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Poem Explication

**KEYS**

My mother doesn't think I should have keys,

but my brother Xin, who is three years younger than me, has keys.

He gets to come home whenever he wants to

But I. I must knock.

Girls don't have keys, my mother said.

What for? Where are you going?

Nowhere, I think.

is Xin who gives me his keys.

Just temporarily, he says. He can knock. Mom won't care.

But when she sees me opening the doors into the house,

she tells me I must return them.

But I'm thinking that I need them too.

*I* need to be able to close and open door when she's not around.

And so I shake my head and I hold onto them,

This borrowed keys,

This keys that may take me somewhere, anywhere.

By: May Lee Yang

The poem “Keys” symbolizes freedom and emphasizes the conflicts a female from Hmong culture experiences in life in order to reach new goals. The speaker [a girl] says that her mother considers it wrong that girls have their own key, implying how strict the mother is. The speaker asserts that her mother allows his younger brother to have a key showing preference between the speaker and her brother. These facts demonstrate some difficulties that a female from Hmong culture carries on in order express their ideas freely. The concept of the “keys” represents conflicts, freedom, and liberty in a Hmong society culture.

In the poem, the first two lines illustrate the different ways males and females are treated in Hmong culture. The first line asserts that the speaker does not have a key to open the door whenever she likes; therefore, the second line lets the reader know that the speaker's young brother is allowed to have a key. The third and fourth lines support the fact that the speaker's brother has a key just for being a male and he does not have to call at the door while the speaker does, “But I. I have to knock” (4). In line number five, the speaker shares that her mother does not think she needs a key; moreover, the sixth and seventh lines shows how females are forbidden going out and experiencing new things. At this point some rhetorical questions are brought when the speaker's mother replies, “What for? Where are you going?” On the next line these questions are answered (6). According to the eighth and ninth lines the mother of the two brothers does not care if the boy goes out or stays at home and that is the reason why he let the speaker borrow his keys for a little while. Later in lines ten and eleven, the consequences of wrongdoing are revealed when the mother tells the speaker to give them back. The conflicts a female from Hmong culture can encounter is realizing that she deserves liberty/freedom as any boy and fight for her voice to be heard; in line twelve she realizes that. The speaker asserts, “*I* need to be able to close and open door when she's not around.” This means that her mother is not going to be always there for her and it is time for her mother to understand and give her the “keys,” the liberty she deserves in order to succeed (13). Later, when the speaker realizes that she has many things to learn and experience in lines fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen, she stands up saying that those “keys” are the freedom that someday will open a door with plenty of opportunities in life.

The author of the poem allows the reader to have in mind what are some of the disadvantages that Hmong culture and traditions offer. The preference towards men is larger in Hmong culture and an example of that is by not letting females have the same opportunities that males do. In this poem the keys are the opportunities given to each of the siblings, where men have more chances to succeed and explore things than females. The use of literary effects and rhetorical question are a great source to demonstrate the idea of the Tanka poem: a personal theme that is unrhymed.

**Works Cited**

Yang, May Lee. *“Keys”*May Lee Yang. N.p., 2 July 2010. Web. 12 Feb. 2013. <http://www.lazyhmongwoman.com/write/writing.html>.