

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

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A brave new world

Children of immigrant parents fuse two cultures to find own identities

By Nishat Fatima
THE BATTALION

Resham Deeptavarni sat at a table in a posh Dallas restaurant with a group of her friends, as they were passing around pictures from their senior prom the night before. As the photographs of beautiful dresses, elaborate dance moves and classy settings were exchanged, the friends had their own special story to share about what they claimed was the "most magical night of their lives." Everyone but Deeptavarni.

Although she told her friends that she was not allowed to go to the prom due to an ankle injury she got earlier that month, Deeptavarni knew that was not the truth.

"My parents are traditional Bangladeshi immigrants that came to America during the late seventies," said Deeptavarni, a Class of 1998 A&M graduate. "The idea of attending something like the senior prom, with dancing and close intermingling of sexes was so risqué in our home, I didn't even bother to ask them if I could go."

Since its beginning, America has been a society in which immigration has been a staple throughout the decades. While early 20th century immigrants faced problems such as world wars, unemployment and segregation, the latest wave of immigrants face new challenges in cultural assimilation.

Changes in immigration laws from 1965 to 1990 led to a large number of Americans being born in families from another country. According to the United States Census Bureau, 28 million of the current United States population are immigrants who were born overseas. The children of these immigrants grow up with a duality of cultures.

As a result, these second-generation immigrants are caught balancing the American culture in which they grew up with the traditional native culture of their parents. Many have to learn about their culture on the basis of meager trips to their parents' country of origin.

Deeptavarni said she made an excuse, as she had done on many occasions before, to avoid explaining her cultural restraints to her prom-going friends.

"When I was in middle school, people didn't care why I always wore conservative clothes or didn't have a boyfriend," Deeptavarni said. "But in high school, explaining my parents' thought process would always lead to my friends saying things like 'that's crazy.' To avoid feeling angry and misunderstood, I started to make unrelated excuses about why I couldn't do certain things."

Some activities common to most young Americans, such as attending a high school dance, are experiences that certain sectors of American youth will never have.

In many cases, such as Deeptavarni's, this balancing act can lead

to a struggle to find a cultural identity.

"My parents and relatives would always tell me that I was Bangladeshi, and the American culture that I was experiencing in everyday life was not a part of who I was," she said. "This would always confuse me because I was born and raised in South Carolina and have only visited Bangladesh three times my whole life. (My parents) would also expect us to know certain things about native Bangladeshi culture as though we were born with an innate knowledge of it. Every time I was told to behave like 'a good Bangladeshi girl' I wanted to yell and ask 'and how is that?'"

Deeptavarni said many times her attitude gets mistaken for a denial of her background.

"I don't want to deny my Bangladeshi heritage, but the fact is, it's the culture of my forefathers," she said. "My individual culture has parts of both Bangladesh and America in it."

Kathryn Neckerman, Jennifer Lee and Prudence Carter, professors in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University, conducted extensive research on assimilation patterns among immigrants and the generations that follow them.

In their studies, they found that immigrants who avoid assimilation may not meet their children's expectations of adopting mainstream culture. This may discourage their children from adopting their parents' native culture. As a result, the children may turn to an oppositional lifestyle, or reject one culture.

Jessica Lock, a junior journalism major, said children of immigrants face a struggle of clashing cultures, especially those whose parents come from backgrounds vastly different from the American culture. Lock's parents have a background that can be considered a cultural mosaic — they are immigrants from Peru, but are Chinese in their ancestry.

"Since my parents are Chinese-Peruvian, they have a hard time understanding American youth culture," she said. "Chinese culture is extremely different than Peruvian, Peruvian is extremely different than American and in the end, just finding a balance between them is the hardest thing to do. Making them understand what it's like growing up in America has always been an issue because they have high expectations of me in every field of life."



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Lock said certain aspects perpetuate the thread of misunderstanding that constantly looms around her attempts to lead a normal American life.

"Getting any kind of independence has always been a struggle. In my parents' culture, it isn't proper to stay out past midnight," she said. "Growing up, I always had to be extremely careful when I hung out with my friends. Even the smallest slip-up could result in parental disaster."

With the difficulties of growing up mounting everyday, Lock said peer pressure can be compounded by obvious differences.

"You always feel weird when talking about your culture. When you are younger, you don't want to be a loser and say 'my parents don't let me do this,'" she said. "Not everybody is understanding about cultural differences."

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