

*Storyletters Records: Rhetorical Analysis of Seven Select Stories*

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**Abstract**

This research project presents a rhetorical criticism of the *Storyletters Records, 1991-2000*, located in the University of Texas at San Antonio Special Collections (MS 40). The purpose of this study is to conduct the first research examination of this collection of rhetorical artifacts.

The methodology used was Bitzer's rhetorical situation analysis for each of the seven selected stories separating them into three clusters based on a common theme. Findings revealed that this collection of rhetorical artifacts contains valuable insight toward building community through the story letters. This study concludes that rhetorical artifacts offer alternative perspectives on life and add to cross-cultural understandings.

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Letters have a long history across the world. Generally, they are written to supplement or enhance relationships between the senders and receivers. Many famous letters in history that have been analyzed by literary and historical researchers. Some were private, as with Abigail Adam's letters to her husband, John Adams (History.com Staff, 2009, "Abigail..."). Within her letters, she advocated for women's rights and strengthened her relationship with her husband through demonstrating her commitment to women's rights and imploring for action on the part of the president. On the other hand, some letters were intended to be distributed to large-scale audiences, as with the Apostle Paul's multiple letters to faith assemblies. Within his letters, "...he seldom alludes to society outside the church groups to whom he was writing. His letters, therefore, are not intended for the larger society. Rather, Paul is concerned almost entirely with specific communities of converts themselves..." (Freed, 2014, 2005, p. 4). Another renowned letter intended for larger audiences was Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter From Birmingham Jail" (Higgins, Dec. 22, 2008). Written to religious officials specifically, the letter was intended to be read by everyone in America (Andrews, 2015). All of the aforementioned letters, with the exception of Abigail Adam's letters, had the same purpose of bringing people together to overcome persecution. These letters sought to further desegregation, whether by gender, race, or faith, through private and public writings.

In contrast with famous letters, there are undiscovered correspondences that are worthy of study. In this paper, I will explore the insight of female authors in a previously unexplored collection of letters for the wisdom and insight contained in their letters.

### Artifacts

The collection of letters known as the *Storyletters Records*, 1991-2000 (Riddle, Dote Foundation), located in the University of Texas at San Antonio Special Collections (MS 40), is a collection of the *STORYLETTERS* publication started by Katharine “Kittu” Riddle. The primary purpose of this project was to build community among women from across the globe so as to uplift and recognize them as worthy individuals (“A Guide to the Katharine Riddle papers, 1960-1999”).

The issues of this nationally- and internationally-distributed publication were circulated from Spring 1993-October 2000 and “... sent to hundreds of readers in several countries, including Australia, Brazil, China, Guatemala, India, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom” (“A Guide to the *Storyletters*...”). The founder and editor of *STORYLETTERS* “...urged readers to share issues of *Storyletters* at no cost with friends, family, and organizations” (“A Guide to the *Storyletters*...”) and broaden readership.

The founder and editor, Katharine “Kittu” Riddle, donated The *Storyletters Records* contained in four boxes to UTSA’s Special Collections throughout 1997-2003 (personal communication, July 19, 2016). The first two boxes contain the history of this publication and copies of the majority of *STORYLETTERS* issues. The third box contains communications sent to and from *STORYLETTERS*. The fourth box contains external publications that aligned with *STORYLETTERS*’ goal of building community among women. Kittu collected these manuscripts that were sent from around the globe.

The *Storyletters Records* collection contains 77 stories. A story, as defined for this study, is limited to first-person headliner narratives in an essay-style format. Correspondences, poetry, homages, and epitaphs are not included in this total number of stories. Of the 77 stories, seven

specific stories are worthy of analysis for the purpose of this study. These stories are clustered into three sets. The first cluster includes two stories by Katharine “Kittu” Riddle: “I Have Nothing” (1993 Spring, pp. 6-7) and “An Immersion Experience” (1994 Fall, pp. 6-7). The first story shares what the author learned from housing a woman in need, whereas the second story shares what the author learned when she was being housed in another country. Both stories have a common theme of connection between women of entirely different frames-of-reference. The second cluster includes four stories with the theme of overcoming obstacles: “First Step” (Howard, 1994 Spring, pp. 5-6), “My Sister’s Love” (Silvius, 1994 Fall, pp. 9-10), “What’s in a Name?” (Kunzang, 1995 Spring, pp. 4-5), and “Irreconcilable Differences” (Anonymous, 1996 Spring, pp. 8-9). “First Step” shares how the author’s mother was courageous and determined to reach her goal of living on her own. “My Sister’s Love” shares how important the author’s sister was toward helping her live with Multiple Sclerosis. “What’s in a Name?” shares the author’s experience as a child who incurred the wrath of the boarding school nun due to communication barriers. “Irreconcilable Differences” relates the life journey of the author as a homosexual female at a time when there was no discussion of same-sex relationships or support for individuals who felt such attractions. The third story cluster contains one narrative that stands alone: “Dreaming...The Right Way” (Salas, 1999 October, p. 3). The author shares her perspective of how imagination in life can be wonderful, yet this outlook must be tempered with coming to grips with reality, no matter how enjoyable it is to imagine otherwise.

### **Methodology**

Letters are worthy of study and usually take the form of literary criticism most commonly looking at the author, genre, plot, setting, characters, and so forth. However, when the letters are rhetorical artifacts, the type of analysis that is most appropriate is a rhetorical analysis. This

study is the first research analysis of the *Storyletters Records* and will use a qualitative methodology through Lloyd Bitzer's rhetorical situation analysis. As Bitzer states, "The presence of rhetorical discourse obviously indicates the presence of a rhetorical situation." ("The Rhetorical Situation", January 3, 2013). This type of analysis examines three components surrounding the contents of an artifact: exigence, audience, and constraints ("The Rhetorical Situation", January 3, 2013). Exigence is defined by Bitzer as "...an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defeat, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be" (p. 6) and "...is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse" (p. 7). According to Bitzer, a "...rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (p. 8). As a result, "...[C]onstraints [are] made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence" (p. 8). Overall, a rhetorical situation analysis examines a wide breath of content for each artifact to gain a deeper understanding.

The reason for using this method of analysis for the *Storyletters Records* is that the stories themselves were intended to be read from all across the world as accounts of living by various women with the goal of furthering dialogue. This was due to the various topics and levels of content throughout this publication series that allowed readers worldwide the opportunity to engage in discussion with one another. The authors of the stories each had a particular rhetorical situation that needed to be analyzed for the exigence, audience, and constraints on an individual basis because of their unique nature as personal accounts of living.

## Rhetorical Analysis

### Cluster 1 – Two stories by the Founder and Editor, Katharine “Kittu” Riddle

The two stories selected for analysis in this first cluster are written by the founder and editor, Katharine “Kittu” Riddle: “I Have Nothing” (1993 Spring, pp. 6-7) and “An Immersion Experience” (1994 Fall, pp. 6-7). These stories are clustered together because they represent an exceptional starting point, as together they provide insight into the creator’s goals for the *Storyletters*’ publication.

The story titled “I Have Nothing” is a rhetorical artifact in which there exists a rhetorical situation. The context of the situation is that the author’s humbling experience in India of learning from a woman for whom she was providing relief. This woman, Sardaranh, was a mother who had faced compromising circumstances throughout her life, but chose her own way to overcome these struggles. In the story, Kittu was assisting Sardaranh, whose son was undergoing optic surgery. Kittu shares a particular instance in which she became overwhelmed and lashed out at Sardaranh, who kept calm and understood the pressures Kittu was going through, but told her, ““You have no reason to be cross with me; I have nothing!”” (1993 Spring, p. 6). This verbal exchange marks the beginning of the transition of Kittu changing her perception of Sardaranh, where Kittu realized that Sardaranh had wisdom and other qualities that money could not buy, rather than physical possessions.

In the story, the exigence, or overarching problem trying to be addressed, is the arbitrary nature of conflict coping strategies, which are exhibited by both Kittu and Sardaranh. According to Vashchenko, Lambidoni, and Brody (2007), there are “...four basic types of coping: cognitive approach (e.g., logical analysis, positive reappraisal), behavioral approach (e.g., active steps), cognitive avoidance (e.g., denial), and behavioral avoidance (e.g., acting out, distraction)” (p.

246). Based on this description, Kittu's lashing out at Sardaranh exemplified the avoidance style of coping, whereas Sardaranh's logically addressing the situation and making it clear she was not in the wrong was demonstrative of the cognitive approach style of coping.

Relating to the exigence of this rhetorical situation, the audience for this rhetorical artifact include the readers of *STORYLETTERS* and all who contributed to creating, distributing, and endorsing this publication. As the front page and the "From the Editor" pages (Riddle, 1993 Spring) both explain, this publication was intended for women of all demographics, nationalities, and ethnicities. The letter mentions multiple organizations and various women's groups, which reflect the scope of the intended audience. This audience will apply to all of the rhetorical artifacts in this study. It could be speculated that "I Have Nothing" resonated with the audience in that the founder shared a time when she demonstrated different levels of cultural awareness, and this vulnerability could have encouraged a wider range of readers to also share their times of vulnerability.

In connection with the audience of this rhetorical artifact, the constraints of the rhetorical situation include the author being overcome by emotion and having a different frame-of-reference toward life than Sardaranh had. In addition, the author was prideful throughout the story, as she was repeatedly shocked by Sardaranh's strong character traits. As this story was included in the first issue of *STORYLETTERS*, a constraint as it relates to the overall publication was that the author needed to share a story that demonstrated she was not perfect and learned from understanding one woman's story, which helped her grow as a person. This vulnerability, then, would invite readers to share their own stories with the goal of teaching alternative perspectives towards living.

Associated with the constraints are two concepts that apply to understanding this rhetorical situation: cultural competence and cultural humility. According to Sanso (2016), “Cultural competence can be seen as a way of...interacting with others cross-culturally... [and] seeks to build effective relationships, which can be achieved by acknowledging and overcoming the cultural differences and biases of the individuals involved in the relationship” (pp. 11-12). Kittu demonstrated throughout “I Have Nothing” the progression of understanding about cultural competence. For example, Kittu came to recognize that Sardaranh’s requests were simple and Kittu was overblowing the situations presented.

After Kittu misplaces her frustration toward Sardaranh in the beginning, Kittu shares another example, showing Sardaranh’s conflict coping skills. In another example, Kittu shares how Sardaranh actively demonstrated to Cally, a different female, on how to function in Indian society and avoid sexual harassment through the female necessity of utilizing a chaperone. Kittu shares that “Cally hadn’t understood Indian custom; Sardaranh showed her” (Riddle, 1993 Spring, p. 6).

Throughout “I Have Nothing,” Kittu remains in awe that Sardaranh was a confident and cognitively astute woman, even though Sardaranh was socioeconomically underprivileged. Kittu stated in the beginning of the story “[she] was caught up in the stress of getting things done! And [Sardaranh] knew it. This village woman was wise beyond anyone [she] had ever encountered” (Riddle, 1994 Fall, p. 6). The turning point in the story where Kittu changes her perception of Sardaranh occurred right after this exchange between herself and Sardaranh occurred, when she learned more about Sardaranh’s own story. This impactful change in Kittu’s perception was evidenced by her referring another female to Sardaranh for guidance. According to Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholdt, Ousman (2016), “In a multicultural world where power

imbalances exist, cultural humility is a process of openness, self-awareness, being egoless, and incorporating self-reflection and critique after willingly interacting with diverse individuals. The results of achieving cultural humility are mutual empowerment...and lifelong learning” (p. 213). Based on this, Kittu was lacking in cultural humility, as she herself continually demonstrated pride. The closing of the story stated that “...it’s been a marvel to [Kittu] to that [Sardaranh] who could barely read, who daily gleaned the fields and cleaned the alleyways of her village, had an inner assuredness and sense of contentment which [Kittu] did not” (Riddle, 1994 Fall, p. 7). By this recognition, Kittu demonstrated that she was trying to improve her sense of cultural humility.

In contrast with “I Have Nothing,” which focuses on the author’s experience of assisting a woman, “An Immersion Experience” shared the author’s experience of receiving assistance from other women. The context of the situation was that the author and her family moving to China in 1946, but Kittu wants to be proactive in improving her Mandarin Chinese. What she does was start an all-female “...conversation group where nothing was spoken except Mandarin Chinese” (Riddle, 1994 Fall, p. 6).

Relating to the context of the situation, the exigence in this story starts with the uncertainty of participation by the invited women, yet the conversation group would grow to be intimate with each other. As the author shared, “They...waited for me to open the conversation...I asked, ‘just talk among yourselves...and I’ll join in as I can.’ ‘What do you want us to talk about?’ they challenged. ‘Whatever you’re interested in...’” (Riddle, 1994 Fall, p. 6). This request led to discussions concerning a broad range of topics based on the interests of group members.

Then a second exigence arose when the political situation in China became dangerous for inhabitants. This situation is due to civil war in the nation, where Kittu and her family need to flee from. She states that “Suddenly, in November 1946, Chiang Kai Shek fled to Taiwan and the Communists came into power. Foreigners were no longer welcome...and [we] were told by the Consulate that we had only three days...to pack and leave” (Riddle, 1994 Fall, p. 6). This overriding urgency to leave is difficult to do after forming strong bonds with the women in the conversation group, and there was uncertainty concerning future contact. However, Kittu was able to reconnect with one woman after more than three decades of no communication (Riddle, 1994 Fall, p. 7).

Kittu did not include much about the political situation in China within her story. Civil war started in 1946 and concluded with Mao Zedong and his Communist army’s victory, which then established “the People’s Republic of China” (History.com Staff, 2009, “Chiang...”). Chiang Kai Shek, exile in Taiwan, began in 1949 to influence national politics through his heading the “KMT [Kuomintang-Chinese Nationalist Party]” (History.com Staff, 2009, “Chiang...”).

Adding to the context of this abrupt shift in China, the Ambassador in China sent a communication to the Secretary of State one month before Kittu and her family fled China, which demanded that America be indebted to leave the nation alone and make up for all damages incurred during American interference with the nation’s external and internal standing in the world. The atrocities that were committed against Chinese individuals included rape and other heinous crimes. While these crimes were committed by individuals within the American military, according to communications sent to the Secretary of State, these atrocities against

humanity increases understanding of why foreigners were evicted during this time in history (The Ambassador in...).

Relating to the exigence of this rhetorical situation, the audience for this rhetorical artifact again includes the readers of *STORYLETTERS* and all who contributed to creating, distributing, and endorsing this publication. In addition, the audience includes the women who were in the now dispersed conversation group that Kittu had started. The publication of this story may have been an attempt to reconnect with these women.

Linking to the audience of this rhetorical artifact, the constraints of the rhetorical situation include that the author needed to be discreet in referring to the women named in the story because of the uncertainty regarding the political situation wherever these women may currently reside. For this safety concern, Kittu makes multiple claims in this story that she had not been able to reconnect with all of the women, nor does she know where they reside.

These examples of the importance of self-authorship connects all three attributes of the rhetorical situation. According to Jehangir, Williams, and Pete, "Self-authorship is a process that invites reflection on one's own identity (2011, p. 1). Based on this definition, the concept of self-authorship is reflected in "An Immersion Experience," as Kittu is selective in how she referred to her relationship with the women in her conversation group during the various epochs described. For example, she uses intimate examples of bonding with the conversation group women during the epoch when foreigners were permitted in China; however, she transitions her identity to distant referencing toward these woman in the epoch in which she fled. Then, when she reconnects with one of the women decades later, she uses the language referent of intimate bonding, but returns to distant referencing afterwards. This fluctuation demonstrates how she

refers to her identity in relation to the conversation group women as alternating between being close friends then to having had a previous relationship with these women.

It is interesting to note the author's comparisons and contrasts between both stories. The importance of hearing women's stories was a common link between both of Kittu's stories. In "I Have Nothing," she shared the experience of listening to and being part of Sardaranh's life story; however, in "An Immersion Experience," Kittu shared the experience of listening to and being part of a group of women's life stories. On the other hand, the author's level of humility displayed was markedly different when contrasting both stories. In the first story, "I Have Nothing," Kittu repetitively used egotistical language that distinguished how Sardaranh was very different from Kittu, such as calling frequent attention to Sardaranh's being a member of a rural community where such luxuries as Kittu had available were not common. This frequent referencing of the socioeconomic dichotomy between Sardaranh and Kittu was combined with Kittu's being astounded by Sardaranh's wisdom, regardless of not having the same luxuries that Kittu had. This unpretentiousness differs from the language Kittu uses in "An Immersion Experience," where she portrayed herself as starting out as being culturally disadvantaged, such as sharing an example of an embarrassing linguistic error that resulted in an inedible meal to then becoming culturally engrossed and having a close relationship with all of the women in the conversation group.

Altogether, the comparison and contrast between both of Katharine "Kittu" Riddle's stories shows the growth of the author. While it's unclear how much time passed between one story and the next, the growth she experienced in cultural competence and humility was recognizable in her attitude and interpersonal communication. From sharing her experience of helping one woman to a different experience of being helped by a community of women, Kittu

demonstrates the influence that listening to and sharing women's stories has toward building cultural competence.

### **Cluster 2 – Four stories about Overcoming Obstacles by Various Authors**

The four stories selected for analysis in this second cluster have a common theme of overcoming obstacles: "First Step" (1994 Spring, pp. 5-6) by Jiaying Howard, "My Sister's Love" (1994 Fall) by Penny Gillett Silvius, "What's in a Name?" (1995 Spring, pp. 4-5) by Kunzang Choden, and "Irreconcilable Difference" (1996 Spring, pp. 8-9) by an author who chose to remain anonymous.

The first story in this cluster, "First Step," shares the journey of the author's mother toward independence outside gender dichotomies in China. The context of the situation was during the Second Sino-Japanese War (Sino-Japanese War: History..., n.d.). This war was between the Japanese, who were trying to take control of territory in China, and the Chinese, who were aiming for survival. This war lasted from 1937 to "...1940" and would become a stalemate between Japan and China (Sino-Japanese War: History..., n.d.). During this time, the author's mother became fatherless and was left behind in an oppressive uncle's household to "...take care of her little brothers" (Howard, 1994 Spring, p. 5) while residing in a position of servitude.

Adding to the context of this story, the exigence of this rhetorical situation was that the Jiaying's mother faced unbearable circumstances in China as enforced by the stark dichotomies of opportunity based on one's gender. The lack of opportunity for the author's mother while she lived under the jurisdiction of the uncle caused her to "rent...The Autobiography of a Woman Soldier...written by Xie Bingying" (Howard, Spring 1994, p. 6). Upon reading this book, Jiaying's mother set out to attain paid employment so as to become self-sufficient.

As with previous letters, the audience for this rhetorical artifact includes the readers of *STORYLETTERS* and all who contributed to creating, distributing, and endorsing this publication. In addition, the audience includes readers who may be unfamiliar with the expectations and survival tactics that mothers faced during war. As Jiaying's mother was told by her own mother before her departure, "You are a big girl now, you have to think of the welfare of our family and your brothers. The family's future depends on the boys. Once they succeed, nobody will look down on us anymore" (Howard, 1994 Spring, p. 5). When interpreting this story, understanding the big picture of the family as a whole is necessary for cultural competence. Furthermore, the audience also includes readers who may have aspirations for themselves outside the confines of cultural norms.

Linking to the norms that society imposes females are the constraints within this rhetorical situation, which include the limitations placed on females through every stage of life as well as the backlash to any resistance they attempt to exert. The author states that "[a]ccording to Confucian teaching, a woman had to obey her father in girlhood, obey her husband in wifedom, and obey her son in widowhood" (Howard, Spring 1994, p. 5). From this account, the lifespan of females always centered on the males in their lives. Similarly, the uncle placed an ultimatum on the author's mother concerning her decision to leave or stay. The author's mother chose to leave as soon as she was able and this "...was the first step she took to become an independent and free woman" (Howard, 1994 Spring, p. 6).

Connecting all three attributes of the rhetorical situation, a concept that applies to this rhetorical situation is gender ideology. According to Pimentel (2006), "Gender is a powerful organizing principle of human society. Ideas about the appropriate behaviors of men and women, boys and girls, determine the opportunities they can realize; the power, authority, and autonomy

to which they may aspire; and the day-to-day interactions in which they will be involved” (p. 341). From this narrative, the author’s mother endured a debilitating dichotomy in the beginning of the story due to the constraints her culture assigned to her based on her anatomy alone.

In contrast with the cultural constraints surrounding the author’s mother since her birth, she chose “...to become an independent and free woman” (Howard, 1994 Spring, p. 6). The way that the author’s mother achieved her goal directly connects with the advice given for students regarding their success in graduate school. According to UTSA Communication Professor Dr. H. Paul LeBlanc III, “To succeed in grad school, you need two things: perseverance and gumption” (personal communication, 2014). Applying this advice to the rhetorical situation, the author’s mother persevered through the obstacles placed in front of her, and with gumption, she overcame those limitations.

In contrast with “First Step,” which shares a perspective on overcoming gender-based obstacles, the second story in this cluster, “My Sister’s Love,” shares the author’s personal experience of overcoming the medical obstacle of a chronic health condition. The context of the situation is the author’s experiences while being diagnosed and living with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). She shares how important her sister, Bonnie, is and how Bonnie supported her through the all-encompassing trials of this chronic illness.

Associated with the context of the situation, the exigence within this rhetorical artifact is the author’s sustaining a positive interpersonal relationship with her sister. The author realized that not only did the MS affect her life in multiple fashions and at different levels of severity, but the condition also impacted the lives of those around her. Bonnie was one of her primary supporters, as she helped the author realize her hopes and ambitions. For example, “In keeping with [their] dreams of travel, Bonnie took control and planned a trip to Walt Disney World. This

was even better since [they] were able to visit eleven countries in nine days at EPCOT CENTER” (Silvius, 1994 Fall, p. 10).

Relating to the exigence surrounding this situation, the audience within this rhetorical artifact, as with previous letters, includes the readers of *STORYLETTERS* and all who contributed to creating, distributing, and endorsing this publication. In addition, the audience includes those who may have or know someone with a chronic illness, as the rhetorical artifact shares the importance of caregivers to the quality-of-life of individuals diagnosed with a medical condition.

In this particular rhetorical artifact, there are no particular constraints. The author does not portray her circumstances as an extraneous limitation. Nevertheless, some readers may know of a caregiver who does not provide support to the medically disabled. This narrative then has the potential of influencing the reading of the rhetorical artifact in a way unintended. On the other hand, it may inspire readers to treat others better regardless of who they are or what their situation might be. The author hints at a constraint when she deliberates on if the tables had been turned between her and her sister. She stated, “I often wonder...Could I have been as sensitive to her needs as she is to mine? Would I or could I have been as supportive to her as she is to me?” (Silvius, 1994 Fall, p. 10).

Connecting all three attributes of the rhetorical situation is the profound importance of family caregivers who do their best to support individuals with a chronic condition. According to Goldberg and Rickler (2011), “Family caregivers function as advocates and provide physical, emotional and financial support, frequently without any training, often without recognition or support, and rarely with financial reimbursement. Many people living with chronic illness could not live independently without family caregivers” (p. 41). From this account, the author’s

sharing of Bonnie's tremendously positive impact toward the author throughout their lives is validation to Bonnie and caregivers as a whole that their support makes an immeasurable difference in the lives of those with a chronic illness.

In contrast to "My Sister's Love," which centered on positive family support to sustain optimism through a health obstacle, the third story in this cluster, "What's in a Name?" shares the author's story of overcoming the obstacles of language and cultural barriers. The context of the situation is the author's experience thirty years ago, when she was a young child having moved from Bhutan for a year-long study at a convent in West Bengal. There, she was immediately thrust into a communicatively toxic environment because of the Reverend Mother severely disliking her, as she could not comprehend the author's name-Kunzang Choden, in conjunction with her father's name-Kunzang Dorji.

Adding to the context, the author stated that "...[she] had never before been separated from [her] parents or traveled beyond [her] [small] village...[she] had travelled for over ten days by horse back, train and jeep from the interior of Bhutan to come to this school" (Choden, 1995 Spring, p. 4).

Contextually, there is a cause and effect linking this huge shift in location to the upcoming shift in dynamic. According to the map that was referenced for identifying the geographic location of Bhutan and its relational distance to West Bengal, Bhutan is a separate country from West Bengal, which is part of India (West Bengal location map). Both locations are not in close proximity to each other. Overall, this supplemental research provides further insight to the author's situation.

Associated with the context of this rhetorical situation, the first exigence within this rhetorical artifact is the language barrier between the author and the Reverend Mother. As the

author states, “Had we...shared a mutually intelligible language...I could have told her that, according to our tradition in Bhutan,...in the Himalayas, names have nothing to do with fathers or families and everything to do with the individual who bears a name” (Kunzang, 1995 Spring, p. 5).

Interconnecting with the first exigence of a language barrier, the second exigence within this rhetorical artifact is the cultural barrier between the author and the Reverend Mother. From this, the problem of cultural barriers was enhanced through not accepting an individual’s identity and instead trying to warp that identity into something acceptable under someone else’s terms. The interlinking of language and culture as inseparable communication barriers is best explained by the author, when she comments:

The main problem was that the Reverend Mother would not move away from her singular understanding that children must take their father’s surname, the family name. I had no common language to tell her that in my culture that is not the case, and she had neither the patience nor the wisdom to accept something that was different” (Kunzang, 1995 Spring, p. 5).

Relating to the audience of other rhetorical situations, this one includes, once again, the readers of *STORYLETTERS* and all who contributed to creating, distributing, and endorsing this publication. Interestingly, thirty years later from the author’s experience within her story, Kunzang’s story returned to India, where her story had taken place. In addition, the audience includes readers who may have experienced language and/or cultural barriers in a new country. Similarly, the audience within this rhetorical artifact also includes readers with the goal of becoming familiar with the experience of a native and how their treatment of foreigners could be improved. In all, this story focused on helping all audiences to understand how critical it is to

develop intercultural and international communication skills and how these skills could help in these situations of foreign travel.

Related to international relations are multiple constraints present within this rhetorical artifact. These limitations include the author's limited skill with the English language, the Reverend Mother's lack of caring, and the translator's plight of translating the harshness of the Reverend Mother to the author.

First, the author's limited skill in the English language prevented her from communicating what she really wanted to say. The author states, "The mostly nuns at the convent spoke only English and the only language I knew was the one spoken by a few thousand people in a small region of my country" (Kunzang, 1995 Spring, p. 4).

Second, the Reverend Mother's disregard of the author's circumstances, her close-mindedness to alternative actualities, and her verbal as well as nonverbal aggression prevents the author from feeling fully welcomed as a new student. In this rhetorical artifact, the author shares numerous evidence of this lack of caring. One example of the Reverend Mother's nonverbal aggression occurs when she uses ink and physical force to mar Kunzang's clothes and self-esteem. (Kunzang, 1995 Spring, p. 4). 1).

Third, the author's translator also faced communication constraints as the "interpreter [was], a girl no older than [Kunzang]. She was from [Kunzang's] country; she spoke some English because she had been in this school already for a year" (Kunzang, 1995 Spring, p. 4). The translator faced difficulty with communicating through the situation that was getting increasingly volatile. As the author stated, "My interpreter's eyes were filling with tears, her voice was choking and strained as she interpreted [words Kunzang] did not quite comprehend" (Kunzang, 1995 Spring, p. 4). Understandably, the situation was incredibly difficult for the

translator, as she presumably knew the author's culture and needed to translate the uncaring words and actions of the Reverend Mother.

The exigence, audience, and constraints of the rhetorical situation share the concepts of language and communication barriers. According to Peltokorpi and Clausen (2011), "The largest and most persistent barrier to intercultural communication was lack of a shared language" (p. 517). The lack of a common language for Kunzang and the Reverend Mother created the need for a translator, who sympathized with the author's circumstances, as both the author and her translator were from Bhutan and shared the same language. The only difference between them was a minimal age gap and the translator's having more familiarity with the English language. Furthermore, Peltokorpi and Clausen (2011) stated that "Collectivism and sensitivity to status and power differences acted as the most formidable barriers to intercultural communication" (p. 519). There was a high power distance between the author and the Reverend Mother. This power distance and intruding on Kunzang's identity by the Reverend Mother did not sway the author to succumb to this identity-encroaching. As the author stated, "I knew my name and my father's names better than anybody else and I was not ready to allow even the Reverend Mother of my new school to change them (Chode, 1995 Spring, p. 4).

In addition to the rhetorical situation surrounding the artifact, a note prior to beginning the author's story in the publication stated, "[Kunzang's] amazing story is one which originally inspired the idea of STORYLETTERS" (Kunzang, 1995 Spring, p. 4). This statement is significant to understanding the *Storyletters Records* in that the founder and editor of the *STORYLETTERS* publication intended for stories shared to help build bridges of understanding and awareness.

It's unclear as to Kittu's reasons for delayed publication of Kunzang's story to be published. As it is featured in the sixth issue of *STORYLETTERS*, rather than the first issue. It could be understood that the editor wanted to be sure that the publication had a steady following of readers before printing this story that inspired her to such an extent. Furthermore, it's unclear whether this publication was distributed to India originally and there may have needed to be an outreach to this part of the world for the most impact by sharing Kunzang's story.

In contrast to "What's in a Name?" which centers on the author's personal obstacle of being linguistically and culturally different at her new school, the fourth story in this cluster, "Irreconcilable Differences," shares the author's story of being rejected by her family for being homosexual. The author chose to be published anonymously, and a note prior to beginning the author's story in the publication disclosed that she chose this route to make sure there is no backlash toward her or her family as a result from the revelations in her story. Considering the highly delicate nature of the story and the author's mental health assistance profession, the decision to remain anonymous is understandable. The context of the situation is the author's self-discovery that she was lesbian and her trying to hide this fact from her traditionalistic biological family. She succeeded until her time in graduate school, where her mother discovered that her daughter was lesbian. This news caused the entire family to make a complete turnaround from positive to negative in their attitude toward the author.

Associated with the context of this rhetorical situation, the exigence of this rhetorical artifact was the hostile attitude of the author's family. Although she was considered a model daughter prior to the family's finding out, once they knew she was then ostracized and berated by her family and ordered to 'fix' herself. The author stated that when she was a child, "[she]

never created a fuss or caused [her] parents much concern.” After graduating from college and starting graduate school, her sexuality was discovered and the author explained:

[she] was not prepared for what followed from that first hysterical conversation with...[her mother]. The next couple of days were a blur; [her] mom’s calls and crying and pleading with [her] to tell [mother] her it wasn’t so, [her] aunt and uncle’s cold stares, [her] cousin’s assumption that all the commotion involved [her] having gotten [her]self pregnant and his commitment to ‘help [her] find a solution’; and finally [her] father’s threat that he would have [her] partner killed by the Mafia (Anonymous, 1996 Spring, p. 8).

The author’s family never improved their interpersonal relations with the author and instead proceeded to cut all ties to the author.

A second exigence of this rhetorical artifact is the intrapersonal struggle of the author with her role throughout this conflict. The author commented: “[c]ertainly there have been many periods of doubt and uncertainty...about how I could have handled things differently. Maybe I could have explained better, or said something differently or taken more trips home to try to work it out” (Anonymous, 1996 Spring, p. 9).

Relating to the exigencies of this rhetorical situation, the audience of this rhetorical artifact includes readers who may know someone who is homosexual or is homosexual themselves. The audience also reaches out to readers with the goal to reconstruct attitudes toward homosexual individuals. The author provided what she learned from her experience and shares that she had “grown and learned many things...and [she is] grateful for these insights...Violence is not something that is only done to you but can also take the more subtle forms of what is withheld [from] you” (Anonymous, 1996 Spring, p. 8).

In connection with the audience, the major constraint within this rhetorical artifact include the lack of care or support by the author's family. The author "[began] to understand immediately how effective a tool the process of 'shunning' was, in keeping members of a group in conformity" (Anonymous, 1996 Spring, p. 8). Yet, the author remained resolved in her choice to remain a lesbian and found other sources for the emotional support she needed. As the author explained, "My partner's parents and relatives, plus close friends have provided the acceptance that has been missing from my parents" (Anonymous, 1996 Spring, p. 9).

Woven throughout the three attributes of the rhetorical situation is family ambivalence, or uncertainty, toward homosexual individuals. According to Reczek (2016), "Ambivalence operates on both the psychological level—wherein parents and children experience mixed feelings, emotions, and sentiments—and on the sociological level—wherein social-structural conditions engender contradictory expectations between adult children and their parents" (p. 645). Based on this explanation, the author experienced hostility because of being different from her family's expectations.

Altogether, the four stories within this cluster shared the theme of overcoming obstacles, yet each story presented a different type of challenge. From gender bias to medical disability to linguistic and cultural barriers to sexual orientation, each story attempted to build bridges of communication through rhetoric.

### **Cluster 3 – One story about Balancing Imagination with Reality by Lesley Salas**

The single story selected for analysis in this third and final cluster focuses on the importance of balancing imagination with reality: "Dreaming...The right way" (October 1999, p. 3).

This rhetorical artifact shares the advice of the author about the need to balance imagination with reality. As the author states in the first paragraph, “Imagination can be a wonderful thing. But wild imaginative leaps must also be tempered by the occasional reality check” (1999 October, p. 3). This advice is given with the author’s real-life example of the detriments that imbalance in both areas can create. This example is the story of the author’s familiarity, outcomes, and realizations concerning investing one’s life in fantasies.

The context of the situation was the author’s experience of marriage based on a high school crush, whom the author described as being a poor quality spouse. As the author shared, “I relied more on an idealized image than on hard facts. Lost in the whirlwind of the honeymoon stage, I didn’t really notice some of the disturbing discrepancies that cropped up the day I arrived in my adopted state” (1999 October, p. 3).

The exigence of this rhetorical artifact is the author’s choice to sustain her fantasy of living with her spouse rather than accepting the reality of the situation. The author left her spouse when it became intolerable to remain in the situation. She explains that she had been made aware of this weakness of living in the realm of fantasy, but acknowledges that “...[she] learn[s] things the hard way” (1999 October, p. 3).

A second exigence was the author’s choice to start transforming her psychological focus from fantasy to reality. She realized that “[r]ather than seeking that ideal partner, [she] can choose to become that sincere, loving and self-aware person she’s been longing for” (1999 October, p. 3). She ties this shift in thinking into her role as a mother and claiming that “[her] children have learned something about life from watching [her] response to failure. As they become young adults, [she’s] determined to let them grow by experiencing the consequences of their own choices” (1999 October, p. 3).

The audience for this rhetorical artifact once again includes the readers of *STORYLETTERS* and all who contributed to creating, distributing, and endorsing this publication. In addition, the audience includes all readers who may have struggled with balancing imagination and reality. The author asserts that “[p]arenting and love relationships are two areas where outdated fantasies about others can lead to a dangerous state of denial... We cling to these comforting, if inaccurate, images because they sustain us through some pretty rough times” (1999 October, p. 3). From this, the audience includes readers who may have or are considering becoming involved in a relationship or starting a family.

There were two constraints within this rhetorical situation. First, there is a commonality of denial toward actual circumstances in exchange for living in a fantasy of an idealized life. The author “...began to think that [she] may not be the only one to have fallen into such a trap” (1999 October, p. 3).

A second constraint was the author’s disregard for the reality of the kind of relationship she was to have with her spouse and its effect on her children. The author explained that “Our household was earning a good combined salary. Yet my spouse’s crisis-creating lifestyle led to an endless stream of bounced checks...disconnection of our electricity on the hottest day of the year...[and] a number of avoidable messes” (October 1999, p. 3).

A concept that applies to this rhetorical situation is fantasy. According to Zipes (2009), “It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason...Reliance on fantasy may...betray us even while it nourishes us and gives us hope that the world can be a better place” (p. 79). Thus, the author seems to have allowed her high school fantasy image of the person she would marry to permeate her judgment about marriage. In the

author's case, "Looking back [she] realize[d she] didn't know much about this person, never having lived in the same city" (1999 October, p. 3).

Another concept that applies to this rhetorical situation is that "logic and evidence will not win against an agenda" (Dixson, 2015). Based on this revelation, the author admits that more than once that there were signs, or evidence, throughout her relationship but she chose to ignore them and focus instead on the fantasy reality she preferred, which was her agenda.

In closing, the author acknowledges that "...[her] life is still fraught with challenges...But [she] trust[s] the new [her] to find an innovative and realistic response..." (1999 October, p. 3). She adds that "[p]romises, whether made by [herself] or by others, are to be honored or re-adjusted to more realistic levels" (1999 October, p. 3). Altogether, the author was explicit with her example of the marriage she chose to pursue as being on the opposite of what she had imagined.

Overall, this rhetorical artifact pulls together all of the rhetorical artifacts in this study. Within each of the artifacts, the authors shared a story that demonstrates how imagination was balanced with reality to result in reaching a satisfactory conclusion. From recognizing the realities of discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation to the challenges of other obstacles, the authors within this study exemplified in the stories they shared what acceptance of reality meant toward changing their circumstances.

### **Conclusions**

This rhetorical study sought to explore the wisdom and insight contained within the previously unexplored *Storyletters Records* Collection. The study accomplished its purpose and revealed that this collection was intended to build community and that it was not merely literature, but persuasion.

Using Bitzer's rhetorical situation analysis methodology extended the observations and insights of the authors of the letters. A significant conclusion about all of these selected rhetorical artifacts analyzed in this paper is that they invited readers to explore a different way of looking at life.

Further exploration of the *Storyletters Records* Collection could reveal content outside the scope of this study, such as the unexplored themes of interpersonal communication resulting from the loss of loved ones and the real-life observations by individuals working in underdeveloped countries.

The new knowledge gained from completing the first study of the *Storyletters Records* Collection "... can [improve] human communication..." (Foss, 2009, p. 16) by adding to cross-cultural understandings.

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