

Reconciling Change, Assimilation, and Tradition in Multicultural Literature

Lindsey Roach Holt
Humanities
Lubbock Christian University
Lubbock, Texas 79407 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ronna Privett

Abstract

A repeated theme throughout Multicultural Literature is that of tension surrounding the idea of change. In this paper, I will explore this theme as displayed in three different novels, and discuss ideas of reconciliation between opposing approaches to change. Typically, the younger generations long to assimilate into the new cultures in which they find themselves, feeling as though they are trapped in limbo and belong neither to the old culture nor the new one. The older generations wrestle with the changes they see occurring, feeling that the traditions they have always revered and valued are being dishonored and discarded. For the main character in *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, she longs for nothing more than to shed the stigma of her background and make a new life for herself. However, she ends up learning to value her past because she realizes that it is what shapes her future. The two sisters in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* react to a complete change of cultural environment in vastly different ways. While one crumbles at the pressure and expectations to adapt, the other bravely emerges stronger and more rooted in her culture than ever before. In *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, the main character is determined and driven to the point of obsession to live up to the standards of power and success in his culture. His world begins to crumble around him when Western missionaries come and begin converting the people of his tribe. He views abandonment of tribal culture and tradition as the greatest of dishonors, and the changes drive him to an early grave. When two cultures collide, there will always be a struggle. Traditions can easily be lost, and with that comes a loss of richness and depth to history and culture. On the other hand, it is often times only with the introduction of new cultural ideas that those who have been cast aside or oppressed can finally receive the chance to be heard or make something of themselves. The key here is that these problems exist not only in the pages of books, but in the real world as well. At first glance, change seems to provide only two options: assimilate or hold fast to tradition. However, it is most beneficial for us to continue to seek out ways to take action on a middle ground between the two. It is crucial to find the balance between appreciating and preserving the traditions of the past while moving on to embrace change and exploring the new things that new cultures may have to offer. As a Western culture, it is especially important that we continue to study and be aware of the struggle to reconcile two such opposite ideas considering that our culture is most often the one being forced upon another.

Keywords: Multicultural, Assimilation, Tradition

1. Introduction

The idea of change is a concept that will stir up in many people feelings of discomfort, uneasiness, and even dread. However, in others, it gives way to feelings of relief, anticipation, and excitement. The theme of tension surrounding the idea of change is widespread throughout Multicultural Literature. Whether it is evidenced by someone coming to a new culture and struggling to adapt, or a new culture being forced upon an already functioning society, when two cultures collide there will always be a struggle. These struggles often occur between the young and the old, but are also seen between the discontent and the content, or the weak and the strong. Some feel like outsiders and long for nothing more than to assimilate to fit in, while others fear the loss of their heritage and traditions and fight to preserve

them. Through a gamut of novels crossing a wide variety of cultures, many different angles are given on the common thread of change. The goal is to help readers to learn to cope with change in the real world, and to find the healthy balance between assimilation and preservation of tradition.

2. Desire for Assimilation in *The House on Mango Street*

In Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, the main character, Esperanza, wrestles with discontentment with her culture. She struggles for most of the book with being ashamed of her circumstances and trying to establish a different image for herself. Esperanza feels hindered by the stigma of her culture and her neighborhood. She tells the reader that "[i]n English [her] name means hope" but that "[i]n Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting."¹ Esperanza was named after her grandmother, who was a very independent woman forced into an unwanted marriage. Her grandmother "looked out the window her whole life...sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be."² In her heart, Esperanza is afraid she will end up inheriting not only her grandmother's name, but also "her place by the window."³ Esperanza longs desperately to get away from her house on Mango Street and make something better of herself. She feels that leaving behind the culture and traditions of her upbringing and assimilating into the more prevalent culture would be the solution to her problems. This is a fairly typical response for young people in multicultural literature. It is a common experience for children to long to outgrow the "smothering, narrow expectations, and out-of-date habits" of the older generations of their culture.⁴ Although by the end of the book, Esperanza gains a greater appreciation and value for the old traditions, she still desires to assimilate. Cisneros shows that this intergenerational tension is a crucial component in matters of cultural change.

3. Contrast Between Tradition and Assimilation in *The Woman Warrior*

In addition to intergenerational tension, there are varying degrees of reaction to being confronted with a new culture. When both the weak and the strong encounter a cultural change, naturally it is always the stronger that survive. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, this is displayed through the story of two sisters who are placed into a strange, unknown culture. Brave Orchid, the older sister, moved from China to America with her husband. There they establish a laundry business and raise their children. Brave Orchid stubbornly clings to her traditions and culture even when her children assimilate into American culture. They scowl and roll their eyes at their mother when she tries to make them follow cultural customs, and they have no respect for their heritage. Brave Orchid's children are easily embarrassed by her, and she thinks of them scornfully as her "American children" and as "bad boy[s] and bad girl[s]."⁵ Brave Orchid's younger sister, Moon Orchid, has a husband that went to America to find work and left her in China until he could afford to bring her overseas. For thirty years, he has sent back money to support her, but he has never sent for her to join him in America. Brave Orchid finally saves her money to bring Moon Orchid over to America to reclaim her husband. When they find him, he is much changed. He "look[s] and smell[s] like an American" and refuses to accept Moon Orchid into his home.⁶ He has assimilated into the new culture with American clothes, an American job, and even an American wife. He has no place for anything from his old life in China, least of all his Chinese wife. Moon Orchid is unable to survive the shock of her husband's cruel rejection and the vast cultural differences she encounters, so she gradually physically and mentally wastes away. While Brave Orchid's encounters with assimilation make her fiercely determined to hold fast to her traditions, Moon Orchid is unable to withstand the pressures brought by change.

4. Changing Traditions in *Things Fall Apart*

Within intercultural tension, not only do the weak and strong react to change differently, but there is a great deal of struggle between them as well. When the customs of a new culture are brought in and imposed upon an old culture, typically the weak people of the society are the first to embrace the change. It gives them the chance to be released from the social oppression of their own culture. The strong and powerful people are normally the most resistant to change, because they stand to lose the most by a shift in culture. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the presence of European missionaries in Nigeria completely disrupts the life of a tribal warrior. A true self-made man, Okonkwo works his way from shame, poverty, and obscurity to being one of the wealthiest and most influential men in his

village. He is prosperous enough to have three wives and two titles, and he is well renowned for his wrestling and his fierceness in battle. Even as a young man, Okonkwo is “already one of the greatest men of his time. Age [is] respected among his people, but achievement [is] revered.”⁷ Okonkwo is determined and driven to the point of obsession to live up to the standards of power and success in his culture. Disaster enters his home, however, when he accidentally kills a fellow tribesman and is forced to go into exile for seven years. During his absence, Christian missionaries arrive in his village and begin collecting converts both poor and rich alike. When Okonkwo and his family return, he is horrified to see the changes that have occurred in his village. He fully expected to come home and resume his place of power and authority, but instead discovers that the traditions and customs of their people are being disrespected and disregarded. Even his own son, Nwoye, who has never fit Okonkwo’s warrior-like standards, embraces Christianity because he feels welcomed and accepted. This is too much for Okonkwo. As a warrior, weakness is despicable to him, and power and tradition are life. He views this abandonment of tribal culture and tradition as the greatest of dishonors, and the changes drive him to an early grave. He chooses to kill himself rather than submit to the Western culture and religion.

5. International Current Events

Clearly, tensions between cultures exist not only in the pages of literature, but are predominant in the real world as well. Interestingly enough, while the conflict of *Things Fall Apart* is set in Nigeria in the late 19th century, the real-life current events in the nation of Nigeria further bring to light the disastrous possibilities that can stem from intercultural tension. The Islamic extremist group Boko Haram has been a growing source of terror for several years now to the people of Nigeria. Its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, desired “to resist [the] Western modernity manifested in Western education, dress, and politics,” particularly (but not exclusively) concerning women’s roles.⁸ While there are debates over the actual translation of their name, the general consensus seems to be that it roughly translates to “Western education is a sin.” This alone clearly indicates that the violence is directly related to the clashing of two very different cultures. Over the years, the acts of terror have increased rapidly as the members of Boko Haram fight against what they believe to be a “moral and social decadence [that] has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society.”⁹ They view the current Nigerian government as “the major vehicle transporting Western civilization to Nigerian society” and desire to replace it with a strong, Islamic government.¹⁰ The clash of Western culture and Islamic traditions in Nigeria has led to a nation wracked with fear and violence. The people are rapidly losing faith in their government, and they live in constant terror of Boko Haram. Just between the months of November 2013 and November 2014 there are said to have been over 10,000 deaths directly related to Boko Haram violence.¹¹ The fact that these events are happening right now across the ocean gives cause for reconsideration of the methods of implementation of Western ideas in other cultures, or, at the very least, should raise concern and compassion for people and nations outside of the United States. While reading literature concerning similar tensions may not immediately put a stop to the violence, it helps to create awareness and a more compassionate and open mindset regarding the struggle surrounding cultural differences.

6. Conclusion

Multicultural Literature is an extremely important genre because it expresses through fiction the intercultural turmoil that is occurring throughout the world even today. Often times, the second generation of a culture change struggles to feel a sense of belonging because they neither have strong ties to their old, traditional culture nor to their new one. This sense of discomfort fuels the desire for assimilation. However, the first generation to experience a substantial culture change is affected the most heavily by the initial shock of clashing cultures. Depending on the strength of their personal character, this drives them either to destruction or to a strong determination to hold fast to their heritage. When the strongest people of a culture see others abandoning tradition, they feel that as a betrayal of everything they hold to be true. At first glance, change seems to provide only two options: assimilate or hold fast to tradition. Either option by itself seems to cause the death of the possibilities for enriched and enhanced cultures. Therefore, it would be constructive and culturally rewarding for us to continue to seek out ways to take action on a middle ground between the two. It is crucial to find the balance between appreciating and preserving the traditions of the past while moving on to embrace change and exploring the new things that new cultures may have to offer. Traditions can too easily be lost, and with that comes a loss of value and depth to history and culture. On the other hand, it is often times only with the introduction of new cultural ideas that those who have been cast aside or oppressed can finally receive the

chance to be heard or make something of themselves. The key here is that these problems exist not only in the pages of books, but in the real world as well. As members of the Western culture, it is especially important that we continue to study and be aware of the struggle to reconcile two such opposite ideas, especially considering that our culture is most often the one being forced upon another. Novels like *The House on Mango Street*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Things Fall Apart* are invaluable because they help us to have a better understanding of the real world events that occur as a result of intercultural tension.

7. Acknowledgements

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8. Endnotes

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 - 2 Ibid., 11.
 - 3 Ibid., 11.
 - 4 Shiffman, Dan. "Mapping Intergenerational Tension in Multicultural Coming-of-Age Literature," *Multicultural Perspectives*, (2010): 30.
 - 5 Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. (New York: Vintage, 1975), 113-14.
 - 6 Ibid., 152.
 - 7 Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. (New York: Anchor, 1994), 8.
 - 8 Maiangwa, Benjamin et al. "'Baptism by Fire': Boko Haram and the Reign of Terror in Nigeria." *Africa Today*, (2012): 45.
 - 9 Ibid., 45.
 - 10 Ibid., 46.
 - 11 Smith, Alexander. "Nigeria's Boko Haram Violence Now Comparable to ISIS in Iraq."

9. Works Cited

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