

Sample essay on ethnicity and immigration

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



Literature as a Way to Express Immigration and Ethnicity

When exploring the varying attributes of immigration and its connection to ethnicity and national identity, one of the best ways to examine these issues is through literature. While literature does not provide the objectivity of facts and figures, narrative fiction in literature provides endless avenues for subjective, thematic discussion about the broader emotional and human issues surrounding topics like immigration. A number of fantastic works tackling themes of immigration help to reach the core of the issues that immigrants must face in their new country, particularly as they relate to generation gaps and cultural acclimation.

Social sciences and objective research can yield some fascinating insights about immigration as a whole, including the notion that immigrants prefer an ideal of integration of native and host cultures in their daily lives (Phinney et al. 505). However, the emotional issues related to the individual immigrant experience can be conveyed in an artful, intense way through the power of literature. In works such as *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and “In the American Society” by Gish Jen, the corresponding issues that often crop up surrounding immigration and integration become incredibly nuanced and clear. To that end, literature is the best way to explore immigration, because of the author’s ability to distill the complex and sophisticated experiences of immigrants into a highly understandable, easy to follow narrative that nonetheless speaks the truth about the immigrant experience.

Immigrant literature provides a unique way to talk about the prevailing theme of the difficulties of older generations to assimilate into the culture of their new home. Gish Jen’s “In the American Society” depicts the travails of

a Chinese immigrant family attempting to acclimate into American culture. Ralph is a very traditional man from China, who has acclimated himself to being his own boss, as he tries to own his own restaurant and acclimate himself to American culture. While he has a tremendous number of difficulties, the narrator seems to have it fairly easy, running into very few problems.

While Ralph is an authoritative figure, he does his best to fit into the business culture of America, in addition to the expectations his family places on him. The more he succeeds, the more Ralph feels compelled to return this glory to his home and family, even in a roundabout way: “ as time went on and the business continued to thrive, my father started to talk about his grandfather and the village he had reigned over in China—things my father had never talked about when he worked for other people” (Jen 177).

Despite these ideals, however, Ralph has trouble reconciling the cultural differences between China and America, treating his workers poorly and behaving in a bad manner. While Ralph believes in the American ideals of hard work and equality, he falls back on Chinese hierarchical culture to conduct his business: “ in my father’s mind, a family owed its head a degree of loyalty that left no room for dissent. To embrace what he embraced was to love; and to embrace something else was to betray him” (Jen 178).

This dichotomy between the American way of life and the cultural baggage immigrants often bring into their immigrant experience is elegantly explored through literature such as this. Simple events like Ralph’s clashes with his workers Booker and Cedric showcase the hardships of immigrants trying to make it in America. Ralph’s frustration at not fitting in with American culture

comes to the forefront in two ways in the story: at the restaurant, he works his workers so hard they begin to disrespect him and resent him, and further cultural confusion comes in the latter half of the story, where he makes a fool of himself at the country club.

The country club scene is a fantastic example of how literature can extrapolate the frustrations of first-generation immigrants attempting to fit into American culture; when Ralph arrives at the country club, he is extremely overdressed for the casual nature of the pool party they are attending, and is generally perturbed by the behavior of the people at the country club. He also encounters discrimination and stereotyping at the club, as a drunk American keeps imploring him to translate phrases into Chinese, and manipulate him and his family into serving food.

The generational gap between immigrant parents and second-generation children carries with it a substantial number of tensions and issues, which literature explores in a vibrant, poetic manner. "In the American Society" cements this tension and explores it thoroughly with the example of the young narrator comparing her life in America with that of her father Ralph, showing how much easier she has it in America than he does. When Ralph is eventually fed up with the abuse he encounters at the aforementioned country club pool party, he throws his dinner jacket into the pool, and informs his daughters that they are "good swimmers. Not like me" (Jin 185). This metaphor is particularly powerful, and another indicator of the elegant way literature can convey deeply felt issues of alienation and acculturation in immigrants. The statement is more than a surface indicator of how well his children can swim in a pool; it also demonstrates the fact that his children

will be better equipped to swim the waters of American culture than he will ever be. The parent's expectations of success in America being transferred to their children is an essential part of the immigrant family experience, and literature like this captures these tensions perfectly.

Immigrant literature manages to express a variety of themes about not only the experience of people from other cultures fitting into a new one, but of the spectrum of acceptability parents will allow their children. Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* is one of the most well-known examples of effective immigrant literature, as the characters within that story attempt to navigate both their own individual issues with American culture and the expectations of their parents and children, respectively, in fitting in. The story "Two Kinds" within *The Joy Luck Club* is of particular relevance to these issues, as the character of Jing-mei describes her childhood dalliance with American show business at the hands of her overbearing, ambitious mother.

Jing-mei starts the story with a perfect distillation of the expectations that come from parents moving to America to give their child a better life: "My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous" (Tan 132). Jing-mei's mother works hard to groom her into a Shirley Temple-like American star, illustrating cultural issues of assimilation pressures and the hazards of intercultural and generational expectations. While many stories about parents and children explore this issue of expectations, the immigrant element places a specific context within these events; immigrant parents do not just want their children to be better than them, but to blend into a wholly different country's culture in the process. Jing-mei's mother, for example,

works hard to force her daughter out of thinking like a Chinese person and to think more like an American. While Ralph Chang just assumes that his children will 'swim' better than he will in America, Jing-mei's mother tries to teach her how (Shear 197).

Because of the incredible harshness and strictness of her mother to fit a particular ideal of American perfection, Jing-mei herself chose to rebel against her mother, deciding that she loves who she is: "The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful.. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not" (Tan 134). To that end, she chooses to forget to practice her piano in preparation for a recital her mother forces her into. This choice is a fascinating inversion of the concept of cultural assimilation, as the parents put so much pressure on their child to be American that they rebel and instead try to learn more about their Chinese heritage.

When Jing-mei plays poorly during the recital herself, she again has a change of heart as she sees the shame her mother experiences: "my mother's expression was what devastated me: a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything" (Tan 140). Seeing that she has lost her mother's respect, her mother returns to the strict Chinese traditions of respecting parental authority: "'Only two kinds of daughters,' she shouted in Chinese. 'Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!'" (Tan 142). This idea of 'two kinds' is an elegant and effective way to showcase the unique issues the immigrant parent and child relationship runs into in the context of immigration. The difference in values between native and host culture can

exacerbate existing parent-child tensions, leading to clashes like these – the advantage of narrative and literature is that these tensions can be elaborated upon using simple, individual case studies such as “ Two Kinds” and “ In an American Society.”

Immigrant literature like this perfectly demonstrates the pressures of assimilation for both first and second-generation immigrants, and allows immigrant writers to express their frustration with this process. “ In an American Society” cements this by showing Ralph’s frustration at not knowing which culture to fit into, and the fear that he no longer fits into either. This is true in “ Two Kinds,” as well, Tan using the framework of the story to criticize the incredible pressure and insecurity that immigrant children receive from their parents to fit in to American culture. Issues such as these are demonstrable phenomena in immigration and cultural questions of ethnicity, but rarely is the emotional impact of these issues on the individual more concretely explored than in immigrant literature.

“ Two Kinds,” “ In an American Society” and other such immigrant literature prove themselves to be the most compelling, fascinating and subjectively accurate means to exploring the immigrant experience. Through their focus on character, story and theme, the story of immigration on a grander level can be told through intimate stories of parent and child, mother and daughter, and native vs. host cultures. While immigration can be expressed through other forms of art and social sciences, literature is the best way to express issues related to ethnicity and immigration due to its ability to concisely distill the difficulties and frustrations of immigrant issues into

elegant metaphors and personal commentary on the experiences of individuals.

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