

The effects of stylistic
decisions in sui sin
far's "leaves from the
mental portf...



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Throughout the life of each and every human, waves of cascading happiness, sorrow, confusion, anger, and relief will be evoked; a person can be triggered to undergo an endless number of these emotions, and each person reacts to such feelings in individual and often inexplicable ways. Not everything a person experiences can be adequately expressed in words, especially when those words are inscribed on paper with nearly no way of displaying deeper meaning. The ubiquitous challenge faced by writers is to find an alternative way to communicate the nuances of emotion, demeanor, and implication. In a time when Chinese people and culture were viewed as corrupting and unassimilable in the United States, author Sui Sin Far, the child of an American man and a Chinese woman, contends with powerful feelings of alienation, as well as an intense struggle with identification and self-acceptance. In “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” Far discloses her experience as a biracial woman in a prejudiced society by utilizing clear and concise syntax, minimalistic yet cogent diction, the repetition of rhetorical questions, and the classification of her own piece as a “portfolio” to translate her emotions and sentiments to paper.

A consistent use of short sentences and purposeful syntax conveys the intensity of the author’s feeling of alienation in her own society. Far continuously alludes to a sense of displacement felt throughout environments in which she should be comfortable, even when she was quite young. For example, while attending a childhood classmate’s birthday party, Far finds herself enduring her first experience of humiliation due to her nationality; in describing the scene, she writes, “I had been called from play for the purpose of inspection. I do not return to it. For the rest of the evening

I hide myself behind a hall door and refuse to show myself until it is time to go home” (Far 777). These three sentences, though not lengthy, provide the reader with more than enough information to dissect the ferocity of emotion incited by the situation. In most instances of upset, a young child is usually able to transition almost effortlessly from the moment of distress back to whatever they might have been doing at the time, especially to something such as a party in which they are surrounded by friends participating in enjoyable activities. The fact that young Far was so troubled and embarrassed by the critique of her ethnic appearance that she could not bear to be seen at all, at what should have been a fun event, divulges a lot in terms of how she was feeling. From only a few short sentences, the mind of the reader is able to conjure up the image of an innocent, primary school aged girl in a party dress, hiding from the joyous festivities, eyes full of pain and perhaps even brimming with tears. As shown, an author relying on syntax over vocabulary can prove just as evocative, possibly even more so, than utilizing winding, flowing language, as Far demonstrates in this recounting of her life.

Further, simplistic and clear diction dominates this piece so that the author is able to get her point across without taking the chance of readers interpreting her words in an unintentional manner. Through sparse in traditional descriptive language, the author still succeeds in thoroughly depicting her emotions as she attempts to determine who she is and where she stands in society. Far thinks back to an incident in which she and her brother brawled with a crowd of racially-intolerant children, and she writes, “ They pull my hair, they tear my clothes, they scratch my face, and all but lame my

brother... we crawl home, and report to our mother that we have ‘ won the battle...’ I do not sleep that night. I am too excited and I ache all over. Our opponents had been so very much stronger and bigger than we” (Far 778). Although Far uses few words, it is obvious that this altercation was a momentous occasion for her; not only had she and her older brother fought physically, but Far was also able to gain insight into what it felt like to fight for herself and for her identity as an Asian-American. Unable to rest, fueled by the pride of fighting back against a larger force, Far seems to be overwhelmed by the sheer glimpse into what it might be like to defy society and construct a unique identity, one that will allow her to accept herself. Though these are not words explicitly written, the clarity of her writing grants acknowledgement of this fact; a lot can be said in few words, and even more so when those few words are clear and concise.

Additionally, through the repetition of rhetorical questions, Far reveals her struggle with public animosities towards the Chinese and their culture as she strives to define her own ambiguous place in society. The questions, which provoke the reader to think about nationality in ways they may never have before, showcase the disorientation the author feels when it comes to the decision to identify as either American or Chinese. For instance, she writes “... the question of nationality perplexes my little brain. Why are we what we are? I and my brothers and sisters. Why did God make us to be hooted and stared at? Papa is English, mamma is Chinese. Why couldn’t we have been either one thing or the other? Why is my mother’s race despised? I look into the faces of my father and mother. Is she not every bit as dear and good as

he? Why? Why?” (Far 780). In a desperate attempt to make sense of her own identity, Far repeatedly asks herself why she was born into such obscurity.

As she grows and matures, Far realizes that she should not have been asking why she was put in such a situation, but instead must ask herself who she wants to be. This panicked questioning of herself indicates the intensity of the internal debate for Far. This is not a choice she will make lightly, which is intentionally made apparent so that readers would understand that this is a plight by which many like her were burdened. In fact, in an analysis of her writings, a professor of the University of Washington and a fellow contemporary Asian-American writer expressed that “... [Far’s] intent was certainly not to exploit, but rather to record, explain, and somehow give meaning to the experience of Chinese in America” (Solberg 33). Far is creating a dialogue for all of those in her position that could not do so. In this way, she can try to decipher the significance of her societal standing from the clouds of chaos that veil it. Eventually, Far answers her own question, which is also a powerful aspect of the piece, by coming to a rather unconventional conclusion. When deciding if she should identify as American, as Chinese, or perhaps both, she chooses to be neither. She explains her choice by justifying that “... I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any. Individuality is more than nationality. ‘ You are you and I am I,’ says Confucius. I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant ‘ connecting link.’ And that’s all” (Far 786). Through this statement, the reader can comprehend that Far has come to accept herself despite whether or not she is accepted by her society, and thus can begin to

locate her niche within it. Her reference to Confucius further delineates her opinion on the matter; that all people are essentially the same, differing only in their individuality and uniqueness.

In fact, Far has been commended for the publication of this decision, as it has been said that "... the most impressive aspect of the writing is the conviction that environment is more important than heredity, that race is an accident, and, when, as with the Eurasian, there is a question of choice, the individual has the power to make that choice" (Solberg 35). Here, one of Far's main messages from her work is summed up well: experiences, conditions, and influences are the forces that shape a person, not the race or ethnicity they were born into, nor the kind of lifestyle they practice. In her decision, she does not reject either of her ethnicities and the cultures that come with them. Instead, she is remaining somewhere between them and therefore choosing to identify not as one nationality, but rather just as herself, as Sui Sin Far.

Another crucial aspect of the piece can be found in the title, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian;" by referring her work as a portfolio rather than simply an essay, she is providing the reader with further insight into her mental processes. Had Far titled her piece as a standard autobiography, the reader would know from the start that they were about to learn of the author's life journey. By labeling it as a portfolio, the reader's perception of the work as whole is changed, for there is an understanding that it is the collection of many smaller works bound together by a common theme. Though unconventional, the idea is not misleading; the piece is a collection of snapshots from throughout Far's life, tied together by the <https://assignbuster.com/the-effects-of-stylistic-decisions-in-sui-sin-fars-leaves-from-the-mental-portfolio-of-an-eurasian/>

themes of identity and alienation. Even more provoking is the idea of each scene being a “ leaf” from the author’s portfolio, as this metaphor relates Far’s life to that of a tree, which in literature tends to represent great strength and stability; the individual scenes from her collection, standing on their own, mean virtually nothing, but united together they reveal the complex and intriguing life of a strong, dynamic woman.

As an author goes through the motions of sharing their story, they must discover a way to express themselves beyond the limits of the written word, shaping language to fit their personal intentions, moods, and experiences as they labor to provide an outlet for the developments and turning points of their own lives. Sui Sin Far makes purposeful stylistic choices in her piece “ Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” such as using a demonstrative title and answering rhetorical questions, as well as employing clear syntax and deliberate diction. to expand these linguistic constraints and disclose the inner-workings of her most intimate self, to expose the hardships that come with accepting oneself and determining one’s identity.