

Ella Skinner

Dr. Garvey

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The Fear of the Melting Pot

Culture changes over time, evolving into something new. That's not a revolutionary line of thinking, but there are different ways to view this change—a melting pot where every culture merges into one, or a salad bowl where ingredients retain their shape but can take on a new flavor. Think of America—a country largely composed of immigrants and cultural intermixing, with its Tex-Mex and other cultural fusions. Even a country as culturally homogeneous as Japan once adopted the Chinese writing system. But to some, this progress isn't something celebrated. Instead, they fear the eradication of their identity—disappearing into the melting pot. In his short story *The Pasho*, Paolo Bacigalupi argues against the views of people like these who cling to insular beliefs and resist cultural intermixing. In *The Pasho*, Bacigalupi divides the Keli and Jai people by associating them with their respective environments' water-abundant and arid natures. By disrupting this boundary between the Jai and Keli with rain at the end of the story and highlighting how the Jai integrate Keli wares into daily life despite their fear of cultural extinction, Bacigalupi asserts that intercultural mixing is a natural process that should be embraced for its societal benefits rather than feared as a threat to cultural identity.

Throughout the story, Bacigalupi ties the Keli to their lakes and constant rain, and the Jai to their barren desert. By depicting the persistence of water—even in Jai territory—through rain at the end of the story, Bacigalupi demonstrates how adopting parts of foreign cultures is a natural aspect of society and implies that cultural intermixing creates positive change in communities. The Keli are consistently mentioned alongside their land's thousand lakes and consistent rain. When Gawar expresses his discontent with Raphel's education in Keli, he says Raphel's "skin cries out for Keli's clear pools" and refers to the Keli as "soft water people" (76-7). Similarly, Mala retorts that she could "never have lived in the rain" (84). Conversely, Jai is a barren desert community of "dust-caked noses" where upon returning from Keli, Raphel instantly feels his skin tighten (69-70). Bacigalupi distinguishes Keli and Jai from each other—wet and dry. This divide is further exaggerated by the invidious remarks towards Keli from Gawar and Mala, which prompt readers to believe that the two communities are two extremely divided parties. However, this distinction is blurred when rain falls nine days after Raphel returns home, the "dust [puffing] where fat raindrops struck. [...] [turning] to mud" and "soaking the thirsty ground with the life-giving water of the wet season" (89, 92). The dust's reaction reflects the Jai's response to Keli's influence in their community—resisting change—but reflects how cultural evolution is ultimately inevitable. Rain is a naturally occurring phenomenon even in the arid desert, and is something unpreventable by human intervention. As much as some Jai might retaliate against allowing Keli products to modify their traditions, Bacigalupi argues that their cultural mixing is as normal as the weather. Bacigalupi's positive description of rain as "life-giving" expands on this idea and highlights how water is essential to life—implying that

cultural adoption is just as essential. Bacigalupi further highlights this message by showing the positive effects of Keli integration into Jai society.

Although radical Jai community members openly oppose using anything Keli, the Jai's benign adaptation of some Keli ideas and wares into Jai culture illustrates how letting old traditions evolve should not be feared, but appreciated for its societal benefit. When Gawar and Raphael discuss the Jai's potential use of Keli knowledge, Gawar rebukes Raphael's offerings of advancements in water retention and farming, scoffing, "Water wells always full? A better breed of the red bean plant? Something to make our lives easier? To make our children live longer? [...] You are the death of us" (80). Looking at Gawar's rhetoric, he contradicts himself; Gawar argues that the inventions Raphael seeks to integrate into Jai society would be "the death" of the Jai, but also acknowledges that these changes would improve their people's quality of life. Gawar's contradictory statements highlight how keeping Jai traditions 'purely Jai' may allow people to feel pride in their culture, but also prevents the community's potential improved well-being and happiness. Bacigalupi asserts that cultural change leads to societal benefit rather than so-called 'death' and criticizes those holding beliefs similar to Gawar. Though one could argue that his fear of cultural erasure from Keli's growing influence is in Jai's future, Bacigalupi argues against this line of reasoning by illustrating how Jai culture isn't as pure as it seems. For instance, when Raphael meets his potential bride, Mala, she wears "eye pigment that Keli girls favored," and an electrostatic scarf from Keli "with a Jai pattern to its weave" (83-4). Despite her mixed-culture apparel, Mala denounces Raphael's Keli softness and rejects him while expressing similar insular views to his grandfather, Gawar. Despite their rhetoric, the Jai choose to integrate Keli products into their lives and can still retain their unique cultural identity, thus suggesting that changing

tradition doesn't ruin its integrity. Instead, change benefits communities and people like Mala. Similarly, the Jai's beloved alcoholic drink, mez, is "poisonous in large doses" and distilled to "[render] its toxins less potent, but custom dictates that they allow a certain percentage to remain" (75). Mez is a product seen as exclusively Jai, only created and sold in their territory. However through distillation, something intrinsically Jai must be mixed with something tied to Keli. Water and mez work together without overshadowing one another, which creates something still accepted as Jai—similar to the mixture of cultures in Mala's outfit—emphasizing how adopting aspects of other cultures creates positive change in society. Furthermore, Raphael killing Gawar with undiluted mez at the story's end underscores the story's message; Gawar's perishing by consuming a pure Jai substance highlights how refusing to let outside influence change old traditions leads to destruction.

In Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Pasho*, the people of Keli and Jai are framed as opposites using a binary of water and dryness stemming from the characteristics of their respective villages. However, Bacigalupi disrupts this distinction and shows how the Jai and Keli cultures can integrate without overshadowing each other's identities. Ultimately, Bacigalupi argues that intercultural mixing is natural and promotes positive change in communities rather than threatening cultural identity as some like Gawar may think. This identity struggle is timeless, as cultural adaptation is seen throughout history and in the present, along with those who share views similar to Gawar's. Bacigalupi seeks to warn those who will listen, to free themselves from insular close-mindedness and recognize how civilizations benefit from progression and cultural sharing—behaving as a salad bowl rather than a melting pot.

Citations

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