organizers had touted this
that present exactly those
right living in New York in
in the wake of that terrific event
many—is no.
ship in American theater.
I really haven’t felt a dif-
day written by a Palestin-
ector of the Joseph Papp
ted throughout Europe to
his theater.
t going to stick a piece of
d to his decision to bring
rican theater, did not feel
cause, as the Philadelphia
d that he could not jeop-
my work is intriguing. For
, I, in effect, censored my-
ce, which is an enormous
faces when portraying the
oversy until I had a bit of
ip was my work was evi-
because it deserves—as
al theater I can only write
thater I’m interested in
up writing for the stage
are, face what it meant to
is time. I, either wisely or
g have had their story told
add to that mosaic one
al when they try so hard
unfortunately and—in my
hat powerful?
ws you to see its charac-
t foreign policy could not

READ WRITING

This Text: Reading
1. What are some of the problems Shamieh has had to face as an Arab American?
2. Shamieh refers to a decision as being Uncle Tom-esque. What does she mean by this?
3. How is this essay about identity? Does Shamieh have a thesis? If so, what is it?

Your Text: Writing
1. Write a first-person essay, like Shamieh’s, in which you talk about your own identity as a text. How have people read and misread you?
2. Write an essay in which you respond to Shamieh’s. What did you learn from her piece?
3. Write a comparison/contrast paper on Shamieh’s essay and Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue.” How are they similar? How does gender figure in to issues of race?

Gender Expectations and Familial Roles Within Asian American Culture

Amy Truong

Student Essay

Amy Truong wrote this essay for Professor Brian Komet’s Asian American Literature survey course at the University of San Francisco. Here, she reads the texts of gender, race, and family alongside Lan Samantha Chang’s novella The Unforgetting. Dempster says of Truong’s essay, “I admire the synthesis of literary analysis and family history.” To achieve this effect, Truong shifts back and forth between readings of Chang and Truong.

In Mercy Lake he started his new job as a photocopy machine repairman. He maintained the new Chevrolet sedan—changed the oil, followed the tune-up dates, and kept good records of all repairs. He labored on the yard. (Chang, 135–136, 140)

She laundered Ming’s new work clothes: permanent-press shirts with plastic tabs inserted in the stiff, pointed collars; bright, wide ties. In the kitchen, Suan learned to cook with canned and frozen foods. She made cream of tomato soup for lunch, and stored envelopes of onion soup mix for meat loaf or quick onion dip. More often ... Suanan consulted the Betty Crocker cookbook. (138–139)

Are these from an episode of Leave It to Beaver? No. These are excerpts from Lan Samantha Chang’s, “The Unforgetting.” Ask yourself what these excerpts mean to you. They may just simply remind some of you of an episode of Leave It to Beaver because these were the characteristic roles of men and women some decades ago when television sets only came in black and white—men were the breadwinners while women were the caretakers. For others, including myself, they are reminders of the life that still exists: a life that is representative of many Asian American families today.

AMY TRUONG • GENDER EXPECTATIONS AND FAMILIAL ROLES
WITHIN ASIAN AMERICAN CULTURE
In many Asian cultures, gender plays a role in dictating what you do. Certain members of the family are designated specific responsibilities that compliment their respective gender roles much like the characters in *Leave It to Beaver*. The males support the family financially and control the household, and the women take care of the family and household chores. Lan Samantha Chang’s novella, “Hunger,” parallels the events in my life and shows how gender roles are still very apparent in today’s Asian American families. This essay seeks to capture that parallel experience of interpreting Chang’s text and the texts of my own experiences.

Within Asian culture, women are raised and taught to be silent and obedient. I am a first generation Vietnamese American and growing up, I was told, “Do not comment or speak up,” whenever I wanted to voice my opinion. My opinion was considered unimportant. And for many years of my life I believed that this was true. I never spoke a word unless I was asked to speak or spoken to; until I finally became tired of being mute. As a young teenager, my parents were going through difficult times with their marriage. One night, my father, mother, grandmother, brother, and I sat down to have a family meeting about the issues between my parents. My dad did all the talking while my mom sat in silence like she always did. “Your mother has committed terrible sins and has destroyed our family,” he said to us sternly in our native language. Not once during the entire family meeting did anyone in the family speak other than my father. Before the meeting ended, I finally worked up the nerve to defend my mother since she refused to defend herself. “Daddy, you shouldn’t speak about Mommy like that in front of us,” I declared. As soon as I said it, my father slapped me hard on the back of my head and told me, “Do not ever speak unless you have been instructed to.” I immediately received a scolding from my mother and grandmother as well. Ironically, it was my mind that they thought was poisoned, and they blamed America for my “rebellious” breaking of silence.

The characters in Lan Samantha Chang’s “Hunger” also suffer from silence. Min, the wife, very rarely speaks a word when she does not agree with her husband. Instead, she lets him do as he pleases and remains quiet as a good Asian wife. For instance, her husband treats their youngest daughter in ways that she does not particularly agree with. Her husband places a lot of pressure on their daughter and that is not how she wants their children to grow up. Yet she remains silent, because she believes that it is her place to let her husband control their family and their daughter in the way that he wants. For example, the mother’s silence is demonstrated on one occasion when her daughter and husband are screaming:

Baba, let me stop! You go ahead and cry! . . . You cry all you want! . . . You cry! But—play! . . .
As I ironed, I watched Anna fiddle with the frayed towels that had once been pink but now
were faded to a creamy white . . . I opened my mouth but my throat was dry. (59)

She wishes to protect her daughter and attempts to speak, but chooses to refrain from doing so due to her respective roles as a woman and wife. Ironically, it is only after her death that she is able to voice her thoughts. In essence, the novella’s point-of-view is symbolic and emphasizes how a woman’s voice can be silenced due to her gender role.

Ruth, the youngest daughter, is also silenced and lets her father live vicariously through her. Though she hates it, she does not speak against his wishes. For example, her father makes her play the violin and has her practice for hours on end. She practices so much everyday that it brings her to tears and causes her to resent her father, because she cannot do or say anything that will prevent her father are locked in the p

Do you understand? (voice rose to a shriek.) The room together.

Though she cries and screams once again occurs. Just as the youngest daughter in an impossible position and shows a lack of respect.

In Vietnamese culture, a house—she is expected to be silent. My mother is the United States after the Vietnam War (age 18), her two younger brothers attended school, which I rely on the difficult responsibilities she assisted her siblings to.

My grandparents finally my mother was 22 years younger. My grandparents expect States she spoke the Eng seemed to have things up and left my mother to take care of it. She continued to put up this day my mother is the (oldest and only dau.

In “Hunger,” Anna’s taking care of the home, decorates it so the boys are not buyers. Strangely, she does a clean townhouse or sp order to rid of all their instance, Anna’s mother who lives; but on some nights, perhaps she has been dry, it is destroyed, and nothing family’s past conflicts with her gender and familial. Her split conscience.

On the other hand, primary (and often only when he was 23. Because

Amy Truong
very hard to understand,” he explains. This affected him ten years later when he and my mother married. Because my father did not know the language well, my mother was the breadwinner in their relationship. This made my father “lose face.” Not being able to contribute to the household as much as your wife was a shameful thing and made him lose a lot of his pride. “I was very embarrassed that your mother made more than me. I was too ashamed to even go out because I worried that others would see me and speak badly of me,” my father states, no longer embarrassed. Not being able to provide for the family financially, my father expressed his “manliness” in other ways. Though my mother made most of the money, he decided where that money would go and how it would be distributed. He was also very strict, held strongly to Vietnamese traditions, and made sure we knew that he still wore the pants. He made sure that I was never out late, because traditionally it was not appropriate for a young lady to be out past dark. Even to this day, I am expected to be home and in bed at 10 p.m. He made sure that we never spoke English in the house so that we would remember where we came from and so that others would know that we were still very Vietnamese even though we were born American. When we spoke English, he either ignored what we said or scolded us for doing so. “You must remember your origins. This house is not a white man’s house,” he droned in our native language. He also made sure of this by having my mother cook traditional Vietnamese meals every day and restricted us from having things such as burgers, fries and sodas. He told us, “Vietnamese food is healthier than American food … tastes better too. All Americans know how to do is fry their food. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, are real chefs.” My father is now trying to regain his respect and honor by taking night courses and practicing his English with my mother and his children. He hopes that by doing this he will earn a better job with better money so that he can fulfill his duty as a man and father.

Tian, the father in “Hunger,” is the breadwinner and the head of his household, much like my father. He provides the only source of income and does so by first working as a music professor, then in a restaurant. He also calls all the shots and makes all the decisions for each member of his family. For example, he decides that Ruth is going to play the violin and that she is going to play it well by forcing her to practice whenever she has free time. According to the novella, “All morning during summer vacations, plus two evenings a week, he sat in the tiny room for hours and helped her practice” (62). Though the text indicates that he is helping Ruth, no normal teenager wants to be locked in a room practicing a craft that he/she has no interest in. Therefore, force is used on Tian’s part to get her to do so. He also decides that she is not going to attend the university where he once taught even after they offer her a scholarship. They have an argument and he demands,

You’re staying here.
Let go of my arm! You’re hurting me!
You are not leaving this house as long as you are still a child. Do you hear me? I’m not a child!
You’re my daughter and I’m your father! (72)

It is not traditional among Asian families for a child to leave the home to attend school. His refusal to succumb to this American tradition represents his need to control the family.

Tian also tells his wife Min what to do. One such incident occurs after his recital. Tian’s colleagues want him to stay and have some drinks. He tells them that Min is tired, but it is she who insists that Tian come home. Min urges him:

It is okay. My [Min] arm and pulled me out with them …
… I want to go home.

Though Min is quite, she is apparently more like many other Asian family. They both support each member of the family. Male sons also help in income and help a lives with my parents. They always do his first job. or “obligation.” Tim is fun with his friends, and parents do not budge. This is only prepa for a father, the man of Vietnamese. Likewise, he is a tired and lazy. In due brother, Will (5), as:

In “Hunger,” all the children’s desires and speak her thoughts, b and yet after “Twenty had not complained. home and made it in to express her disapp role as dutiful wife.

Tian decides to his responsibilities to:

Everyone… has the one thing that a person to do. Even more t

Unlike some me obligation to his respe do, as though he has:

Ruth challenges always wanted to, also, saying, “I’m quitting without a pause, he can’t!” (88). After this
she who insists that they stay. He hushes her quickly and tells her that they are going to go home. Min urges him,

It is okay. My [Min's] voice cracked against the words... Come on, said Tian. He took my arm and pulled me around the corner, to the coatrack. I'm not that tired; I could have gone out with them... Why did you want to leave so much? ... I want to go home. (22)

Though Min is persistent that her husband mingle with his American friends, his desire is apparently more important than hers, displaying both his power and her silence. Tian, like many other Asian men, including my father, is the money-earner and controller of the family. They both support the family financially and make all the decisions pertaining to each member of the family whether or not protest occurs.

Male sons also have a respected role in the Asian family. They are expected to bring in income and help with the household expenses as well. My younger brother, Tim (19), lives with my parents and has paid rent every month since he was seventeen and received his first job. My parents do not like to call it rent. They prefer to term it “duty” or “obligation.” Tim is still young and would prefer to spend his money to go out and have fun with his friends. He and my parents constantly argue about this topic but my parents do not budge. “Tim, it is your responsibility to contribute to the needs of the family. This is only preparing you so that one day you can handle the responsibility of being a father, the man of the house, when it is your time,” they continually insist to him in Vietnamese. Likewise, they tell Tim that American traditions have made him ungrateful and lazy. In due time, they will be lecturing the same thing to my other younger brother, Will (5), as well.

In “Hungry,” all of the characters, like my brother, struggle between achieving their individual desires and observing their respective gender and familial roles. Min wishes to speak her thoughts, but her role as a wife prevents her from doing so. Min has other desires and yet after “Twenty-one years... I had never admitted my disappointment with him. I had not complained about a lack of money or time together, I had taken what he brought home and made it into our daily lives” (94). Min is very unhappy and though she yearns to express her disappointment and opinion, she can not because she has to maintain her role as dutiful wife.

Tian decides to pursue his love for music but at the cost of abandoning his family and his responsibilities to them. According to Tian,

Everyone... has things they want to do in their lives. But sometimes there is only one thing—one thing that a person must do. More than what he is told to do, more than what he is trained to do. Even more than what his family wants him to do. It is what he mourns for. (28)

Unlike some members of his family, Tian chooses his own personal longing over his obligation to his respective gender and familial role, claiming that it is something that he must do, as though he has no choice.

Ruth challenges her prescribed role as a daughter so that she can live the life that she always wanted to, also at the cost of her family. She searches for freedom from her duties, saying, “I'm quitting! I'm never going to pick up a violin again for as long as I live. And without a pause, he cried, "Then I don't want you! You are not my daughter! You are nothing!" (88). After this heated exchange, Ruth “walked to the door, opened it, and stepped
outside” (90). Ruth and Tian have their differences, but they are very much alike. As stated earlier, they both leave their families to pursue their dreams, disregarding their responsibilities to their family.

Anna wishes to forget all her memories by selling their home. Instead, she is true to her respected role and remains in that home even against her own wishes. For example, “One day she opened the door to a brisk young couple full of plans, the woman’s belly swollen with hope like freshly risen dough . . . They bid, and Anna refused to sell” (107). Anna has invested much money into fixing the house so that she can begin to forget the past it holds; but her obligation to stay in that house so that her family’s story can be saved keeps her from doing so.

Like my brother, the characters of “Hunger” make sacrifices in order to fulfill their roles. Likewise, those who follow their desires make huge sacrifices as well. Their personal longings and respected gender and familial roles create internal conflicts that are a part of their everyday lives just as is so with members of today’s Asian American families.

It has been thirty years since my parents first arrived in the United States. Most people would expect them to assimilate to the American culture by now but they are deeply rooted in their Asian traditions and way of thinking, just as Min and Tian from “Hunger” are. They raised my brothers and me by attempting to pass on their way of thinking, hoping that we honor our roots. We are Vietnamese and were raised to understand and adhere to Vietnamese values, meaning that we are to accept our gender and familial roles as many of Chang’s characters do. What my parents fail to understand is that we are also American and have been greatly immersed in and influenced by the American culture as well. My siblings and I believe that gender roles are a thing of the past . . . a thing that belongs to the generation, time, and country in which my parents grew up.

In essence, my siblings and I are Anna and Ruth in “Hunger” while my parents are Min and Tian. We are a great representation of an Asian American family torn apart by our prescribed gender and familial roles. Reminiscent of the family in “Hunger,” my family is one of many Asian American families conflicted with such issues. These issues tear apart the family in Chang’s story, but many Asian American families are learning to cope with these problems by finding a balance between familial responsibilities and personal desires instead of letting one or the other dictate their lives completely. For us, these issues have become an everyday part of our lives and our struggles seem to be far from over. There is much that my siblings and I need to understand about the immigrant generation and vice versa. Whether or not these conflicts will ever disappear is still a mystery and has yet to stand the test of time.

Works Cited