

## Immigration Assimilation Vs. Native American Assimilation

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Literature in the New West has consistently depicted various instances of immigrants and Native Americans. Within these depictions is the portrayal of the struggle that both groups of Immigrants and Native Americans experience within the new land. Immigrants struggle to assimilate into the new culture, whereas Native Americans struggle with their identity due to the influx of migration into the New West. As a result of the different struggles, characters in the literature of the New West often experience gender roles and subversions. In identifying hegemony from Cultural Studies criticism and the concept of double consciousness from Post-Colonial Studies criticism, this essay will explore the various depictions of immigrants and Native Americans in addition to the representations of gender within the literature of the New West.

Cultural Studies encompasses various politically inclusive literary critical lenses. One facet of Cultural Studies is cultural hegemony, which "Implies a situation where a 'historical bloc' of ruling-class factions exercise social authority and leadership over the subordinating classes" (Baker and Jane 75). Cultural hegemony is seen through various novels whose characters are immigrants or migrants as they try to assimilate into the culture and lifestyle of the New West while leaving their previous culture behind. The novel *China Men*, written by Maxine Hong Kingston, shows a clear representation of the trials and tribulations that many immigrants face when coming to America. "He wanted to taste the rain fish; he wanted to pocket some gold" (Hong Kingston 45). The novel illustrates the journey of BaBa, the father of the narrator, who immigrated from China to America with the strong belief that America contained a much better life than his current situation could offer. Even though BaBa's journey to America was filled with obstacles and turbulence, he never lost hope of a better life. This can be seen on page 51, "They were discussing a new world... 'All you have to do is stay alert; play a little less than they do, use your memory, and you'll become a millionaire'" (Hong Kingston). On various occasions, BaBa and Worldster, co-owners of the New York laundromat, talk about leaving a part of their past culture behind. "The legal father decided that for a new start in the new country, he would rid himself of Chinese superstitions; this curse would not count... 'That must be a superstition from your village, a village superstition,' said Worldster. 'You ought to give up village superstitions in America'" (Hong Kingston 72-73). In doing so, they believed that they would be able to adapt and adjust to the new American culture easier.

In addition to the hegemony experienced from the White Americans, women are portrayed as less worthy

and are degraded. Historically, in Asian cultures, men were traditionally the head of the household and women were expected to be subservient to their husbands. It was common for men to make decisions for the household and for women to not have a say in the matter. Furthermore, women were not really allowed to have an opinion in a world where a man's words were law. In *China Men*, readers see BaBa, on various occasions, degrade women, ignore MaMa's concerns, and imply that MaMa's move to America was by Baba giving her the opportunity to. The first time the narrator tells readers about BaBa, she recounts the times she would hear him swear and berate women. "Every day we listened to you swear, 'Dog vomit. Your mother's cunt. Your mother's smelly cunt.' You slammed the iron on the shirt while muttering, 'Stink pig. Mother's cunt.' Obscenities. I made a wish that you only meant gypsies and not women in general" (Hong Kingston 12).

The narrator further illustrates BaBa's disgust towards women in another passage.

You complained about holiday dumplings: 'Women roll dough to knead out the dirt from between their fingers. Women's finger-nail dirt.' Yet you did eat them. MaMa said, though, that you only lately began eating pastries. 'Eating pastries is eating dirt from women's fingernails and from between their fingers.' As if women had webs. Finger jams (Hong Kingston 14).

In an effort to bring MaMa to New York, BaBa dictates her actions, making it seem as if he was allowing her to come to America by saying, "'Here's what you'll have to do if I'm to bring you to America'... 'I will bring you on one condition...'" (Hong Kingston 67). In continuation of Asian cultural norms, he explicitly ignores MaMa's concerns. In this particular event, MaMa tells BaBa of the strenuous work she has to do and he responds by disregarding her complaints. "When my father came home from work at two in the morning, she told him how badly the owner's family had treated her, but he told her to stop exaggerating" (Hong Kingston 244). BaBa's words and actions depicted verbal abuse, along with controlling actions, and lack of respect towards MaMa.

Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* is another representation of immigrants' struggle in assimilation, describing the experiences of an Asian family's new life in America. Through their struggle of assimilating into the new culture and establishing their identity, they experience racism and stereotypes, portray gender roles, and fuse their past and present culture together. In the section *Half and Half*, the main character and narrator, Rose, recounts different instances and tales of her life that have led her to her current position. In doing so, Rose identifies two accounts of racism that include her mother and her husband's mother. Rose's mother says in reference to Rose's husband Ted, "He is American, a *waigoren*" (Tan 2018). "*Waigoren*" translates to foreigner, which is

ironic being that they are a family that immigrated from China to America, whereas Rose's husband's family migrated across America from New York to California. They are both foreigners to the New West, yet only he was the foreigner in her eyes. In the second instance, her husband, Ted Jordan, introduces her to his family for the first time. Sadly, Ted's mother unintentionally makes racist and stereotypical remarks towards Rose.

And then she spoke quietly about Ted's future, his need to concentrate on his medical studies, why it would be years before he could even think about marriage. She assured me she had nothing whatsoever against minorities; she and her husband, who owned a chain of office-supply stores, personally knew many fine people who were Oriental, Spanish, and even Black. But Ted was going to be in one of those professions where he would be judged by a different standard, patients and other doctors who might not be as understanding as the Jordans were. She said it was so unfortunate the way the rest of the world was, how unpopular the Vietnam War was. (Tan 2018-2019)

This statement from Ted's mother shows the hegemony and ignorance that some White Americans have towards Asians and their history, as it is not uncommon for people, such as Ted's mother, to continue to lump Asian ethnicities together. They may also try to validate and justify that they are not being racist by explaining that know and have worked with other minorities as if to decrease the impact of the insult that Asian immigrants are a negative addition to the American image and reputation.

In addition to the hegemony and racism, *Half and Half* also includes traditional gender roles while tying in the fusion of American and Asian cultural tradition. Towards the beginning of the section, Rose describes her mother sweeping in the dinner room, followed by her story of attending UC Berkeley. This shows the gap between generation and culture while identifying traditional Asian gender roles. Rose's mother sticks to the traditional Asian culture of staying at home and taking care of the house, whereas Rose represents the American tradition of attending a university. In another instance, Rose identifies herself as an American, however, all her stories that follow from that sentence show the blend of the Asian cultural traditions with American cultural aspects. Rose compares the beginning portion of her relationship with Ted to the Chinese philosophy of yin and yang. She also presents the gender roles in their relationship that differ from the Asian culture that follows the patriarchy. Rose explains how at the beginning of their marriage, Ted was in charge of making all of the decisions. However, as Ted faced turmoil in his career, the responsibility of making decisions shifted over to Rose, which mimics American culture where women have increasingly become more in charge. Rose also recounts memories of her childhood where her family

tried to assimilate to the American lifestyle. "We were all blind with the newness of this experience: a Chinese family trying to act like a typical American family at the beach" (Tan 2021). The need to fit into the new culture seems so prominent in this line, yet following that line, contrasts the idea as her family still enforces the Asian culture through the act of filial piety. At the beach, Rose's mother tells her to watch over her brothers, and when Rose asks why, her mother responds with "*Yinding*," and that she must do so in order to learn how to handle responsibility and to respect her parents for the sacrifices that they made for her.

In contrast to Immigrants struggle of assimilation into America, the literature of the New West presents the aspect of double consciousness surrounding Native Americans. Double consciousness is the internal conflict that an individual experiences when trying to identify with their native ethnicity and a dominant oppressive group. Although the concept of Double consciousness derives from the literary lens, Critical Race Theory, the Postcolonial criticism depicts the wide range of factors that may cause double consciousness (Brizee). Postcolonial criticism "looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony (western colonizers controlling the colonized)" (Brizee). The film *Winter in the Blood* portrays double consciousness through its main character, Virgil. Virgil is depicted as a man who is half Native American and half White. Due to this, he experiences discombobulation in terms of self-identification. Throughout the movie, he lives in a blurry haze between memory, reality, and fiction. He experiences flashbacks of his childhood, stumbles through life and intermixes reality and what he believes is an encounter with Malvina. He lives in a town where the vast majority are white and the minority are Native Americans. He struggles to identify with the American side of himself, especially when all he has known are his Native American roots. However, in his efforts to identify with his Native American side, he is shunned and ridiculed by other Native Americans for being a "half-breed". At the end of the movie, viewers see Virgil come to the conclusion that he was never a "half-breed", but a full Native American.

*Winter in the Blood* included the portrayal of traditional gender roles, as well as gender subversions. The movie challenges gender roles through the characters of Theresa and Virgil's Grandmother. Theresa's position of head of their household challenged traditional gender roles. She supports the farm and her family by finding someone to help take charge of the farm who will still follow her lead. Virgil's Grandmother takes charge by aiding in the survival of her tribe by seeking out help from another tribe, rather than waiting for another man to take the position of chief in their tribe. However, the concept of gender subversion is also present in the film, and ties into the concept of double colonization. Double colonization is the "Description of the status of women

in colonialism" (Ashcroft 206). Although the characters Theresa and Grandmother are portrayed in a higher position than the men, *Winter in the Blood* still contained the typical female subversion due to a leading male. The character Marlene is sexually subverted by Virgil as he becomes violent and hits her after she demands him to complete a sexual act. In hitting her, he silences her, while controlling her libido and exerting his dominance.

In the film *Smoke Signals*, the main characters, Victor and Thomas, do not experience double consciousness as they are self-assured in their ethnicity as Native Americans. However, as the film progresses, both characters gain new perspectives on their ethnicity. Thomas is a traditional Native American character, as he upkeeps the tradition of storytelling, and uses it as a bartering system. Victor is impassive but is very prideful in his ethnicity as a Native American. As Victor and Thomas go on a journey to Phoenix, they begin to teach, learn, and appreciate the different aspects of their ethnicity in each other, while also gaining more understanding of the other person. The film also displays the struggle with cultural assimilation when Victor and Thomas enter a bus. Everyone stares at them with confusion or disdain, and they stare back seeming very uncomfortable being around everyone else.

The film portrays women in a mostly positive light. Victor treats his mother with kindness and Thomas treats his Grandmother like his best friend. But, the movie does contain a few scenes of female subversion when Arnold, Victor's father, yells and manhandles Arlene, Victor's mother, in a drunken state. Although the character Suzy is a drifter, she is not portrayed in a bad light, but rather as more of a friend to Arnold, Victor's father, when he needed one. In the process of assimilation, immigrants lose their previous culture and experience hegemony from White Americans. The contrast between these novels is significant because, on one end, readers see the struggle of immigrants from China trying to assimilate into America, leaving their previous culture behind or holding onto what little they have left of it.

On the other end, readers see individuals who are native to the land but are forced to assimilate to the culture of the migrants who have now become the majority in their own home and who now dictate the norm of the land. They experience other issues such as racism, traditional gender roles, as well as subversions in result to their previous cultures intermixing with the culture of the New West. Yet as both groups, Immigrants and Native Americans, experience these issues while immigrating or assimilating into America/ the New West, their goal remains the same: to obtain a better life than the one they previously had. Both immigrants and Native Americans struggle to find their identities, as they try to establish a better life and search for a place for themselves within the New West.

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