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Professor Bennett

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Mother Tongue

Living in America does not necessarily mean that someone is American and regardless of being born in California Amy Tan knew that she is not simply American, at least, not all of the time. “Mother Tongue” gives an example of a woman struggling with various identities bestowed upon her. In the essay, she struggles with identity through language (both mainstream English and Mandarin), and her outside world’s perspectives. Tan shows how hard it is to be just one person while dealing with the looks and voices of the people she familiarizes herself with.

Tan suffers from a total cultural clash in the dialect world. At home she uses “broken English” to better communicate with her mother, although, she speaks perfect English outside of the household. Unfortunately, neither of the two languages can coexist in Tan’s life simultaneously. Her mother is not fluent in English as her daughter, and with that communication is strained. Tan has even stated that the manor of English that her mother speaks in is almost embarrassing and shameful, stating that “imperfect voices” comes from “imperfect thought”. It is very common for those from other countries to adopt a more strained form of English, since it’s near impossible for anyone to just learn a new language, especially those who were accustomed to a previous one for so many years.

Tan states that her interests also further put her in an equally frustrating position, being equally ostracized by both white-America and the Asian population. From the perspective of Americans with the stereotypical views of Asians, Tan has said that she was looked funny, being an English major and of Chinese descent mainly because of the notorious stereotype of Asian being more affiliated with math and science. Ironically, Tan had discovered based on surveys that a majority of Asians do in fact excel in mathematics and sciences. She also noticed that many of her teachers had even pushed her more into the path of math and science as well and was even told by a former boss that writing was not something she was good at and should focus more onto her account management. It’s clearly been shown on multiple occasions, both directly and indirectly, that ethnicity clouds others judgment on Tan and her interests, hobbies, and aspirations.

Identity is not something that can easily be found. It is something that takes years to learn, embrace and adjust to. Willing to love both the origin of where one was once from and the settlement they have now partaken in takes time. Tan cannot say she is Chinese but easily cannot say she is American and the world can be a divider of a single person’s life. Who she is in one environment is not who she will be in another, thus it is easy to say there is no balance, although, having two worlds does not make someone two separate beings which Tan demonstrates. Regardless of there being faults in one part of her life, there are always rewards in another that balance it all out.