are manifested in how they react to cultural traditions. The value one puts into the family and its members is the first conflict. The culture of origin expects children of immigrants to exhibit the same degrees of filial piety and familism that immigrants have internalized. Performing rituals religiously is required by parents of their children. However, the children of immigrants do so unwillingly because they are not completely convinced of the idea.

Finding one's identity is the objective of children of immigrants and in the texts studied, such realization was aided by a death in the family which has pushed children of immigrants to come to terms with their fears and confusions. At the end the protagonists in the stories found their identities.

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