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What is Pushing Away Children from Parents in Immigrant Families?

When a family moves to a new country, the generational gap within the immigrant family tends to be highlighted. As the young ones in the family quickly adjust to the new environment, culture, and values that are predominant in America, the parents struggle to move away from their old habits and established value system. The effects of this familial divergence are multifold. The children gradually distance themselves from their parents to seek opportunities and influences that allow them to be more like the rest of the society. The older generation become deprived of cherished interactions with their children and grow frustrated that their children refuse to heed their advice. Sometimes the elders seek new places to deposit their parental love.

The theme of difficult parent-child relationships is present throughout works by immigrant writers like Jamaica Kincaid, Maxine Hong Kingston, and others. Because their writing is often semi-autobiographical, we are generously offered a lens into these writers' lives, witnessing their struggle with the estrangement from parents. Additionally, some scholarly journals seek to unravel the enigma of growing gaps within immigrant families. The concept of "dissonant acculturation" and "dual frame of reference" between generations are defined and used to explain the development of alienation within these families. This paper will focus on

connecting the semi-autobiographical accounts of first-hand immigrant experiences with academic literature that examines immigration from an anthropological point of view.

To identify a common pattern in parent-child relationships among different immigrant experiences, it is helpful to introduce certain anthropological concepts that apply to distinct individual experiences. In “Our Child Doesn't Talk to Us Anymore: Alienation in Immigrant Chinese Families,” Desiree Baolian Qin offers an anthropological explanation as to why relationships in immigrant families become hard to maintain. Her study was based on data collected from interviews and observations of a large sample of immigrant families over a period of five years. The study discusses the concept of “dissonant acculturation.” Dissonant acculturation captures the reality that in an immigrant family, the parents and child adapt to new cultures at different rates and in different ways. The generational separation becomes even more acute during adolescence, when an adolescent’s desire for independence is combined with acculturation into mainstream values of individualism.¹ “Dual frame of reference” is another factor contributing to alienation in immigrant families. The child in the family tends to compare their parents to those of their friends or what they see depicted in U.S. media; the parents tend to use standards for how a child should behave in their home country to judge their own child’s behavior. The dual frame of reference undoubtedly creates different expectations of what acceptable and desirable, which fundamentally fuel conflicts in immigrant households. Lastly, the study found that the dual frame of reference has greater impacts on middle-class families, while structural and linguistic barriers contribute more to alienation in working-class families.² In working-class families, parents often work long hours and spend less time with their child,

¹ Desiree Baolian Qin, “Our Child Doesn't Talk to Us Anymore: Alienation in Immigrant Chinese Families,” 164.

² *Ibid.*, 165.

and many of them would never learn English while their child loses native language proficiency over time. These two anthropological concepts will be incorporated to examine various strained immigrant family relationships.

Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of A Girlhood Among Ghosts depicts a girlhood filled with frictions and conflicts with her parents. In the chapter where Maxine retells the story of her legendary aunt, she challenges the authority of her mother because her mom told her to keep the story a secret. Apparently, the aunt story was only one of the many cursory and slightly horrifying stories that Max's mom tells. "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on."³ A dual frame of reference is evidently at play in this episode. The mom expects Max to behave in accordance to traditional Chinese values and warns her the repercussion of doing otherwise, potentially ending up in her aunt's situation. However, Max judges her mom's behavior with a different set of standards. "The immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village where they called their friendships out across the fields. I have not been able to stop my mother's screams in public libraries or over telephones."⁴ Max demonstrates steadfast adherence to western customs that she would not hesitate to criticize her mom, even though disrespect toward elders is a taboo in Chinese culture. Starkly contrasting expectations of the other person in this mother-daughter relationship indeed estrange the two. Moreover, dissonant acculturation is accentuated when Max quickly adopts what she deems are appropriate behaviors, while her mom would "add nothing unless powered by Necessity." "Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking

³ Maxine Hong Kingston, "No Name Woman," web.

⁴ Ibid., web.

in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine.”⁵ Max is unabashed in her pursuit to become truly American. Her mother on the other hand “plants vegetable gardens rather than lawns; she carries the odd-shaped tomatoes home from the fields and eats food left for the gods.”⁶ Her mom sticks to what was normal practice back in China. Because the two adapt to the new environment in the U.S. at different rates and in different ways, it becomes difficult to sympathize with each other, worsening alienation within the family. Lastly, the young Maxine took it upon herself to fill holes in the story with a combination of her creativity and westernized world views. Maxine defies the conventional power structure in a typical Asian American household, as she remains skeptical of the worth of certain traditions that her mother advocated for. Some of these traditions demand being submissive to one’s husband, giving birth to a son, and embracing the domesticity of a woman. Throughout the story, the disagreement in acceptable manners and values between Max and her mother plays an important role in developing the storyline. This story is telling of the general trend of growing parent-child separation within immigrant families. With the parents making every effort to ensure the intactness of their legacy, the young ones always find the old traditions at odds with their newly-developed worldviews.

In Edwidge Danticat’s Krik? Krak!, “The New York Day Woman”, the author highlights a difficult relationship between a mother and a daughter in a Haitian immigrant family. This story is not dissimilar to Maxine Hong’s story about her aunt. Suzette, the protagonist of the story, also grows tired of her mom’s nagging. On the other hand, her mom as a conservative Haitian woman wants Suzette to be just like her rather than becoming westernized. “If they want

⁵ Maxine Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman,” web.

⁶ Ibid., web.

to eat with me, let them come to my house, even if I boil water and give it to them.”⁷ Dining out is clearly not something Suzette’s mother is used to, and she expresses disapproval when Suzette eats at restaurants. Suzette’s mom follows a frugal lifestyle because she worries about the mortgage and her cab-driving husband. However, Suzette embraces the Western consumerism of buying a lot of goods and enjoying one’s life. Her mom also disapproves that she played softball in high school. “Why, you can’t you look like a lady playing softball?”⁸ The mom expresses displeasure with broken English that her daughter did not behave like a traditional Haitian woman. In this conflicts-ridden relationship, one day the self-sufficient daughter finds her mom wandering the city alone. The daughter soon realizes her mother is on a quest for new loves to sustain herself because Suzette is no longer by her side. This heart-broken realization is at the center of this story and so many other similar immigrant stories, a realization that we have become so consumed by our own efforts to assimilate and thrive that we neglect the difficulties our parents must experience and their needs and wants. “Dissonant acculturation” is a cruel but common phenomenon in many immigrant households. Indeed, Suzette’s mom clings to many old traditions from home and refused to adapt to new ways of living in American. In contrast, Suzette holds an office job and gradually adopts mainstream western values. The gap in communication, emotional life, and values across generations that can be very difficult to overcome. Once the gap becomes too large, conflicts arise and subsequent estrangement becomes the theme of many immigrant family relationships. In the case of Suzette’s mother, she found a coping mechanism to deal with the loss of her daughter’s presence by engaging in other relationships. Suzette learned about the effects of her distancing from her mother the hard way.

⁷ Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, 148.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

Marilyn Chin shows distaste for his father in her short essay “How I Got that Name.” Her father named her after Marilyn Monroe, an iconic blonde in popular western culture. At first, her father seems different from parents in the last two stories, as he embraces elements in western culture. However, her father’s appreciation of western culture is superficial. He still expects Chin to “live and die in sublime ignorance, flanked by loving children and the ‘kitchen deity.’”⁹ Naming Chin after a blonde woman only serves her father’s sexual desire, but deep down he still expects Chin to observe traditional Chinese values. “Nobody dared question his integrity given his nice, devout daughters and his bright, industrious sons as if filial piety were the standard by which all earthly men were measured.”¹⁰ Chin’s father’s traditional sexist views on daughters are subtly on display here, with expectations for daughters being nice but for sons being ambitious. Her father, as an uneducated paperperson from Hong Kong, judges Chin by comparing her to millions of daughters back in China. Indeed, filial piety is a significant sign to her father that affirms the success of his parenting. Contrasting with daughters from the last two stories, however, Chin does not blindly adopt western worldviews nor indiscriminately use western standards to judge her parents. She embraces a more holistic way of viewing the world and spells out the ugly side in both worlds with her humorous sarcasm. Chin refuses to unselectively acculturate. She criticizes both the sexism in traditional Chinese culture and racism in western culture. She takes a stance to stand tall as a woman of color despite facing discriminations and prejudice from both the Chinese and western culture. Clearly her decision to do so puts her at odds with her parents and contributes to conflicts within the family.

⁹ Marilyn Chin, *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty*, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

In Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, the eponymous protagonist experiences significant conflicts with her mother. Although Lucy's mother did not emigrate with Lucy to the U.S., Lucy's emigration exacerbated an already-strained relationship. In this novel, the worsened mother-daughter relationship derives from two sources: the clash between traditional and progressive worldviews across generations and Lucy's desire to truly achieve independence by breaking away from her mother's influence. Lucy once enjoyed a very tight bond between her and her mother until the birth of her younger brothers. Lucy no longer gets the same attention from her mother. As someone who has shown tremendous disdain for traditional values, Lucy decides to rebel against the injustice in her mother's preferential treatment of her brothers. She keeps all the correspondence from her mother unopened to show discontent.¹¹ Piling up these letters could also be Lucy's effort to avoid becoming nostalgic from potentially evocative content in those letters. The values she upholds are clearly incompatible with those of her mother and contribute to the alienation of Lucy away from her mother. Lucy's decision to emigrate makes the estrangement permanent and irreparable. Furthermore, Lucy does not want to be the "echo" of her mother.¹² She wants to create her own legacy without being under the shadow of her mother. This effort is brought to a climax when she burns all the letters from her mom and moves out of Mariah's apartment without informing her mother of the new address, effectively severing all kinds of communications between the two. By living in the U.S. and sustaining herself for a year, Lucy tastes the joy of independence. Additionally, she solidifies her determination to emigrate with her exposure to the western value of individualism. In *Lucy*, we see a classic example of a

¹¹ Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy*, 120.

¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

daughter trying to escape the traditional values that are being forced by a reactionary mother. Eventually, the dynamics between the pair devolved into an all-out war within the family.

There is no question that immigration adds complexity to an issue that is complicated in and by itself—managing a healthy relationship between parents and children in a household. The risk for developing estrangement and separation increases significantly in an immigrant household, because different rates and ways of assimilation between generations make communication and agreement on certain values much harder. As demonstrated through the semi-autobiographical works by immigrant writers, maintaining a good relationship with their parents has not been an easy task. Some outright severed any connections with their parents. We also learned from Qin's study that if both the parents and child pay more heed to each other's needs, it might mitigate the tension in many immigrant households.

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