

## Psychologically Speaking

“A Souvenir of Japan”, a story by Angela Carter is about a British woman living in Japan. Told in the woman’s point of view, it describes her experience living in the country with her Japanese lover, Taro. She narrates about the differences between herself and her lover, and their native countries. Their differences in each other parallel to the different values in their native lands and this dawns on the narrator as the story begins. The idea that their relationship can’t last because of these differences and a lack of real love is repeated in different ways throughout the story. Yet the narrator still seems to hold on to the idea that she is in love with this man. This feeling ultimately ends when the narrator realizes their relationship cannot go on and that there really isn’t any true love between them.

The idea of being rejected from a culture is seemingly being perpetuated throughout the story. Even though people may dislike the ideas or values of a foreign country there is also the idea of an uneasy acceptance of it, as they learn to appreciate the subtle nature of the culture. In Japan where Carter’s story is based, women are less valued than men, in what is described as “a man’s country”, and thus a conflict of social values is introduced. When a person finds themselves seemingly rejected by the society, part of human nature seeks to gain acceptance through a connection of culture. The individual begins to seek means to gain the acceptance and in the case of the narrator of the story, they may do so without really acknowledging the desire for this personal quest.

When an individual first senses themselves as an “outsider” from society they tend to sense it through the obvious differences in cultural values and seeks to ‘correct’ this rejection. The narrator dislikes the idea of a lower placement of women in Japan’s society that contrasts to

the idea from her Western world. Though there is still some prejudice found, like the idea of a “glass ceiling”, which places women at a disadvantage in the business world, it is not as blatant as in the Japanese society portrayed in the story. In the story, the narrator describes the idea of the wife, the okusan, who has to stay in her “inner” room and not disturb the husband. This idea is confronted every night that Taro stays out since she is not supposed to oppose it, and so she doesn’t. The perception of where a woman is supposed to be becomes stronger and she begins to feel out of place. Not only is it because of her cultural values but also her physical appearance, thus she gains the feeling that she is “like a female impersonator in Japan” (Carter 301). At this point she does not judge herself in terms of the values of her native country but rather her new environment. This new judgment is because of her daily interaction with it. She faces this idea of what a woman is and has to acknowledge “her place” when Taro goes out at night with his friends. So her time in Japan changes her mindset from where she used to believe a woman should be, into where she believes in it now, from a Japanese perspective.

The conformity with the individual’s attempt to join society may begin with seeking a personal connection. From the story the narrator has chosen to be with a Japanese man because by doing so she may affirm her own belief that she is being accepted by society. Though she still senses a feeling of rejection by society she does not see her foreigner status is the reason. Instead she thinks it is because she is with the younger Taro. This is her attempt to project the rejection away from her and onto other people. The projection is so that she can psychologically retain the idea that she is really a part of this society and the fault is not with her but with Taro. But the individual’s attempt to hide their differences in values has just amplified them. This causes the foreign society to reject the individual more vehemently and causes more distrust.

As it becomes more apparent of their changes, the individual's attempts at conformity don't take away her anxiety. From the story the narrator states that in her relationship she is expected to stay in her home. This is merely an excuse so that she may shut herself seemingly out from the Japanese culture. She is extremely conscious of her physical appearance and does not want to continue seeing the society without the presence of Taro, who is her connection. To her, Taro gives validity to her own claims of being Japanese. So without him she sees herself standing out more in society. The narrator shut herself out from the world when Taro is gone to isolate herself. She isolates herself into the "inner" room as a form of punishment for her differences. She stays inside in order to hide her differing ideas and in reality sees the room as a safe haven from the clashing waves of ideals.

The individual's transition from the differing culture is not easy, so they try to grasp the knowledge of values they know of to lessen the transitional shock. From the story the narrator named her boyfriend "Taro" from a pop up book she found in a toy store. In doing so she creates the "character" of Taro, one that experiences masochism, or enjoys the suffering from their relationship. This is because she knows that she sought him out as a cultural connection and know their love is not real. She portrays Taro as the one who enjoys suffering because she doesn't acknowledge her own pain. The pain of knowing she is using Taro as a vessel, a connection to the thing she really wants which is acceptance. But at this point she still does not acknowledge the real reason for her change, and instead seek to destroy her values. She acknowledges the idea that women are seen as objects of passion in Japan and decides it's better to be seen as such than have no value at all. In her mind she accepts it and justifies it with "at least one knows where one is" (Carter 301) which might show some of her misgivings at her own society that doesn't openly talk about the value of women. In Western society there is the

idea of equality and yet prejudice still exists in the minds of some. Such unpopular ideas of “where a person should be” are not openly talked about and that is what the narrator dislikes, the avoidance of an issue she wishes to confront.

The change in the perception of conflicting ideas however shows the assimilation of the individual. A cultural adaptation for people is so that they may survive in their new environment. For the narrator of the story she creates a new idea of value in order for her to function in Japanese society. This can be seen also in second generation families of immigrants into the United States. Young people are exposed to a new culture which in most cases contrasts that of their parents’ native cultures. This contrast causes the young people to adapt to the environment in order to fit in. They take aspects of the new value and integrate it into their own values. When this is done there is a degree of acceptance given to the younger generation because they are seen as adapting to the ideals of their new environment. This is where the idea of cultural identity steps in; where people begin to identify with the new native culture. In the story the environment around her changes her outlook at values, as she adapts to the values of those around her causing her to act Japanese.

The need for change is such that there begins this loss of sense of reality and unreality. The narrator begins to relate the idea of mirrors in Japan with her relationship with Taro, and as such her conforming to Japanese society. She asks “how far does a pretense of feeling, maintained with absolute conviction, become authentic?” (Carter 303) Thus begins her damning of the society, her questioning of the things she thought were good but which took away her sense of reality. She sees the harmonious front put upon by the society, from the trees to the neighborhood she lives in, and sees that behind the appearance there is no real truth in it. This is like her relationship in that though she and Taro may appear to people as a lovely couple behind

it, there is no love. Just like how her quest for acceptance has no real meaning to it. She took upon an ideal, the values from Japanese society to create a harmonious life but in her there was an upheaval, an inner turmoil because of the conflicting values. As she realizes the price of the appearance of her own harmony she also realizes the crushing of the inner spirit that she has been experiencing. Also that it is wrong for her to deny who she is to appease others.

The idea or fear of rejection by a 'host' country is the main reason for individuals to begin a slow process of adaptation. They include values from a new culture so that their differences do not seem as obvious to others. This isn't because of any desire to throw away who they are but because they feel they must change certain aspects of values. They fear rejection by society for who they are culturally and so seek to right it with conformity. There is a realization of their own uniqueness in terms of belief and ideals and there is a desire to cover that with the majority thinking. All this creates are groups of people, not true individuals. With the use of conformity to fight the fear of rejection all it creates is a greater fear of being who you are. In the end conformity has forced people to not freely think, because to do so would upset the standard that they have created. So though the individual is conforming or adapting because of their fears, they should fear more the loss of their cultures and ideals.

## Work Cited

Carter, Angela. A Souvenir of Japan.