Soul Searching Essay, Research Paper

In the memoir “The Girl Who Wouldn’t Sing”, Kit Yuen Quan

describes her life experiences growing up as a Chinese girl in America.

In her attempt to try and find her place in society, Quan intermingles

with several groups of people. Her interactions with a feminist group,

two young Cambodian girls, and finally her own father allow her to

explore her Chinese background and how that affects her interactions

with people. In order to find her own “voice” in a society that is not

really hers, Kit Yuen Quan explored relationships with people of

different lifestyles. She does so in order to be able to recognize how

she wants to express herself, and through which culture, American or

Chinese, if not both, she wants to do so.

When she ran away from home, Quan “sought refuge in the women’s

community working part-time at a feminist bookstore”(Quan 214). Yet,

because of her Chinese background and difficulty in understanding

language, Kit found she wasn’t as accepted as she had hoped she would

be. The fact that she could not understand many of the issues discussed

by the feminists she was surrounded by was very frustrating for Kit.

This frustration acted as a vehicle for her to gain a desire to be more

proficient in the “feminist rhetoric”(Quan 214). Although her desire to

be part of the community was strong, she continuously encountered

problems because of her age, nationality, and lack of a “formal American

education”. The frustration that Kit encountered made her feel even more

misunderstood, and she sought her voice through other communities and

experiences.

Kit’s first failed attempt to become a part of a community was

because of her inability to “properly” express herself and her ideas. In

her quest for acceptance, Quan decided to immerse herself in a

beneficial situation in which language would not be a problem, and so

she decided to tutor two Cambodian girls. The two girls, Yan and Eng,

lived in a terrible neighborhood where there were “drunk men and

prostitutes near corners”, “the fragrant smell of piss and jasmine rice

wafting from windows”, and “a medley of languages: Vietnamese, Chinese,

Cambodian, English, Black English, Laotian”(Quan 216). Kit went into the

situation thinking that she would be able to connect to her culture

through knowing a common language. Somewhat to her surprise, the

connection to her culture did not come through language, but through

observing the experiences of childhood that these two girls were

immersed in. Kit states that “whether they were living in a refuge camp

in the Philippines or in Thailand or in some one-room apartment on Eddy

Street, they were connected to each other through their language and

their culture”(Quan 217). It was not so much Kit’s own interaction with

the girls that allowed her to realize where should would find herself,

but her observation of the girls and their interaction with their native

language and society.

Kit’s experience with Yan and Eng compelled her to learn more

about her native culture, rather than solely try to fit into the

American culture. Kit’s attempt to conform to the American standards and

culture was precisely the mistake she had made with the feminists. Kit

Yuen Quan’s time spent with the Cambodian girls allowed her to see how

important being in touch with her Chinese background is. Not only did

this cause Kit to learn to speak Chinese, but this catharsis also helped

her realize that being in touch with her culture also means reconnecting

with her family. In making this realization, Kit decides to reconnect

with her father, and she says that “speaking Chinese with my father is

the closest I have felt to coming home”(Quan 219). Although being home

was originally something that was uncomfortable for Kit, it is the same

home that she returns to in order to receive that comfort that she has

been missing in all other aspects of her life since the age of sixteen.

Kit Yuen Quan’s life, as described in her memoir, is a series of

life changing events that have caused her to question her methods of

expression. The title of the memoir, “The Girl Who Wouldn’t Sing”, is

very telling of Kit’s personal search for a comfortable way to express

herself. Quan’s personal journey has allowed her to connect with her

culture and language in a way that probably would not have happened if

she hadn’t left home. The fact that Kit had the experiences she did,

with the Cambodian girls, the feminists, and her father, has allowed her

to see life in a new light. Through her language and culture Kit not

only finds her voice, but finds her inner self as well. She states in

the last line if the memoir, “As long as there are bakeries in Chinatown

and as long as I have 85 cents, I know I have a way back to myself”(Quan

220). Through her culture, language, and reunion with her family, Kit

has found her ability to communicate, as well as the comfort that she

has searched for all her life.

Bibliography

Quan, Kit Yuen. Making Face, Making Soul; Creative and Critical

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