

GENERATIONAL CHASM: EXPLORING THE CONFLICTS IN GISH JEN'S *MONA IN THE PROMISED LAND*

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Abstract:

Conflict is a major issue that exists throughout the world. Conflict is considered a behavioral change due to a difference of opinion among two groups, two people, or within oneself. When conflict is mismanaged, it can cause great harm to relationships. Conflict can be compared to a double-edged sword that can weaken or strengthen a relationship. Intergenerational conflict plays a major role in the life of an immigrant. An Immigrant who migrate from one place to another place, undergo intergenerational conflicts because of generational gap, misunderstandings, disobedience, language barrier, tradition, customs, and beliefs. Intergenerational conflict always emerges because of the contradictory and ambivalent outlook of an individual. Gish Jen, a famous Chinese-American novelist depicts the life of the Chinese immigrants and their woeful experience in the new host land America through her novel *Mona in the Promise Land*. This paper explores the intergenerational conflicts between first-generation Chinese immigrant parents and their second-generation daughters. Further, this paper highlights the cause of intergenerational conflicts through the lens of the central character, Mona, who is inclined towards the American hegemonic culture of individualism and switches her root of identity from Chinese-American to Jewish-American.

Keywords: Intergenerational conflict, biculturalism, individualism, disobedience, identity.

Conflict is one of the major issues found all over the world. Conflict arises due to various reasons *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines conflict as “a state of disagreement or argument between people, groups, and countries” (281). Conflict is a part of life. However, when it is handled in a polite and positive way, conflict provides an opportunity to strengthen the bond among people. The word conflict is often indicated as a negative term, but in fact, it has both negative and positive impacts. Negative conflict reflects the argument of an issue and positive conflict can be helpful to generate new ideas, and it will make a person think creatively.

In literature, conflict plays a major role. Most of the literary works symbolize the idea of conflict. Conflict is considered a literary element that deals with two opposing forces, that is internal and external conflict. Internal conflict acts within a man and his self. Whereas, external conflict deals with a man and other outside forces. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the hero faces many internal conflicts. Not only he wants to take revenge on his uncle, but also he suffers from depression which leads him to a state of confusion, whether to live or die. Hamlet's conflict complicates the situation and he says, "To be, or not to be- that is the question . . . And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep;" (56). So conflict varies depending on the individuals, society, generational gap, and two different ideas. Intergenerational conflict can be often identified between two generations with regard to culture, tradition, and social issues.

Intergenerational conflict is a major issue among the immigrants. People, who migrate from one place to another, find it difficult to adjust with the new host land. Some immigrants take time to adjust and some others wish to go back to their native land because of the new culture and tradition they encounter in their host land. Thus, the life of an immigrant becomes a battlefield because of the intergenerational difference that exists between the parents and their children. In this paper the characters encounters the issues of the intergenerational conflict like cultural clash, language barrier, misunderstanding and mother-daughter issues. Also, the immigrant encounters intergenerational conflict due to cultural diversity. The theorist Rogers and Steinfatt brings out the cause of conflict in their work *Intercultural Communication*. According to them 'the conflict that occurs between two or more cultures when they disagree about a certain value' (96). The state of ambivalence experienced by an individual is the cause of intergenerational conflict.

The intergenerational conflict that exists in *Mona in the Promise Land* is due to the encounter of different cultures and the American life of individualism. Mona Chang and Callie Chang are the daughters of first-generation Chinese immigrant parents Helen and Ralph. Mona starts her middle school when her family moves from New York to Scarshill "nice Chinese family – father, mother, two born- here girls . . . go with it a house in

Scarshill” (3). In her school, Mona amuses her friends by making up stories about Chinese exoticism, martial arts, etc. She gets attached to one of her Jewish friends Barbara Gugelstein. At first, Mona reflects her Chinese identity in her school, “Mona tells her she knows Chinese. “Byeh fa-foon,” she says. “Shee-veh. Ji-nu.” This is Shanghai dialect, meaning, “Stop acting crazy. Rice gruel. Soy sauce.” (6). Mona Chang invites her friend to her house “to taste –test their Chinese cooking” (6). Mona’s mother Helen describes the nature of Chinese people and the style of Chinese cooking to Mona’s schoolmates. “In China,” Helen says, resorting to facts, “we eat tomatoes like fruit. Just like we eat apples here. Of course, first we drop them in hot water to take the skin off. Because, you know, Chinese people don’t like to eat anything with the skin on” (7).

Though Mona portrays her Chinese identity, in eighth grade, she starts to take a different track by adapting to the American lifestyle of individualism. Wilfred M. McClay describes individualism in his work *Individualism and Its Discontents* as which “disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends” (391). Americans give importance to their desires and decisions. The first-generation immigrants have a thick bond with their ancestral land and they follow the strict tradition and Chinese cultural values whereas, the second-generation immigrants are closely connected to the American culture, and they develop a modern lifestyle of freedom and individualism. Mona Chang develops the idea of being American, which symbolizes the desire for individualism that is hidden in the deep heart of young Mona Chang. “She thinks of certain tips she learned in Girl Scouts about poise. She crosses her ankles. She holds a pen in her hand. She sits up as though she has a crown on her head. She swivels her head slowly, repeating to herself, I could be Miss America.” (9). Having migrated to America, and being born to Chinese immigrant parents, Mona Chang faces the issues of identity crisis and starts to adapt new American identity. The slight transformation of Mona Chang results in misunderstanding, which complicates the mother-daughter relationship.

Biculturalism complicates the nature of the immigrants making them experience the issue of duality. For immigrants, biculturalism is a crucial issue as it deals with the

construction of one's own identity. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* states biculturalism as 'of, relating to, or including two distinct cultures'. Biculturalism theorists Raymond Buriel and Delia S. Saenz state biculturalism 'as an integration of the competencies and sensitivities associated with two cultures within an individual'. Similarly, the bicultural immigrant has an experience of two or more cultures. Biculturalism represents comfort and proficiency of one's own cultural heritage and the culture of the country in which one has settled. It is applicable not only to immigrants; moreover, it is also related to the second generation of immigrants. Due to the bicultural identity, the first generation immigrants and the second generation immigrants face intergenerational conflict. The problems of dual culture create a power imbalance between the older and younger generation.

Similarly, Religious transformation is a major cause of intergenerational conflict. Mona Chang starts to accompany Barbara Gugelstein. "classmates be discussing whether G-d is good or just neutral, and whether Judaism is a religion or a culture? . . . Also they talk about what it means to be Jewish," (32). Influenced by her friend's Jewish tradition and culture, Mona starts to practice Jewish tradition, she goes to the Jewish synagogue, and starts to practice the religious customs without the knowledge of her mother Helen. "Mona too is turning Jewish"(32). Further, Mona often visits the Rabbi to clarify her religious doubts; she hears the religious incidents written in Torah, follows the Jewish food tradition, and accepts to take baptism "She chants her Shema Israel. She burns her special four-stranded candle. Her three witnesses sign neatly her nice farmable certificates. And in this way, she becomes Mona-also-known-as-Ruth, a more or less genuine Catholic Chinese Jew" (44).

In the interim, Mona Chang's elder sister Callie informs her parents about Mona's conversion to Judaism. The news of Mona's conversion could not be accepted by her parents. Her parent warns her to change her Jewish identity, but Mona refuses her parent's words. Ralph questions Mona "Things are not always how they look . . . and watch out before you leap. Has somebody tricked her into turning Jewish?" (47). Instead, she says "Jewish is American," Mona says. "American means being whatever you want, and I happened to pick being Jewish" (49). The strong reply of Second-generation immigrant Mona Chang reflects

the dominant nature of individualism. In China Helen and Ralph follow the traditional norms and customs, and they also portray their own cultural identity. Even after their migration to America they still cling on to the Chinese values. Being born and bred up in the strict tradition, the first-generation Chinese immigrant parent could not tolerate Mona's attitude of identity switch to Judaism paves the way for intergenerational conflict.

Further, disobedience is also a major cause of intergenerational conflict. The first-generation Chinese immigrant obeys the words of their older generation. It is one of the strict norms to be followed in the Chinese culture. Every woman in the house should obey the words of the male. The men are treated as superior to the women, and the decisions are taken by the men in the family. But, in the case of American culture, an individual has their own freedom to survive. Being converted to Jewish, Mona wishes to attend the High Holy Days, which is one among Jewish traditions. Mona's parents never allow her to attend the service, which creates a conflict between Helen and Mona. Helen yells at Mona "You know where all the trouble started? All the trouble started from you became Jewish" "Mom," Mona says. "It's a free country. I can go to temple if I wanted to . . . mosque" (248). The conflict between Helen and Mona continues, and Helen shouts at her and says "Once you leave this house you can never come back" (251). Mona never minds the words of her parents; she stands in her own decision. The stubborn behavior and the disobedience of Mona reflect the nature of individualism. Finally, Mona reunites with her family without changing her Jewish-American identity. Jen highlights the independent self of America through the character Mona. It is not easy for a human being to give up his/her native culture and shift to the other ethnic Community. He or she has to be ready to face the consequences in a pluralistic society like America.

It is evident that the first-generation Chinese immigrant and their daughters in the novel *Mona in the Promise Land* undergo different kinds of intergenerational conflicts like problems of disagreement, misunderstanding, and lack of respect for elders, disobedience, and individualism.

Jen's *Mona in the Promise Land* portrays the problems of two generations. The first-generation Chinese immigrant's character has been molded by Chinese tradition and customs. They are brought up under a tradition that emphasizes self-respect, obedience, and inequalities. On the contrary, the second generation daughters are born and brought up in America where freedom and individualism are emphasized. To conclude, the immigrants who migrate to any host land find it difficult to adapt to the host land culture. Moreover, the immigrants fall victim to their own generation, which in turn, results in intergenerational conflict. Human beings cannot avoid facing conflict. However, to avoid conflict with others, it is necessary to employ polite words and have a polite attitude. Impolite words may lead to serious arguments. Eventually, conflicts between the first generation and the second generation may be resolved through the factors of reconciliation and tolerance. In order to have a good relationship, the immigrants can practice mutual understanding. In addition, the intergenerational conflict between the first-generation immigrants and the American daughters may get solved with the help of a balanced mindset, the quality of acceptance and adjustment makes an individual overcome any conflicts.

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