

# Anger:

## the Good, the Bad and the Beautiful

**D**id you even think someone could make a career out of being angry?

How about an Asian American woman?

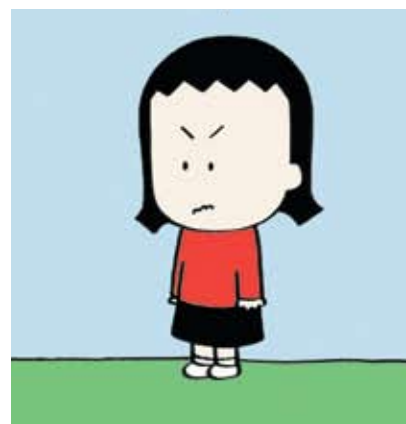
Lela Lee has capitalized on anger, much to the joy and empowerment of girls and women across the country. She created an animated cartoon and comic strip, *Angry Little Asian Girls*, after—yup, you guessed it—after getting pissed off at racist and demeaning cartoons at a Spike & Mike's Sick & Twisted Festival of Animation. Her outrage fueled her creativity, and her first animated short screened to much laughter and acclaim. In it, the *Angry Little Asian Girl* (ALAG) hums sweetly on her way to school. All seems fine until her teacher and classmates make derogatory comments about her eyes and ethnicity ("You could blindfold yourself with dental floss," for example). She explodes in expletives then hums sweetly all the way home. The ALAG won't put up, shut up, or give up.

*"Angry Little Asian Girls grew into Angry Little Girls with its rising popularity, and now features girl characters of all ethnicities united in anger. They are sisters in the struggle, divas of destruction, sandbox superheroes, wondergirls of the wordfist, the kick-ass answers to Hello Kitty."*

*Angry Little Asian Girls grew into Angry Little Girls, and now features girl characters of all ethnicities united in anger. They are sisters in the struggle, divas of destruction, sandbox superheroes, wondergirls of the wordfist, the kick-ass answers to Hello Kitty. The girls have their own personalities, from the original angry girl to gloomy, disenchanting, fresh, and crazy girls.*

The *Angry Little Girl* website includes links to cartoons, a discussion forum, and quite a selection of merchandise, from *Angry Little Girl* T-shirts to tote and messenger bags, videos, mugs and mouse pads. There are bold and vibrant gifts for every sparky and angry girl in your life.

Lela Lee's creation empowers as it informs, and entertains as it lights a flaming sword. She shocks some and excites others by turning the stereotype of the submissive (Asian) woman on its head.



# What About Anger?

## The Psychological Viewpoint

Let's look at Lela Lee and Asian American identity from a psychological viewpoint. Her powerful use of anger and her enshrining of anger in an age of extreme emotions are welcome to many. And troubling to some.

What is anger? Is it good or bad?

Anger primes our bodies and minds for a fight. It makes you feel stronger in situations that seem threatening. It is to be distinguished from aggression, which is actual threatening or damaging behavior. It is also different than hostility, which is an attitude and set of judgments that lead one to dislike others and evaluate them negatively. Anger, as one of our basic emotions, is neither good nor bad in itself, but has potential for being either.

Generally, anger springs from three sources. You may feel angry when (a) you are being threatened; (b) someone/something you love or care about is being threatened, or (c) your needs aren't being met and you become frustrated. At their cores, all these reasons hinge upon the survival instinct. If you are threatened or your needs aren't being met—you might die. So your brain sends signals to tense your body, raise your heart rate, and pump up your adrenaline, as you get ready to attack. You've been pushed into fight-or-flight response mode.

Anger is a difficult emotion, a burning fire hard to tame. At times we need fire to clear the dead undergrowth so that a new forest can grow. And the anger of Lela Lee or Bảo Phi (the Minneapolis-based poet featured in the September/October 2004 issue of *NHÀ*) is vital in establishing our identities and boundaries as Asian Americans. Similarly, the anger of political activists is useful in motivating and energizing them to do great deeds on behalf of the community. Their anger may have its personal roots as well, but serves to protect threatened ideals or peoples.

So is anger good or bad? That question is probably not as important as getting curious about the anger itself: understanding where it's coming from, and what to do with it. It's an important signal that something's awry. Perhaps its energy can be turned to constructive purpose. Certainly, "stuffing it" or bottling it up inside, can lead to worse problems—like depression.

But sometimes anger burns up both self and other. It can morph into hostility and aggression. It can burn unresolved for years, wounding the angry individual but doing nothing to the target of the anger. We are confronted with inappropriate anger frequently, from road rage to vitriolic marital arguments. Psychotherapists and other counselors help individuals and couples explore the roots of their anger and underlying fears, and coach skills to deal with unhealthy anger. A skilled therapist can help uncover and heal wounds of early life that can fuel and misdirect anger.

The most effective way to deal with a short fuse is to take a time out when you notice your tension rising. Distracting yourself, not thinking about the problem, even holding ice cubes or running cool water over your hands can help. Connecting with supportive friends helps.

Marital disputes are a challenge as well. The Gottman Institute in Seattle studied and analyzed many couples, and has generated a wealth of data about what works and doesn't work, especially in arguments. They can actually predict whether or not a couple will get divorced by watching the first three minutes of their arguments! They've come up with the "Four Horsemen" of marital conflict, which actually can come up in all kinds of couples, happily married and not. They are (1) Criticism; (2) Stonewalling; (3) Contempt; and (4) Defensiveness. It turns out that stereotypically, women come into a discussion with a harsh, angry or critical startup, and men respond by stonewall-

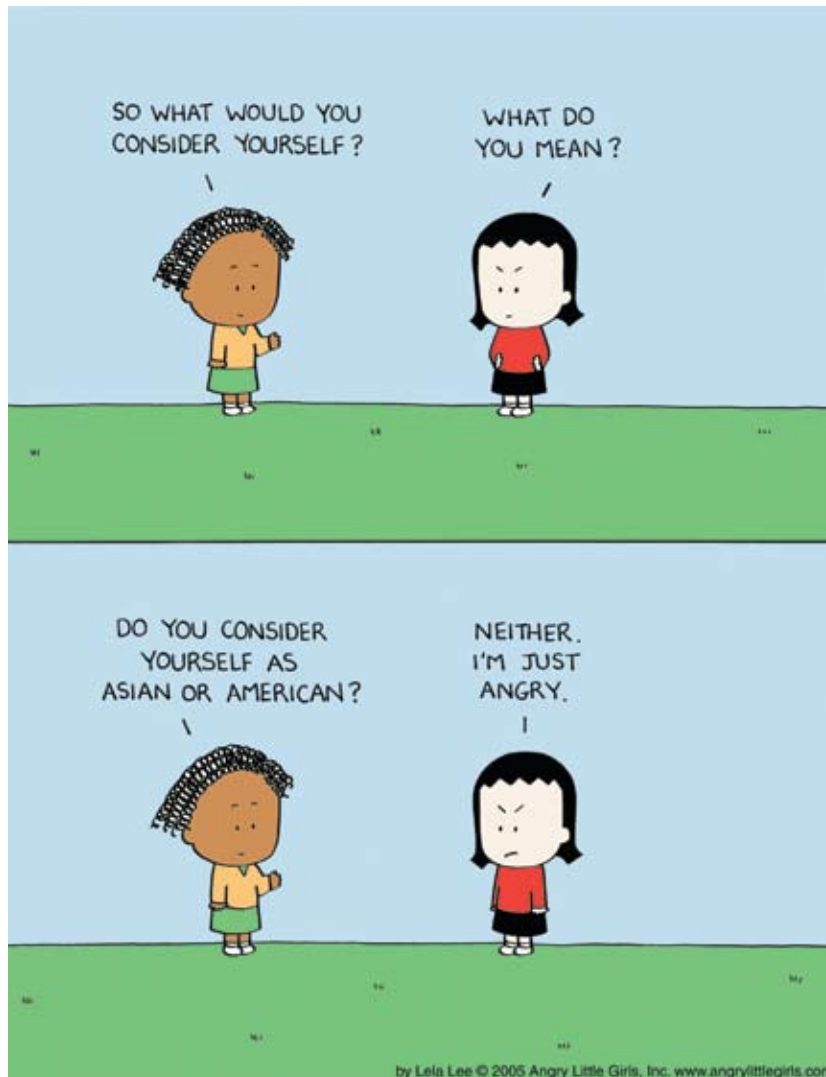
ing or shutting down. Obviously this leads to cyclical patterns which don't solve or even address the real issues that are sparking the argument. Couples that do well in marriage have five times more positivity even in their disagreements. Couples that do poorly have more negativity. The biggest indicator for divorce turns out to be showing contempt for the partner, or deriding them as persons unworthy of respect. Contempt turns out to predict the partner's likelihood of being sick over the next four years, since it actually weakens that partner's immune system.

Learning communication techniques that don't trigger your partner's survival mode helps. One wise method for delivering criticism is "five strokes before a poke", or leading any criticism with plenty of compliments. Building up your "emotional bank account" with many small acts of fondness and admiration for your partner can serve you when the chips are down.

Finally, becoming more sensitive and responsive to the emotional needs of those around us, and generating kindness, love and compassion even for those we disagree with is important in creating our own well being, and ultimately in creating a world where defensive anger is rare, because we will be actively protecting and nurturing each other.

Until then, though, here's to all the Angry Little Asian Girls and Angry Little Asian Boys out there! Your energy and motivation is vital to all of us—and to your own growth! But remember, anger can destroy as it protects. Perhaps it's possible to purify anger, to treat it like a precious instrument, finely tuning it so it hits the right pitch at the right time, and then goes silent afterward.

Is anger good or bad? It's a question that needs to be asked about each instance of anger. Why did it arise? Where did it lead us?



Lela Lee resonates with so many Asian Americans because she advances the image of strong and independent girls (and women) with powerful voices.

Now personally, I've never known a submissive Asian woman. Strong, dynamic, principled, energizing, quietly capable, easygoing—but never submissive. But I do know that anger and dissent are looked down upon in many Asian cultures, and accommodating to the family or group will be preferred and even enforced. Women feel this pressure even more than men. In America, as minorities, there is even more pressure to blend in, assimilate, to go unnoticed, and to keep silent. Sticking out risks disapproval from the majority group, with potential consequences.

But this is also a land of extreme emotions and individuality, in which the pursuit

of happiness and identity can lead the individual to butt heads with disagreeable opposing forces. This is certainly what Lela Lee faced when she saw those demeaning cartoons in college.

We construct our identity around race and ethnicity, gender, class, occupation, immigrant status, sexual orientation, disabilities or illness, and our achievements, etc. Imagine someone being contemptuous and dismissive of any of these traits, and it's easy to see how identity issues can stoke anger.

We live in a culture that can marginalize and deride us as Asian Americans. Senator McCain's use of the slur "gook" a few

years ago is but one example. Many of us feel injured when these things happen. We've been slighted. When our identity is slighted, we feel disrespected and diminished. The end result of diminishment and scorn in our minds is non-existence: death itself. Slightings can seem like death threats to our survival instinct. Underlying our anger is fear, usually fear of loss or death.

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Lela Lee resonates with so many Asian Americans because she advances the image of strong and independent girls (and women) with powerful voices. She makes this palatable by letting cutesy, disarming children say the most alarming things. And by doing so, she protects and promotes the identity and equality of women. Hopefully, her work will result in empowering the identity called "Asian American Woman", as girls and women proudly wear their Angry Little Girl T-shirts and gain courage to respond to demeaning situations. We all need that encouragement and bonding to build self-confidence and appreciation of who we are as individuals.

Thanks to Lela Lee, we have another advocate for our identities as Asian Americans. ☺

To find out more about Lela Lee and her work go to [www.angrylittlegirls.com](http://www.angrylittlegirls.com). Also check out the miniseries *Searching for Asian America*, available from NAATA at [www.naatanet.org](http://www.naatanet.org)

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