
From the Instructor

Questions that might seem absurdly simple to one who has always lived in the same culture often turn out to be extremely complex for the immigrant, the child of a multicultural family, or the international student: what is my real name, my real home, my real language, my real self? In an extremely insightful essay, Ying Zhang (Phoebe) confronts these questions as they affect both her and the narrators or protagonists of several literary works. The assignment for Essay 3 in WR 098 was to write a synthesis and analysis essay examining a theme as it is developed in the memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, by Polish-Canadian-American journalist Eva Hoffman, and in two other sources. For her second source, Phoebe chose *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, a novel about a boy born in the US to Indian immigrants and given the unusual first name of Gogol, after the father's favorite author. For her third source, Phoebe selected "Cultural Baggage," Barbara Ehrenreich's manifesto rejecting her multifarious ethnic background in favor of her family's legacy of intellectualism and critical thinking.

To these three examples Phoebe adds her own experience as a Chinese student at BU, trying to negotiate between her native culture and the new culture in which she is immersed. As Phoebe notes, each of the four persons described resolves his or her conflict in a different way. And, while she has entitled her essay "An Unanswerable Dilemma," Phoebe has in fact shed a great deal of light on this vexed question.

— Thomas Oller

From the Writer

As my class was discussing *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, a short novel written by Eva Hoffman, we reached a question about searching for identity while facing multicultural circumstances. I found it relatively easy for me to find a topic for my final paper because I am the one who is facing a multicultural environment. Moreover, I had read Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, which is also talking about identifying oneself in a multicultural environment. Hence, I decided to use my personal experience and the book I read before to further question whether people can succeed in finding their identities.

After I made up my mind, I kept asking myself the same question and tried to weave my emotion into this essay. Then, I had trouble when I was actually writing the essay. I wrote with too much personal emotion, which made it more like a biography than a comparative essay. However, it was an obstacle for me to remove any parts of my personal experience since those are the strongest support for my argument. By reviewing the second draft a few times, I decided to make some changes. Instead of simply describing my experience, I broke it into pieces and added the primary material in between. In this way, I finally made this essay more objective, but it still contains all of my experience and emotion.

— Ying Zhang

YING ZHANG

Prize Essay Winner

AN UNANSWERABLE DILEMMA

I stand bolt upright like a statue in front of the customs officer waiting for permission to pass through customs. “What’s your name?” “Phoebe.” A suspicious look shoots from the officer’s eyes. “It doesn’t match your record.” Then I suddenly remember that my legal name is Ying. I have just gotten too used to being called Phoebe. The passport profile picture taken a few years ago looks somewhat like a stranger. My legal name is Ying, but I visualize the differences. My English name is Phoebe, but it does not completely represent me. I ask about who I am, but I never find an answer. Eva Hoffman, the author of Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language, also questions her identity in a new country in face of assimilation. Name change and language diffusion exacerbate Eva’s confusion, to which she never finds a solution. Likewise, Gogol, an America-born Indian man in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake, experiences confusion due to the change of his name. However, he succeeds in identifying himself in the end because he realizes the importance of his original culture. Barbara Ehrenreich, the author of “Cultural Baggage,” fails to identify herself but decides to create a new heritage on her own. Although Eva, Gogol, Barbara, and I all have trouble in giving ourselves appropriate identities, Eva and I cannot solve the dilemma as easily as Gogol and Barbara since it is hard to draw a clear line in the process of assimilation.

Names are always seen as symbols that help people to communicate with each other, but they play an important role for people to identify themselves. In America, I act like Phoebe and try to suppress Ying in my psyche. In order to achieve a comfortable life in this new environment, I strive to blank out my heritage and assimilate to American culture. When

I go back to China, I lock Phoebe into my unconsciousness and switch to being Ying. Yet, chaos emerges as I frequently switch back and forth between two names. I cannot help thinking in an Americanized way even though I am in China. Gradually, I find it hard to communicate with Chinese because I think completely differently. Meanwhile, I blame myself for being exotic. The inner mental contradiction confuses me about my real identity. Certainly I am not an American, but it seems that I am not a real Chinese either.

Eva is in the same situation as I am. Eva initially senses a loss of identity when she is granted a new name in Canada. She states that, “our Polish name didn’t refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can’t yet pronounce, are not us . . . We walk to our seats into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves” (Hoffman 105). In Eva’s perspective, a new name represents a new identity, which is a detachment from her original heritage. No matter how aggressively she resists the new surroundings, she has to compromise on assimilation. Eva further asks herself, “Who was I, after all? Eva’s ghost, perhaps, a specter that tried not to occupy too much space” (114). As Eva intends to preserve Polish identity, she not only confuses herself about who she is but also realizes that assimilation already reshapes her and makes her different from before.

While also experiencing identity confusion from a change of names, Gogol is nevertheless able to define his identity. Since Gogol is born after his father survives a horrific train accident in which few others survive, his father sees the name Gogol as a pet name to signal his rebirth. However, Gogol does not understand how meaningful his name is when he is young. Later on, Gogol develops resentment toward this name during adolescence and decides to use his legal name, Nikhil, as an overcoat to escape from Indian culture. Although the name Nikhil brings him more confidence, Gogol is always present inside him. Soon he feels a sense of futility and dissatisfaction about avoiding his roots: “Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all” (Lahiri 289). All his efforts pay him back with confusion about who he truly is. He sees himself as Nikhil,

striving to be truly American, yet he fails to eradicate Gogol. By the end, he chooses to stick with “Gogol,” is Indian identity, since he realizes that everything that he has gone through, from the botched naming attempt at his birth (Gogol) to his realization of the hope behind Gogol, is the meaningful fragment to define who he is.

Such confusion is not only triggered by a change of name, but also affected by language. Eva is threatened by a language crisis after moving to Canada. When she wants to record her life in a diary, she hesitates about whether to use English or Polish. Eva writes, “If I am indeed to write something entirely for myself, in what language do I write? Several times, I open the diary and close it again. I can’t decide” (Hoffman 120). Later on, Eva still decides to use English, since only English can represent her current situation. The more often she uses English, the more she loses Polish. Eva explains, “I’m not filled with language anymore, and I have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don’t really exist” (108). Without language, it is impossible for people to understand each other. I also notice a severe problem of my ability to learn more English and maintain Chinese well at the same time. As Chinese becomes less accessible for me in America, I adapt to English much better. All the books I read and the essays I write are in English. I was not aware of the potential dilemma until one day, when I was reading a Chinese novel, I got stuck a couple of times because I could not really comprehend the phrases and I had to translate them into English in order to continue reading. This increases my confusion about my current identity. My first language Chinese is slowly diminishing. But meanwhile, I am not proficient at English. Then where do I belong and who am I? Eva and I no longer fully understand our first language, yet we are not completely adept in English as native speakers. We have difficulties communicating with both sides, which blurs our certainty about who we are.

Aside from Gogol, who successfully retrieves his Indian identity by accepting the name Gogol in the end, Eva is pessimistic in dealing with confusion. Definitely it is tough for Eva to mingle her Polish culture with American culture and still clearly recognize her identity. Eva carries the burden of identity confusion all the time. She never stops finding the sources of confusion instead of seeking solutions to eliminate such confusion. Driven by this psyche, Eva does not know how to manipulate her life

toward her future. She asks, "But where to? I have no map of experience before me, not even the usual adolescent kind . . . and later, when the dams of envy burst open again, I am most jealous of those who, in America, have had a sense of place" (Hoffman 159). Eva's accumulated confusion invisibly makes her purposely exclude herself from the new environment. In the end, she, in fact, notices the cause of confusion is her resistance to the new world. Nevertheless, assimilation is a stumbling block that puzzles Eva about finding a balance between her Polish identity and her new identity.

While Eva is trapped by confusion, Barbara Ehrenreich is able to jump out from the problem, probably because her situation is different from Eva's. Unlike other people around her, Barbara cannot identify herself with a particular ethnic heritage. In addition, her complex ancestry baffles her in her search for an identity. She remembers the answer she gave to a question on her ethnic background. "None,' I said, that being the first word in line to get out of my mouth. Well, not 'none,' I backtracked. Scottish, English, Irish—that was something, I supposed" (64). After many failures, Barbara makes up her mind to identify herself by intellectual heritage, which is to "try new things" and "think for yourself." She asks, "What better philosophy, for a race of migrants, than 'think for yourself'? What better maxim, for a people whose world was rudely inverted every thirty years or so, than 'try new things'" (66). By implying this novel idea, Barbara discovers her identity. Additionally she argues that intellectual heritage is as crucial as ethnic heritage, "To which I would say that skepticism, curiosity, and wide-eyed ecumenical tolerance are also worthy elements of the human tradition" (66). Identity is not all about ethnic heritage; indeed, it is largely influenced by different intellectual perspectives.

A powerful desire drives me to imitate Barbara's solution. However, even though I highly appreciate her creativity, her solution is hard to apply to me or to Eva. Both Eva and I are significantly influenced by our original cultures. Consequently, we can barely remove them from our cognition. As for Gogol, he is exposed to American and Indian culture throughout his whole life. Yet his task is to clarify and embrace his original heritage. Although he has plenty of pressure from his families and friends while struggling for the decision, it is relatively easier for Gogol to figure out his choice compared to Eva and me. As for Barbara, her confusion does not even come from cultural convergence. It is clear that she is an American.

She is confused because of her complex ancestry and because of peer pressure to have a sense of ethnicity. Eva and I are dealing with “How”—how to balance our heritage and the new culture. Gogol and Barbara are dealing with “Which”—which culture they should choose. I am sure that immigrants as well as foreign students like me all undergo this self-questioning process that is probably caused by name change, language diffusion, and perhaps other factors that I have not yet encountered. It is common to question one’s identity, yet the trauma cannot be cured so easily.

Eva, Gogol, Barbara, and I all are the victims of identity confusion. However, Gogol and Barbara are luckier because they do not face the consequences of dealing with assimilation. As for Eva, it seems that she still cannot unburden herself of bafflement about who she is. I am not sure whether I will be able to define myself in the future either. For Barbara and Gogol, the culture shock is not powerful because they are born and raised in America. The source of confusion for Gogol is more likely to be chaos caused by admitting his original culture whereas the source for Barbara is complex ethnic heritage. The situation for Eva and me, or for those who face assimilation, is different. It is hard to balance two different cultures, particularly when there is one already rooted in. I wonder if anybody who has the same situation as Eva and I can offer an authentic answer for this dilemma in the future. At least for now, it is an unanswerable dilemma.

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YING ZHANG, Class of 2015, is majoring in mathematics and human geography in the College of Arts and Sciences. She came across various problems as a Chinese international student in an American high school, such as language barriers and culture shock. Her own experience makes her interested in the topic of seeking an identity in a multicultural society. This essay was written for Thomas Oller's course, WR 098.