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Identity

Identity, a word that lives rent free in my mind. Can I identify as anything I want, and if it always changes based on others expectations, does identity hold any meaning? Sometimes I am an obedient child that cannot say no to commands given; other times I am a devilish imp that tormented everyone around me. I toiled through life struggling to find which one of these versions is the real me. In “Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan, her struggle to define identity through language mirrors my own confusion on identity. It took many years of trials and error for me to realize that identity is not a fixed concept but shaped by shifting roles and external expectations, ultimately forming the most authentic version of yourself.

As a child I was obedient and followed every rule and expectation without question. In school, I was a model student that answered questions in class, completed assignments on time, and got perfect grades. At home, I did my chores and ate the disgusting vegetables placed in front of me without thought. I lived like a robot, programmed to make everyone obey the demands of my parents, teachers, and peers. Everyone around me called me a “good kid” that never caused trouble and made everyone happy. I took pride in being a “good kid”, yet beneath the surface, I often wondered if I am really a “good kid” or simply a jester performing a play scripted by others.

This thought of being simply a slave festered and grew out of control in my teenage years, twisting itself into a deep resentment that I could no longer ignore. I became a devilish imp, rejecting every expectation that had once defined me. Where I had once strived to meet standards set by others, I now took pleasure in tearing them down. I skipped school out of spite for societal norms. I purposely failed my tests with a perfect zero to upset my parents. This revealed a side of me that craved freedom and authenticity, even if it meant being seen as a troublemaker. They were desperate expressions of a soul yearning for freedom, a quiet but determined refusal to be molded into something I didn’t choose to be. In their eyes, I was a troublemaker, a disappointment but for the first time, I felt alive. With each act of resistance, I felt the possibility of becoming my own person, free from the expectations that had weighed on me for so long.

Identity is not a fixed concept but a fluid one due to the different roles we play in our lives. In my life, I have taken on different personas, like an obedient child, a rebellious imp, and other times a devilish tyrant. These shifts in identity reflect the tension between who I am and expectations that others forced upon me. Similarly, in “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan describes her identity being connected to different versions of English that she uses. For example, “It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with.”(Tan 1) This family talk represents an identity that is created for her mother. However, to the outside world she adopts a standard English identity to navigate society and be accepted by it.

Societal expectations play a significant role in shaping identity. We are taught to fit in the moment we enter school. The desire to be liked and respected by our peers often forces us to conform to societal norms at the expense of our values. For me, the expectation to obey my parents and fit in with my friends led to an identity crisis. I struggled to balance the values instilled in me since birth with the social dynamics in the outside world. Amy Tan experiences a similar struggle; “When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she.”(Tan 2) This reflects Amy Tan's identity being shaped to fill the gap between her mother’s English and the outside world. While I have done the same by pretending to be a female for my mom, it started to mess with my mind and question my authenticity.

The search for authenticity is a challenge that many people face throughout their lives as they navigate expectations placed upon them by family, society, and their own sense of identity. I often wonder if the obedient child or the rebellious imp who seeks freedom is my true self. Amy Tan also struggles with this, stating “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state," (Tan 3) as she struggles under pressure to show her academic prowess under judgmental gazes. Yet, Amy Tan finds value in the English that she was born into when she presents her mother with a book created for people like them. Her mother’s verdict, “So easy to read,” (Tan 4) symbolizes a deeper realization that identity is not about choosing one version of yourself over others, but about embracing all aspects of who you are and being proud of them.

Identity is a complex and fluid concept. It is shaped by the roles we play and the expectations placed upon us. In “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan’s journey of identity through language mirrors my struggle to define myself. Through her experiences, Amy Tan shows that identity is dynamic and is constantly shaped by internal and external forces. Amy Tan has embraced Standard English and her mother’s English as her true self. In the end, identity is not about finding a single, fixed self but understanding that every version of ourselves contributes to who we truly are.

Work Cited

Tan, Amy. *Mother Tongue*. 1990.