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International, Female, First-Generation Scholars’ Resilience and Search for Love

Abstract

Imagine yourself as an international, female student. As the first in your family to attend college, you have high hopes for your future. You know it’s going to take work—not just to excel in your studies, but to overcome the social, institutional, and familial pressures and inequalities you encounter every day. Despite it all, however, you remain driven to achieve your dreams, and, in the end, that’s exactly what you do. This is the experience Marty authentically represents through a comparative analysis of two international, female, first-gen scholars. Advancing an argument for the power of “anxiety-ridden resilience,” Marty explores the unstoppable nature of first-gen women in higher education around the globe.

Recommended Citation

Marty, Taylor. “International, Female, First-Generation Scholars’ Resilience and Search for Love.” *Text & Type*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024. CSU Open Journals. Available at: <https://journals.calstate.edu/textandtype/issue/view/451>

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International, Female, First-Generation Scholars' Resilience and Search for Love

International, female, first-generation (IFFG) scholars have a particular kind of resilience that is often needed for them to overcome structural barriers, cultural prejudices and inequalities, and a lack of familial support. Within their own families, many girls are made to feel incapable of pursuing a college education because of their gender or ethnicity. Once in college, high-performing IFFG scholars are often scapegoated by “model” students who feel threatened by the success of IFFG. IFFG scholars who lack institutional and familial support understand they must work for everything they want in life, despite how unfair that is. Nothing is freely given, and for that reason, many IFFG scholars are unstoppable. This resilience that comes from being neglected by institutions and abandoned by one’s own family is anxiety-ridden—a forward-moving resilience that perseveres, hoping for some payoff that may never come. Anxiety-ridden resilience is IFFG scholars’ will to keep going and prove themselves no matter how many times they have been told they are unworthy of the place they earned. IFFG scholars’ unique loneliness in moving from one place to another without support painfully and positively affects their resilience, desire to pursue higher education, collegiate experiences, and pursuit of love and support within academic spaces.

Chinese girls are often made to feel unworthy of love on the basis of their gender and as though they can only earn love and respect through success. Adeline Yen Mah, an IFFG scholar and author of *Falling Leaves: The Memoir of an Unwanted Daughter*, was born in 1937 to a mother who dies shortly after Adeline’s birth. Adeline’s father inadvertently kills his wife in an attempt to save money and then blames Adeline for her mother’s death. Though young Adeline is unloved by her father and her half-white stepmother, who fail to provide Adeline with the food and financial support they offer their mixed-race children, Adeline is loved and supported by her Aunt Baba. In *Falling Leaves*, Mah expresses her surrogate mother’s desire for her to pursue higher education and escape the loneliness of being an unwanted Chinese daughter:

[Aunt Baba] was determined that I should eventually gain a college degree... the ticket to escape, independence and limitless achievement. [...] I knew that I was the least-loved child because I was a girl and my mother had died giving birth to me. Nothing I did ever seemed to please father, Niang [Adeline’s stepmother] or any of my siblings. But I never ceased to believe that if I tried hard enough, one day Father, Niang and everyone in my family would be proud of me (60).

Adeline’s lack of love and support from her family pushes her to work toward gaining love and self-sufficiency through her studies.

Despite Adeline’s hard work, however, her academic achievements are seldom noticed and usually met with contempt because of her family’s cultural values. Women from Adeline’s parents’ generation were meant to be sold, housekeepers, and bearers of sons. Foot-binding, abolished in 1911, just one generation before Adeline’s, is a cultural practice that reinforced

this oppression, designed to make women physically incapable of leaving the home and bound to domestic servitude. With unbound feet and no price tag around her neck, Adeline holds no value to her parents and is seen as a nuisance. In Mah's words, "if Niang could, she would see to it that [Adeline] never had a future," doing everything she could to contribute to Adeline's failure and reaffirm the idea that she is unworthy of love and care (115). At fourteen, Adeline's stepmother tells her they will not fund her university education in London as they did for her brothers because her wealthy father "does not have an endless supply of money" (Mah 115). Despite this fundamental understanding that her parents are unsupportive, and directly being told they will not support her, Adeline continues writing them from boarding school, hoping to change them. She begs her parents to finance her education, mailing them many letters enclosed with "report cards[,] commendations, prizes and awards" to prove her worthiness (Mah 115). She receives no reply.

As other IFFG writers demonstrate, abuse, oppression, and neglect on the basis of gender can cross cultural lines. Born in 1975, Reyna Grande, an IFFG scholar from Guerrero, Mexico and the author of *The Distance Between Us: A Memoir*, begs her father to send her to college soon after her siblings flunked out. Just as Adeline believes she can make her abusive parents love her and support her academic dreams as they do for her brothers, Reyna believes she can convince her father to support her academic dreams as he did for her siblings. Reyna is driven to graduate college, earn her father's love, and become "somebody [he] could be proud of" (Grande 288). In response to her begging, her father asserts his preconceived notion of her inferiority, saying, "[y]ou can forget all about going to that university. You're going to be a failure too[,] so don't even bother" (Grande 288). Despite her father explicitly telling her he will not support her academic goals, she continues to believe he will, thinking, "[h]e'll change his mind tomorrow," but he does not change his mind (Grande 288). She misses the opportunity to apply to college out of high school and enrolls in community college later in adulthood without parental support. Reyna and Adeline both believe they can reason with their abusive parents to make them see that they are a worthy investment.

For Adeline, this anxiety-riddled belief that she can convince her parents to become supportive, loving people may result from inconsistent caregiving. She receives just enough attention and approval to positively develop her self-efficacy, perceived control, and resilience. During elementary school, Adeline works hard to receive straight-As and academic achievement medals because "[t]hose were the only times when [her father] showed pride in [her]" (Mah 36). After winning a play-writing competition that was open to students from all over the English-speaking world, her father pulls her out of the orphanage boarding school he abandoned her at to say he will fund her education. She wants to study literature to become a writer, but her father scoffs at English studies and says, "don't you think the English people write better than you?" (Mah 116). After graduating from London Hospital Medical School with an emphasis in internal medicine, she gives up her dream job as an assistant lecturer in London to be an intern in an unrelated field at Hong Kong University. Adeline takes the "insultingly low" salary to please her father, who believes that "[i]nternal medicine is not a good field for a woman" (Mah 114). She takes the internship thinking, "I wished above all else to please my father. To gain his acceptance. To be loved. To have him say [w]e're so proud of you" (Mah 145). Despite their near-constant failure to support her professional dreams, Adeline's parents' sporadic attention, love, and support propel her educational and occupational work toward earning her parents' approval. Adeline's core childhood belief that

she can earn love informs her resilience and strengthens her will to keep trying no matter what obstacles she faces.

While on the one hand, Adeline studies to earn her family's love, she paradoxically continues to persevere even when she knows that no one is going to save her, love her, or care for her. Academia becomes her only solace from the lack of control in her life. Adeline's Ye Ye (grandfather) informs her understanding of survival by saying, "[y]ou must rely on yourself. No matter what else people may steal from you, they will never be able to take away your knowledge. [You] must make your own life outside of this home" (Mah 110). By immersing herself in her studies, Adeline can forget her present childhood in which she is unloved and imagine a future in which she is independent and deserving of love. After young Adeline wins the class presidency, her stepmother physically abuses her and says, "[n]o matter what a big shot you think you are at school, you are nothing without your father. Nothing!" (Mah 70). In the midst of getting kicked out and told to stay in an orphanage, Adeline says, "[m]y anguish subsided as I began to write. My nose stopped bleeding. [I] was in control of my own destiny. The completion of each assignment satisfied an emptiness within" (Mah 72). As much as Adeline studies to earn love, she also develops a deep love of writing because it allows her to regain control of her future and escape her present abuse, emptiness, and loneliness.

Reyna similarly turns to English studies and her academic community to find solace from her childhood scars. Seeing herself in the abused daughter, "Sally," from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Reyna cries over lines describing the prospect of Sally walking away from home. She wonders, "[h]ow did Cisneros know that was exactly how I had felt[?] Just wishing my feet could keep walking[,] to a beautiful home where I was loved and wanted" (Grande 306). Literature helps Reyna see that she is not alone in the world. Reyna's professor, Diana, who recommended the novel to Reyna, becomes her friend, and offers her housing to get through school. IFFG scholars who lack supportive parents and a safe home are well-equipped to find new families, homes, and definitions of love within academic spaces. When Adeline gets pneumonia at boarding school and her first visit from her father on her sickbed, she bonds with her peer about being perceived as orphans. This recognition teaches her she is not alone and her female friendships within academia hold power. She realizes she can create her own family, saying, "[w]hy should I force myself on my parents when there were loyal friends?" (Mah 113). Finding solace in being two of fifty girls in the "almost an orphan" category, Adeline and her new friend begin imagining a brighter future for themselves and make "plans to escape from Hong Kong and live in college hostels somewhere far away" (Mah 113).

Despite the community she has started to build, however, once she gets to college, Adeline struggles to find a place for herself due to racism, sexism, fetishization, and performances of liberal acceptance. When speaking pidgin, people place her where "[she] 'belonged' [to] reaffirm [their] own superiority" (Mah 124). Her peers call her "exotic" and "interesting[.]" among other discriminatory words (Mah 126). Her professors tokenize her, "singl[ing her] out to show that they even accepted female Asian students into medical school" (Mah 126). In response to the high grades the female medical students earn, the male students call them "ugly," "DARs (damned average raisers)," and "robb[ers who take] qualified male" spots in medical school (Mah 126). Adeline and her female peers' being called DARs in acknowledgment of their impressive intellect while simultaneously being called robbers who steal men's spots in academia, exemplifies how imposter syndrome is manufactured as a

gendered social phenomenon. Imposter syndrome, “reported most frequently by female students who felt compelled to compare their abilities against those of their peers,” stems from “feeling[s] of inadequacy despite evidence to the contrary” (Rease Miles and Dyckhoff Stelzriede 5). Unlike many women who are affected by imposter syndrome, as it is conditioned by their white, male peers who attempt to make them feel inadequate, Adeline’s nickname “Pollyanna” shows her unique ability to remain confident in the face of adversity (Mah 127). In response to her nickname, she thinks, “[h]ow could they understand the exaltation I felt to be at last free of Niang’s looming shadow?” (Mah 127). Adeline can remain optimistic in the face of her racist, sexist peers because they are not saying anything she has not already heard from her own parents. Her lonely upbringing within sexist, racist, and inequitable cultural norms primed her to endure like experiences as an IFFG student.

Adeline and Reyna both lack familial love and support—proven forms of cultural capital that correlate with academic success—and yet they are extremely successful. Kenneth Oldfield defines cultural capital as “the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the education system a comfortable, familiar environment in which she can succeed” (Oldfield 2). Adeline depicts love as a form of cultural capital when speaking to how her lack of love distinguishes her from her classmates: “my classmates sensed my vulnerability and yearning for acceptance behind the irritatingly perfect scholastic record. They must have realized that there was something pathetic about me. I never mentioned my family[,] I [carried] a terrible loneliness” (Mah 60). Lonely, exclusionary environments are familiar to Adeline and Reyna. Having navigated exclusion from their family homes may contribute to their resilience. After realizing she lacks the love and support that her peers have, Adeline goes home, does “homework, invent[s] [her] own solitary games and read[s,]” demonstrating her adaptive skills and ability to self-regulate through channeling her emotions into her studies (Mah 60).

At seventeen, Adeline begins a relationship with her “esteemed professor, a man twice [her] age,” recreating the power dynamics from her childhood (Mah 130). She marvels at “the trouble he took over [her academic] efforts,” showing how her lack of parental attention shapes her early romantic, exploitative relationships (Mah 128). Her “deep-rooted Chinese reverence for learning, age, and wisdom” also fuels her attraction to her professor, reigniting the power dynamics she suffered as a child who had to be submissive to her parents (Mah 129). Adeline’s inappropriate relationship with her professor contrasts Reyna’s relationship with her professor, showing how high-need IF/FG scholars may be more vulnerable to forming deep, personal relationships with their faculty and peers—for better or worse.

IFFG scholars are often compelled to return to their families in search of familial love, even when they have become successful in spite of their family. Like Adeline gives up her dream job to return to her abusive parents in Hong Kong, Reyna feels as though she must give up her dream school to return to her abusive father. Reyna’s brother expects her to return home, telling her that their father has attempted suicide after she and his girlfriend left him. When wondering whether or not to proceed with her plan to move away from home for school, she wonders, “[h]ow could I leave now when things were starting to turn around at home, when finally my father was beginning to change? What if I stayed?” (Grande 314). She finds it hard to believe that her father would need her and “hurt himself just because a woman had left him. Besides,” she continues, “did he even love [his girlfriend]? *A man doesn’t hurt and beat the woman he loves, does he?*” (Grande 308). These are the guilt-riddled, anxiety-producing

questions that haunt IFFG students who leave abusive homes in search of love, validation, belonging, and security. Do parents and partners who abuse their children and partners love them? Are abusive caregivers worth returning to?

When prompted to discuss love as a female, first-generation student, my friend says love in Hispanic culture is a double-edged sword. Sometimes it is a chain pulling one back into their abusive home, and other times it is a motivator to leave and find better. Diana redefines love for Reyna when listening to her speak, recommending her relevant books, giving her housing, and encouraging her to write and make a difference in the world. A study examining Mexican-origin female college students' self-efficacy, a foundational component of resilience, "determine[s] that academic support from mothers, professors and romantic partners is positively associated with participants' self-efficacy" (Ramos 119). Female, first-generation scholars create their own families to define their own outcomes. Adeline's second husband, Professor Robert Mah, redefines love for Adeline by listening to her and "holding [her] hand [as she] poured out [her childhood] pain and yearning" (Mah 210). Adeline comments on her marriage to him saying, "I felt that I had come home at last" (Mah 211).

Despite the problems Adeline faces as an IFFG student, she describes her university years as a "wonderful period of [her] life" and her university lessons as "pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle depicting the mystery of life" that she yearned to uncover (Mah 127). First-gen writer Frances Varian asks why "the children of doctors and lawyers [are] taught the mysteries of existence while the children of janitors and waitresses are taught fear" (Varian 164). I ask why IFFG scholars are taught to fear failure. Reyna and Adeline's parents tell them to give up on university, presumably out of fear they will fail. It is possible, however, that their parents tell them to give up on university for fear they will not fail, and they will then prove that they did not deserve their parents' sexist, racist, inequitable, and abusive treatment.

IFFG scholars may experience a profound sense of isolation that comes from the experience of relocating to another country alone. They often carry guilt from leaving behind the family who pushed them to search for something greater—either through building them up or tearing them down. Anxious resilience is the will to keep moving forward in search of a home and mutual love. Love is reliability, safety, respect, support, and valuing another's perspective and personhood. Though some women may never experience such love from their families, they come to college ready to experience it with their professors, peers, partners, and other persons. Leaving home, past definitions of love, and one's family behind for college can leave a hole in an IFFG scholar's heart. This hurt may make them susceptible to further exploitation, but it can also make them more capable of forming deeper connections with their campus community and more driven to fill themselves with knowledge and a greater understanding of their past.

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