

My Mother's Eyes

“Your eyes tell the story of your family, your history, your culture. They tell the story of *you*.”

The morning air was frozen lace on my skin, delicate and cold as I sat down under the comfort of the cola and cradled my mother's thermos in my lap. The school playground was bursting with life and exuberance as children ran around, screaming, laughing, and crying as the wind beat against their coats. Puffs of steam escaped their mouths with every breath and evaporated into the twirling mist that settled above them.

I twisted the lid, releasing aromas of vinegar and soy which danced through the air. I inhaled it all in:

the fluffy white dough; the droplets of steam that glistened in the crevasses; the ribbon tied around the top, a gentle reminder of my mother's care – each one so perfect. I reached my hands towards them, eager, re-

“What. Is. That?” a voice grated through the air.

My eyes squinted to see the small figure approaching through threatening fog. Her fair hair was slicked back into a tight bun, stretching her ivory skin across her face, her arms were folded, and her eyes were a remarkably vacant, cold ocean.

“It's *bao*,” I smile, shivering as we locked eyes. “D-do you want to try?”. The warmth of the dough radiating through my body as I held it in my small palm.

“Oh, its *bao*!” she mocked as she stuck her tongue out and pushed my hand aside, “looks disgusting if you ask me.”

“Well, it's really good if y-“

“Besides,” she continued, her smirk widening as people gathered around us. “Why are your eyes like that when you smile. Can you even see?”

Her words soared like acid through my veins, suffocating my confidence. I gazed towards

the ground and bit my lips, cradling my head in shaking palms. *No, this can't be happening.*

Make it stop.

“Yeah, they’re pretty ugly if you ask me,” one giggled as others nodded in agreement and squinted their eyes.

Each comment circled like a haunting melody as I melted into darkness. I dug my fingers into the concrete, begging the pain to distract me from the shrill of this taunting choir. A nail split from the force and a metallic crimson trickled into the cracks.

I sunk deeper;
the blanket darkened.

Make it stop!

“Your food doesn’t belong here. Neither do you...

Freak,”

“JUST SHUT UP!” I scream, fuelled with rage.

Tears clouded my vision as I threw the thermos, wincing at the clash of metal as it skidded across the cement. Adrenaline kicked in. I took off and sprinted across the playground, tearing around corners, limbs grazing on brickwork. I sprinted faster, my chest burned, and my lungs grasped desperately for oxygen. *Faster! Please!* Humiliation trailed behind me as I fought my way back home. I stopped and sat at the doorsteps, exhausted, staring at the weighted clouds of black rain that now pervaded the sky. A single droplet fell on me. One drop. Two Drops. Three. A flood trailed down, drenching me in gloom.

“What happened?” my mum cried as she opened the door. She extended her hand and ushered me inside, frantically searching for a towel as her face hung heavy with worry. “*Ni mei shi ba?* Are you cold?” she sighed, as she brushed her fingers, gentle and cool, along my skin.

I couldn't look at her - at myself in her. Dark hair and almond eyes – hers and mine. It was everything I hoped to escape, the blanket of shame that consumed me.

Silence invaded the room, only interrupted by the stove as it bubbled and sang. Bursts of ginger, sugar and sesame escaped and glided in perfect harmony, greeting every corner of the kitchen with its comforting aroma. I took it all in and for a moment, a brief moment, the blanket had lifted.

Memories swam with the warmth of my grandma's gaze. She would waltz around the kitchen, hand in hand with grandpa as they reminisced younger days in *Shanghai*. The history of her life was measured in every wrinkle around her soft eyes. Time had stolen everything but her beauty and kindness. She was proud. She was radiant. She would tell me how beautiful my eyes were, how lucky I was to be part of this. This beautiful, rich cul- *No!* My jaw clenched. *No, I'm not.*

The stove screamed and frothed as the metal lid clashed against the rim of the pot. *I winced. Adrenaline kicked in. My chest burned. Humiliation trailed behind me...* “You're a *freak*.” I shoved *ma's* hand away frantically, heart thumping against my skin, clawing to escape. “Look at my eyes *ma!* Look at th-this f-food!” I burst through choppy breaths, struggling to hold back the throbbing in my throat. “Why can't I be like them? W-why must I be...like you?”

I covered my mouth in horror as the rest of my body sat there, paralysed. Silence invaded us once again as her eyes shot to the ground and descended in pools of melancholy. Each minute felt excruciating as I saw her sink deeper and deeper. She was drowning in the very suffering she tried to protect me from.

“You-” she paused as she reached into her pocket, gently smoothing out creases of a faded photograph. Her eyes crinkled and the corners of her mouth widened as she traced the smiles frozen in time, looking towards one girl cradled in her mother's arms. “You are all who came before you. Your eyes tell the story of your family, your history, your culture. They tell the story of *you*.”

Her words swirled around like snow, each one delicate and different as they melted into me. We locked eyes and for the first time, I saw them shine amongst the shadows. I saw *ma*, grandma and grandpa. Proud. Radiant. Bathing in the gold of the sun's rays – in the richness of culture. It was a melody that pacified my soul. It was something I wouldn't let others take away. It was what made me...me.

“Now *Ying Yue*,” she whispered, embracing me in her arms, “do you want to wrap *bao* for *xing nian*? Grandma should be visiting soon.”

Outside, small beams of gold seeped through the cracks from the heavens above. The harsh wind subsided into a small breeze, gentling caressing seeds of spring as they emerged from deep slumber, decorating them with bursts of scarlet and jade. Laughter echoed from the doorsteps as two women and a little girl opened the windows and admired the sun. Puffs of steam escaped from their doors and evaporated into the sky where nature burst with life and exuberance. The mist swirled around the doorsteps, guiding wafts of soy and sesame as they darted through fading rays of the falling sun.

Word/s	Translation
<i>Bao</i>	Depending on pronunciation, the word can mean “steamed bun” or “to treasure something precious”
<i>Ni mei shi ba?</i>	Are you okay?
<i>Ma</i>	Mum
<i>Ying Yue</i>	“Reflection of the moon”
<i>Xing nian</i>	Lunar New Year

Reflection:

Inspired by Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella, "Heart of Darkness", my didactic narrative, "My Mother's Eyes" explores the flaws of the human condition through the othering of the protagonist, "Ying Yue" – a Chinese girl that struggles to embrace her culture in a European-dominated society. The title, "My Mother's Eyes", incorporates concepts of race and culture and foreshadows her journey to acceptance of her insecurities through her mother – a symbol of knowledge and healing in Chinese literature. I was inspired by Conrad's use of foreshadowing through his title, "Heart of Darkness" which reveals Marlow's journey to the discovery of the darkness of mankind.

I established two settings through pathetic fallacy - winter at school and spring at home - to support the transition of the protagonist and reveal the characters reflect their surroundings. The group of children mirror the spiteful and inhospitable nature of winter in the metaphor, "her eyes were a remarkably vacant, cold ocean.". They are unnamed as they represent a microcosm of a society that ostracises "The Other" to obtain a sense of empowerment and control. I mirrored Conrad's use of nameless institutions and characters such as, "The Company" and "the pilgrims" to reveal the hollowness and corruption of mankind. To couple this, the personification of the winter fog as "threatening" was inspired by Conrad's symbolism, "there was white fog...more blinding than the night.". I intended to illustrate the ignorance of mankind to the destructive power of othering which has allowed it to persist through time and generations.

The negative connotations of winter are contrasted by the motif of the sun, "Proud. Radiant. Bathing in the gold of the sun's rays," at the protagonist's home. The sun is utilised as a force that penetrates the "threatening fog" to allow individuals to embrace their differences. Additionally, the protagonist's name is only revealed after her encounter with her family. The name, "Ying Yue" translates to "reflection of the moon," - symbolic of her connection to her ancestors and her newfound appreciation of her culture. I was inspired by Conrad's symbolism through Charles' last name "Marlow" – derived from old English meaning "driftwood" – which presents him as an intermediary between land and water; dark and light; the savage and the civilised. The two settings are representative of the mixed nature of humans and their capacity for both love (family in spring) and evil (children in winter). The change in setting is critical in the development of the protagonist as it emphasises her transition from shame to acceptance.

I employed first-person perspective to immerse the audience into the journey of the protagonist and evoke empathy. However, I concluded with third-person omniscient narration, “Outside, small beams of gold seeped through cracks from the heavens above,” to allow the audience to reflect upon and celebrate the resilience of *Ying Yue* - similar to Conrad’s framed narrative structure which encourages the audience to reflect upon the teachings of Marlow.

The exploration of Conrad’s classic text in this module, “Encounters with The Other”, has increased my awareness of the treatment of “The Other” and allowed me to develop a unique voice in this narrative. I am immensely happy with the outcome. However, given a higher word count, I would have explored the relationship between *Ying Yue* and her grandmother to highlight generational differences of othering in a European society.