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## **Epic High-Fantasy Response to Asian Xenophobia During COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **Introduction**

"The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!", tweeted by President Trump.<sup>6</sup> Notice the phrase 'Chinese Virus'. Although the virus originated from China, these bigotry terms and ideas target Asian Americans.<sup>5</sup> However, this is no surprise. Historically, fear and anxiety lead people to "prescribe an 'otherness' to disease to feel protected and ascribe blame to justify prejudicial rhetoric", or in other words, xenophobic hate and violence.<sup>7,20</sup> The United States is home to nearly 21 million Asian Americans, and there are currently multiple cases of violence and hate. The COVID-19 pandemic has put the world in a dangerous time, but it is neither the fault of Asians nor the time to cause more separation.<sup>8</sup> If this Asian xenophobia is to continue, there will be inevitable repercussions post-pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

The current situation of xenophobia is also very similar to the xenophobia experienced by Muslims after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Dubbed as Islamophobia, this xenophobic hate follows a hasty generalization fallacy, concluding that since the September 11 terrorists were Muslims, all Muslims are terrorists.<sup>3</sup> In other words, just because of their religion and the way they look, they are immediately thought to be a threat to many Americans. Muslim Americans still face many discriminations, especially after President Trump condoned Islamophobic fear by initiating a ban on multiple Muslim countries.<sup>3</sup> It has been almost two decades, and yet the xenophobia has not stopped. Reasons as to why can be narrowed to two possible explanations: ongoing conflicts and lack of a single, loud voice.<sup>11,12</sup> In the past decade, multiple terrorist attacks linked to Islamic terrorist groups. Each time this occurs, Islamophobia flares up, and Muslim American efforts to eliminate take steps backward.<sup>12</sup> Regarding Muslim American efforts, there has been much progress with groups supporting multiple issues, multiple ethnicities, and multiple religious sects. However, this "immense diversity in the Muslim American community, it is difficult to reduce it to a single voice" that is strong and impactful.<sup>11</sup> Without large numbers and support from all, Muslim American impacts on reducing Islamophobia is limited. The same mistakes should be avoided when attempting to combat the new Asian xenophobia.

Fortunately, solutions exist to deescalate this new wave of xenophobia. One current solution suggests the education of the ignorant. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests that to "help stop the stigma ... by knowing the facts and sharing them with the community".<sup>4</sup> However, this may not be enough, especially when the President of the United States is not taking his own organization's advice on the matter.

A better solution exists in between the lines of *Children of Blood and Bone*, an epic high fantasy novel, by Tomi Adeyemi. Although the novel may be for young adults, it depicts a lot of mature concepts. Tomi Adeyemi created her story with her experience of “being black in America during a time of high-profile police shootings”<sup>2</sup>. She has taken this experience to give the children of her culture “a mirror” and others “a window ... to see what people who are different from them are going through”.<sup>2</sup> Adeyemi has been quite successful at that. Multiple reviews have applauded her effective ability to tackle the heavy subject of discrimination in the novel.<sup>15,19</sup> Tomi Adeyemi depicts multiple aspects of discrimination against the majis through the violence Zélie experiences. Furthermore, she instills in her characters the belief that restoring magic to the majis will end the violence in Orisha.<sup>1</sup> With this storyline, Adeyemi has unintentionally presented a plausible solution in battling the new coronavirus-related xenophobia with the culture’s own magic: Asian collectivism.

### **Asian Collectivism vs. Maji Magic**

To the majis in *Children of Blood and Bone*, magic is sacred and built their history and lives on it. Magic was a gift, and its powers allowed them “to care for the people of Orisha and were revered throughout the nation”.<sup>1</sup> However, some majis abused their power, and soon enough, they became feared and hated, leading to violence against them. Then, the majis lost their magic and were at the mercy of King Saran. They no longer could defend themselves, and like Zélie, many “lost maji members of [their] families” during The Raid eleven years ago.<sup>1</sup> After years of facing intense discrimination as ‘maggots’, rumors of magic returning excited the majis. Without magic, Zélie and her people “will never be treated[ed] with respect”; however, if magic can be restored, it is believed that violence against the majis can be extinguished.<sup>1</sup>

Just as the maji’s strength comes from their magic, Asians have a long-standing value of collectivism, a social construct that is identified by:

One well-accepted set of characterizations of individuals with high levels of collectivistic tendencies states that they (a) ‘see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, coworkers, tribe, nation)’, (b) are ‘primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives’, (c) are ‘willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals’, and (d) ‘emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives’.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, these collective individuals tend to choose the community over himself or herself. Traditionally, these ideas are instilled in Asians at a young age and passed on through generations. However, times have changed. Like the magic lost in Orisha, the valued idea of collectivism has also faded from the context of Asian Americans. First, recent significant historical events, such as the Vietnam War, has sponsored ethnic divides among the Asian-American community.<sup>14</sup> Second, failed collective efforts of the Asian-American community has left a bad taste. For example, the violent massacre at Tiananmen Square has scared Chinese Asians from participating in political activities.<sup>18</sup> However, it should be noted that here in

America, it is a democracy; therefore, such violent acts cannot be legally committed against political participation. Third, collectivism has also faded in Asian-American culture due to multiple communist regimes using collectivism to legitimize themselves.<sup>18</sup> Again, this is in the social context of another country and a different purpose. The second and third points should be considered. However, in the context of a collectivist effort against xenophobia among Asians-Americans in the United States, it is not quite as relevant. In both points, there is a different type of enemy than what Asian Americans are facing now. Lastly, one of the key points in Asian collectivism is that they are often motivated by the “appreciation [of] the organization and consequences of affect, cognition, and interpersonal behavior”. In other words, an Asian collectivist considers the reputational consequence before acting and avoid changes to their community’s norms.<sup>13</sup> In the context of political participation, Asian Americans view themselves as better off than other minorities, thus making no sense for them to disrupt the peaceful norm. To disrupt the norm and fight back could mean losing the status of the model minority, bringing unnecessary change to the community. Over time, fear and separation have halted the collectivist nature of Asian Americans, leading to the group’s apolitical stereotype.

### **Call for Political Activism vs. Call to Adventure**

Due to the loss of magic, the majis have become weak and on the defense ever since. Instead of attacking, they submit to the other Orishans and King Saran’s men. Out of fear, they choose not to fight back and continue to wait for a chance. For example, in Mama’s Agba hut, Zélie was scolded and reminded of the “strength of restraint” and “mak[ing] sure [to] know when to fight” by Mama Agba.<sup>1</sup> This fear and restraint have diminished the fight of the majis, even in those who feel fiercely like Zeile. Similarly, Asian Americans also showed restraint in their actions, and generations of this practice have diminished the quality of Asian values and their American political base.

For many immigrant experiences in America, it requires assimilating to the American culture. Often, this changes the values of a person, which has been especially notable in the Asian American community. After years of mistreatment as laborers, Asian Americans worked tirelessly at the fact to assimilate to American culture. Then, when World War 2 occurred, Japanese Americans were discriminated against, and efforts to assimilate restarted again. Today, Asian Americans have gained a reputation of the model minority and “suggests the ideas ... that [Asians] have successfully integrated to American society”.<sup>10</sup> However, such a notion has halted Asian American political strength as a community. First, the term ‘model minority’ does not mean that Asians have successfully assimilated. In fact, most still consider the idea that Asians can never be truly assimilated into the white American context, but rather, America has granted Asian Americans “relative valorization”, or cultural recognition.<sup>10</sup> Second, this status as a model minority has “ostracized [Asians] from civic participation”.<sup>10</sup> Asians have been somewhat satisfied with the idea of just a white man’s demeaning respect; instead of working to change it politically. Third, Asian Americans, in an effort to assimilate, have forgotten the strength of a collective effort. Instead, they have actively adopted Western individualism and concern themselves with one self’s financial well-being.<sup>10,18</sup> This adoption has led to the idea that “Asian Americans are too busy getting ahead and making money to worry about politics.”,

leading the Asian-American community to view that economic success is more important than politics.<sup>10</sup> However, the truth of the matter is that strong political participation is ever more crucial now during this pandemic due to its related xenophobia.

The rising Asian xenophobia and the violent events of Prince Inan's raid are a call to action for the Asian-American community and the majis of *Children of Blood and Bone*, respectively. Unlike Zélie's lessons with Mama Agba earlier in the book, she changes to the offense upon restoring her magic and the raid. Instead of submitting to Prince Inan, she plans her escape and forcefully pushes Zélie to go to Chândomblé Temple to talk to the sêntaros and, hopefully, restore magic to Orisha.<sup>1</sup> The current events in this pandemic require the same offensive change among the Asian American community.

Right now, there is public outcry for justice by the Asian American younger population, celebrities, and leaders. Like the general public, they, too, see the cases of xenophobic violence on social media pages, news media, and elsewhere and are reacting to it. New York House Representative Grace Meng reminds the current situation shows we are still outsiders, despite being revered for our model minority status, and it is time to speak out.<sup>16</sup> "Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning" author Cathy Park Hong similarly calls out her Asian-American community to "stop following the carrot" that is being the model minority, "be enraged", and "speak out about this hate ... and [proactively] fight" the current xenophobic hate.<sup>10,17</sup> Other Asian-American leaders have "vowed to speak out and protect their community".<sup>16</sup> An organized Asian-American political voice is needed more than ever if they are to halt the growth of xenophobia.

From a collectivist point of view, current Asian-American activists have chosen to disrupt from Asian-American norms. Now, they are sending an open invitation to join them. A study critically analyzing Asian-American participation suggests that "political fate ... [that] marshals ... a sense of linked fate ... in the group [can lead] toward political participation".<sup>21</sup> Currently, the situation fits this study's commentary more than ever. All Asian-Americans, especially East and Southeast Asians, are being targeted by the COVID-19 xenophobic hate and violence, thus sharing a 'linked fate'. This ties one Asian-American to another and inspires the Asian collectivism support required to fight against the xenophobic hate. Fighting this fight will not be easy, but with strength in numbers and an Asian collectivist spirit can be won.

### **Responding with Social Media vs. Responding with Ritual**

In *Children of Blood and Bone*, a ritual using the relics was performed to restore the magic.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in order to restore the collectivism and complete the political activism journey against the Asian xenophobia, a similar ritual is in order as well.

Social media is a powerful tool that can reach a massive audience and effectively carry out proposed action plans. Currently, the coronavirus federal stay-at-home order and social distancing requirement have blocked traditional political activism routes, such as rallying. However, the online format of social media allows it to be still a viable solution. Even more so, social media have recently experienced more activity. With people and students at home with

nothing to do, social media has been turned on more. These factors indicate an action plan with social media would be not only safe, but also an effective medium for political activism during quarantined times.

The proposed action plan is not comprehensive, but UNICEF recommends fighting xenophobia by exploring cultures and teaching others and calling out bigotry and hate and standing up for others.<sup>9</sup> It is crucial to choose the right platform for this material content for the exploration of culture and education. A video format is desired when educating due to its ability for both audio and visual explanation. Some suggested video platforms are YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram; they would be most effective for this action plan. Also, due to the small attention spans, short clips, like TikToks, can be highly effective in educating younger age groups. The second action plan requires Asian Americans to be more proactive. Since there is no safe way to congregate right now, social media is currently the most effective to produce news coverage without the risk of physical harm. Asian Americans need to share their stories with the community and the general public. Other Asian Americans need to share and support each other stories in order to reach outside the Asian sphere. At the same time, Asian Americans should call out any hate and bigotry seen. For example, many did not President Trump get away with his xenophobic slur by calling him out and causing an effective media frenzy over it.<sup>6</sup> These social media plans are essential to prevent further intensity and spread of xenophobic hate during quarantine and post-quarantine.

## **Conclusion**

Asian American xenophobic hate is something most did not expect. For years now, as the model minority, Asian Americans have stood at the sidelines of discriminatory hate until now. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way American culture is viewing the Asian American community. What used to be begrudging respect is now fear of disease turned into hate. Already, this hate has caused violence against Asian Americans in communities all over the United States. If Asian Americans let this persist, there will be dire consequences post-pandemic. The time is now to stop this virus. Luckily, answers as to how are not too far away. Hidden between the lines of *Children of Blood and Bone* are analogical depictions of the current state the coronavirus-related xenophobia and a collectivist solution paired with social media and political activism contexts. Just as readers do not know of the ending for Orisha by the first book of the trilogy, Asian Americans do not know the outcome as well. However, the hope is that these first steps will limit ongoing Asian American xenophobic hate.

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