

Two kinds by amy tan: the relationship between mother and daughter



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Amy Tan is a prolific Asian American writer who has been successful in depicting the sentiments of children of Chinese immigrants to the United States. Most of her work focused on the relationship dynamics of mothers and daughters inspired by her own conflicted experiences with her strict Chinese mother. Her bestselling novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, has been made into a movie adopting the same title. The short story, 'Two Kinds' was derived from that piece of work.

In 'Two Kinds', the narrator is also the protagonist as she relates her own stressful relationship with her overbearing mother. It reflects the vast difference between two generations, one that hailed from traditional Chinese upbringing and another one that has been greatly influenced by Americanized values. The title itself reveals opposite poles that seem to be the theme of the story, which often clash and result in damage in the mother-daughter relationship. The mother subscribes to her own beliefs that daughters should be obedient and blindly follow what their parents tell them to do. However, the rebellious streak of the daughter hindered her from fully obliging to all her mother's demands. Initially, the daughter was dutiful in obeying her mother's wish to be a prodigy, as she also wished this for herself. However, after a stark revelation that she is not the kind of prodigy her mother wanted, as demonstrated in her disastrous piano recital, she stepped back from being the dutiful daughter she was expected to be and decided to follow her own path. This inner courage she unleashed when speaking up to her mother may have come from the strong American influence on allowing children to assert their independence. She did not want to be a genius pianist as she did not believe she had what it took to be one,

much to her mother's disappointment. She said hurtful words to her mother, like opening a can of worms on painful memories from her mother's past that were left undiscussed until that fateful confrontation. From then on, her mother stopped pushing her to fulfill the dreams she had for her daughter... which were also for herself.

The mother's desire for her daughter to be a prodigy was deeply rooted from her own misfortunes in the past. She left China devastated, losing her whole family including her twin baby girls. She came to America in 1949 to chase the American dream which she so strongly believed in. Perhaps it was her own optimism that pushed her to dream for her own daughter, and that includes shining as a child prodigy, just like Shirley Temple. She even had her daughter's hair cut like the child actress' iconic hairstyle so she can somehow resemble her and perhaps, her brilliance as a child prodigy might rub off on her daughter. Although she already set foot in American soil, she maintained her Chinese values, one of which is raising a dutiful child who is expected to obey her every command. She felt the need to control her child's life for her to be successful in achieving the American dream.

The title 'Two Kinds' presents deep themes of duality and opposition. The mother mentioned two kinds of daughters - "those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind!". She decided that her daughter should be the obedient kind. The daughter refused to accept it and stubbornly held on to her decision to 'follow her own mind'. That was when the mother finally backed down to lose the fight. She continued to be disappointed with her daughter, with all her failures in her life, however, the daughter embraced such failures as part of her own growth and development into the kind of

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woman she wanted herself to be and not what her mother wanted her to be. They continued living their lives following their different beliefs. Finally, on her thirtieth birthday, the mother made an effort to reconcile their differences by gifting her daughter with the piano she spent so much time and effort practicing on as an aspiring child prodigy. The daughter softened and realized her mother just wanted her to realize how much she believed in her talent. As she played the cherished piano, she found two pieces inside the piano's bench that also reflected the theme of duality and opposition. One was "Pleading Child" and the other one was "Perfectly Contented". These pieces were vastly different from each other in terms of tempo and mood, but they were really part of just one song. One piece represented her past life as an unhappy child resisting the pressures her mother laid down on her and the other piece reflected her present life as a woman living the life she wanted for herself. In playing these two pieces as one song, she realized that they complemented each other and the song will not be completed without the other one. That was when the daughter realized that she could not have grown to be the woman that she is, the 'perfectly contented' woman, without becoming the 'pleading child' who had to struggle for her own independence. It now made sense, and she has reconciled with her past conflicts with her mother with the music she played on her piano.

The narrator's clear memories of her childhood experiences, especially those that included how her mother related to her brought her a better understanding of the dynamics they shared, the conflicts they struggled with in their relationship, the differences brought about by the various influences each had while growing up and how they both matured into the present to

settle their differences. As she narrated the anecdotes, she expressed the same emotions she felt then as a child making her readers empathize with her agony as a child of a traditional and controlling mother. When her mother reached out to her by giving her the piano, the narrator appreciated it and understood the journey her mother also had to go through from her painful past to the time she came around to also understand her daughter. She still did not waver from her belief that her daughter was truly talented, and this time, it was not only to push her to be a prodigy but to assure her that she really has it in her but she just did not see it then. As a mother, she knew things about her child that the daughter refused to see or was still blind to see because of her own desire to be independent of her mother's control. That was why she was so insistent that her daughter should try harder. Knowing what her mother endured in China and realizing her optimism that life will be much kinder to her American-born daughter, the narrator developed a more enlightened appreciation of her mother. It was in her adulthood that she saw that her mother's intentions were for her own good as she did not want her to suffer the same fate she experienced in China. Holding on to the American dream, she subjected her child to what she believed was right, and that was pushing her to be the best she can be. The narrator and her mother were indeed different from each other in terms of their personalities and beliefs. However, they did not realize that they were truly the same in hoping for a better future for themselves despite the painful past they have endured.