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English Composition I
Betty Gilson
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Summary of
“The Misery of Silence”
Revision

In her illustrative essay, “The Misery of Silence,” Maxine Hong Kingston talks about the culture shock that foreigners could experience, when moving to a new country.

When she moved to America, her biggest difficulty was speaking English. Her body would stop reacting, and she would lose her voice. In the first three years, she didn’t speak at all. Her parents didn’t speak English either; therefore, they never understood what the teachers were trying to say, and their children’s problems continued to deepen.

Initially she wasn’t aware that she had to talk, or pass kindergarten. When some Japanese children joined the school, and they were all talking loudly, she realized that she had to talk too. It was then that “school became misery” (209) and “silence became misery”(209).

She struggled to adapt to the new culture, trying to speak English properly. Reading was easier, since you “did not have to make up what you say” (209). As well, the different rules of the new country confused her even more.

She wasn't the only one that experienced "culture shock." Her sister and other Chinese children she knew had the same problems.

She found it easier to talk to "the Negro students" (209), who were very nice to her, and walked with her to school and back home. They were also protecting her from the Japanese children, who were mean to her.

Sometimes, she felt like an outsider. She felt misunderstood when the teacher didn't include the Chinese girls in class activities. When she tried to address her problems with the teacher, she didn't have any success.

After the American School, she went to the Chinese School. A totally different person was unveiled. The cultural inhibitions were gone, and the children found their lost voices. They were able to participate in the class, take tests, and scream and yell during the breaks. They were able to act as normal children do.

Her parents, also, were having problems understanding the American culture, but this was not a one-way only situation. The Chinese culture is so different—even in the way they interpret music—it is hard to understand. Therefore, newcomers have a hard time adjusting to the New World.

In their struggle to adjust to the New World, some children create a totally new "face" (211). They "invented an American-feminine speaking personality"(211).

Maxine's essay could be considered a bridge over the cultural gaps. Her emotional writing gives us a better understanding of the society we're living in, reminding us to try to understand the person at the other end, no matter who they are or where they come from.

Works Cited

Kingston, Maxine Hong. "The Misery of Silence." *Connections: A Multicultural Reader for Writers*. Editor Judith A. Stanford. California: Mayfield, 1997. 208-211.