

Cultural Reconciliation in Amy Tan's Novels

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Abstract

The paper analyzes how Amy Tan in her most successful novels described and designed the reconciliation between important female characters, which is also widely considered her wish for improving the relationship with her mother and her desire for seeking cultural root. It is pointed, however, that this seemingly wishful ending embodied in cultural reconciliation has a long way to go before being realized due to the actual barriers, the hybridism in cultural background, the specification of Chinese American culture in Tan's works, the discontinues of the cultural connection and the overemphasis on Chinese identity.

Keywords: Amy Tan, Cultural Reconciliation, wishful thinking, Chinese identity.

I. Introduction

As a Chinese- American writer, Amy Tan delineates in her books the cultural dilemmas she is confronted with, such as the hard relationship between Chinese mothers and American- born daughters, difficult connections among sisters, and so- called equality in international marriages. The female characters, whatever they do, finally forgive and understand each other and return to the homeland, China. This reconciliation is considered as the solution Amy Tan has found to overcome cultural conflicts. However, this beautiful wish seems to be impossible to come true. This paper aims at exploring the cultural reconciliation Amy Tan designed for her novels and the problems with such acculturation.

II. Cultural Reconciliation in Amy Tan's Novels

Unlike the children of European emigrants, the Chinese- American younger generation had obvious Oriental feature, which made it difficult for them to lose themselves in the American melting pot. Living in the confinement of Chinatowns with parents who spoke broken English and who clung to the old Chinese way, they felt an indelible sense of otherness that weighed heavily on them as they tried to make their way into middle- class American life. As a result, many Chinese American writers express their strong desire to seek cultural root and self-identity back in China, Amy Tan is no exception. In her works, the place of origin is always China, in fact, a variety of Chinas: a country torn by the nineteenth- century T'ai Ping Rebellion, a nation ravaged by the Japanese army, a feudally stratified society, a gracious and privileged existence behind walls, or a culture uneasily embracing European goods while striving to maintain a Chinese way of life.

The Joy Luck Club and *The Kitchen God's Wife* end on a note of understanding and reconciliation between Chinese mothers and American daughters. The struggles, the battles, are over, and when the dust settles what was formerly considered a hated bondage is revealed to be a cherished bond.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, in the end, Winnie breaks to her daughter Pearl everything about her pain, insult and secrets in the past. All these bad memories become a sort of spiritual pressure for a long time. Winnie herself has been struggling to get rid of them off her mind, let alone confide to Pearl and hurt her. But anyway, Winnie reveals all, hoping that her daughter can forgive her and reach a mutual understanding and reconciliation. She succeeds. Winnie went to a Chinatown shop that specialized in statues of the principal deities. In the final scene between mother and daughter, Winnie proudly presented a new Goddess to Pearl.

While in *The Joy Luck Club*, first of all, Amy Tan names the last chapter as "Queen Mother of the Western Skies" in which mother and daughter reconcile with each other. To some extent, it means that Chinese mothers have become from "horrible fossils" to "sacred queen" in the eyes of American daughters. In the plot, Jing-mei does take her mother's place at the mah-jong table, " I am sitting at my mother's place at the mah- jong table, on the East, where things begin"(Joy Luck Club, p. 22); she also does make the trip to China to see the long- lost twins. The mother daughter conflicts are most fierce, but now they still reach an agreement and step towards reconciliation in the end. It's due to the effort from both sides. Mothers want their daughters to inherit the Chineseness but have been resisted for a long time, and then they change the way, never imposing their own wishes on daughters; while daughters come to understand what the aging mothers have intended and realize that the danger from mothers do not exist at all and that mothers always keep their interest in mind and render them maternal love unselfishly. If a daughter does not understand her own mother, it will be miserable. So they begin to accept mothers and inherit from a mother, which is best expressed in daughter's returning to the homeland.

Jing- mei's concluding narrative about going back to China functions in a number of ways as a paradigm for the other narrators' stories that also need cultural resolution. In traveling to China to meet her twin half- sister- the now- growing babies for whom Suyuan had searched for almost forty years- Jing- mei brings closure and resolution to her mother's story as well as to her own. For Jing- mei, the journey is an epiphany and a discovery of self: finally aware of her mother's meaning, she is able to give voice to Suyuan's story as well as to the story that they share as mother and daughter. The Joy Luck aunts, whose gift of a generous check has sent Jing- mei on her pilgrimages to China, are well aware of the significance of the journey for her and for themselves. They beg her to tell her half- sisters about Suyuan- how she raised a family and gained success in her own way. The aunts encourage Jing- mei to make Suyuan come alive for her other daughters through narrative, through descriptions of her hopes and dreams, through re-creations of stories that she once told Jing- mei. Their words reveal their own dreams that in time their own daughters will, like Jing- mei, also remember and recount the stories their mothers have told.

In a Guangzhou hotel early in the visit to China, Jing- mei asks her father to recount her the rest of the story of her twin baby girls, the story that Suyuan had not had the opportunity to finish telling her. During that late night conversation, Jing- mei also learns that her Chinese name--- the name that her mother gave her when she was born, the name that she once repudiated in favor of the more American sounding June--- represents her mother's past and present, losses and hopes. Jing- mei means "Younger sister who [is] supposed to be the essence of others"(Joy Luck Club, p. 281). For Suyuan, her American daughter would be the replacement child who would enable Suyuan to bear the loss of the twins. In going to China, two cultures, two countries; she reconciles herself with her mother; and she gives the aunties the hope that they, too, will be reconciled with their daughters. As a matter of fact, in the return to China, Jing- mei feels she is at last becoming Chinese,

The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And I think, my mother is right. I am becoming Chinese (Joy Luck Club, p. 306).

Being Chinese becomes a lofty goal rather than something she has been trying to shed all these years. The other daughters experience similar moments of revelation, though more subtle, where they become more receptive to their mothers and to the wisdom of their cultural heritage opening up their lives to change, growth and authenticity (Trudeau, p. 12). In performing the act of coming back to China with filial obedience, the daughter realizes she is not filled with resentment or anger. What she discovers in the reunion with her Chinese half sisters, in her father's story of her mother's separation from these children and from the mother's first husband, and in the photograph of her and her sisters is a renewed sense of her dead mother,

And then I see her. Her short hair. Her small body. And that same look on her face. She has the back of her hand pressed hard against her mouth. She is crying as though she had gone through a terrible ordeal and were happy it is over... and I see he again, two of her, waving... as soon as I get beyond the gate, we run towards each other, all three of us embracing, all hesitations and expectations forgotten. 'Ma ma,' we all murmur, as if she is among us"(Joy Luck Club 331).

The mother's living presence in them is the feeling Jing- mei has been searching for, the feeling of belonging in her family and of being at last in the larger family of China. In the case the cultural wholeness grows out of and is dependent on a sense of family togetherness.

It is evident that Amy Tan seems to place more emphasis on the Chinese identity as the healing factor, which is closely related to her own experience and also her writing intention. In 1987, Tan traveled with her seriously- ill mother to China, with whom she had been having a problematic relationship. She learned from that trip how important that was to her.

It was a chance for me to really see what was inside of me and my mother. Most importantly, I wanted to know about her past. I wanted to see where she had lived. I wanted to see the family members that had raised her, the daughters she had left behind. The daughters could have been me, or I could have been them.

And I did see all of those things, and even more. I discovered how American I was. I also discovered how Chinese I was by the kind of family habits and routines that were so familiar. I discovered a sense of finally belonging to a period of history which I never felt with American history.

It was wonderful going to a country where suddenly the landscape, the geography, the history was relevant. That was enormously important to me.

So, I think going to China was a turning point. I couldn't have written *the Joy Luck Club* without having been there, without having felt that spiritual sense of geography"

(Schell, p. 190).

As a matter of fact, in addition to holding to the Chinese identity, as a Chinese American writer, Tan more desires for a cultural acculturation. Jing- mei's experience in China at the end of the book seems to support the possibility of a rich mixed identity rather than an identity of warring opposites. She comes to see that China itself contains American aspects, just as the part of America she grew up in- San Francisco's Chinatown--- contained Chinese elements. Thus, her first meal in China consists of hamburgers and apple pie, per the request of her fully "Chinese" relatives. Perhaps, then, there is no such thing as a pure state of being Chinese, a pure state of being American; all individuals are amalgams of their unique tastes, habits, hopes, and memoirs. For immigrants and their families, the contrasts within this amalgam can bring particular pain as well as particular richness.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, back in China, Olivia and Kwan are together again where they were when Olivia was a child, as they have not been in almost thirty years. In the geography that has shaped their lives, they reestablish their emotional connections with each other and they reaffirm a relationship that has endured through at least two lifetimes. More importantly, they are blessed with a rare opportunity: they are empowered to correct the mistakes of an earlier time, and as they rewrite their story, each one finds what she has been seeking- an integrated self for Olivia and peace for Kwan.

The desire for reconciliation is not only in the reaching of the mutual understanding between mother and daughter and between sisters at the end of the novels, but also in the whole process of the plot arrangement on the three novels concerning husband wife relationship. If in *The Joy Luck Club*, we can see Tan's inability to solve the cultural problem and dilemma as to being not sure about the reconciliation, then in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, we can see her confidence and optimistic manner for the these issues. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, she finds a good solution, taking advantage of returning to homeland as a cultural healing.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the daughters fare badly in marriage. Waverly Jong is divorced from her high school sweetheart who turned out to be irresponsible and stingy as well as inclined toward extramarital affairs. Rose Hsu and Lena St. Clair are still married, but Rose's husband has filed for divorce, and Lena's is obtusely blind to the fact that their marriage is dysfunctional beyond repair. The cross- cultural marriage ended in failures.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Jing weili diligently schools herself to think only of Wen Fu's needs and wants regardless of the cost to her body and soul. She suffers from the brutal husband, submitting to her husband's rough assault, enduring his taunts and accusations. While later she immigrates to the America and marries an American man named Jimmy Louis who treats her tenderly and kindly. They understand each other; they are harmonious; they live a comfortable life. This cross- cultural marriage is a success.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan's wish for cultural reconciliation is much more strongly expressed in the couple connection. Simon and Olivia are firstly at the edge of divorce and later they come back to each other due to a task which needs their cooperation. They visit China together. The mother country is the site of Olivia's journey toward self. More importantly, the primitive village with mud streets and lively chattering people that Olivia begins the process of reconnection with her husband Simon.

After reading Tan's novels, we as readers come to a conclusion: to be truly mature, to achieve a balance in the between- world condition then, one can't solely to the New American ways and reject the Old Chinese ways, for that is the way of the child. One must reconcile the two and make one's peace with the old. If the old cannot be incorporated into the new life, if they do not mix, as Lindo Jong puts it, then they must nonetheless be respected and preserved in the pictures on one's walls, in the memories in one's head, in the stories that one writes down.

III. The Possibility of the Cultural Reconciliation

Amy Tan gives her novels happy endings where the characters finally begin to forgive and understand one another. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Jing- mei Woo takes her mother's place at the mah- jong table and goes back to the mother country to seek her root and fulfill her promise; in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie reveals all her stories in the past and gains Pearl's trust and understanding. They will support each other in the future life; in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, in a Chinese ancient village, Olivia knows what life means to her and understands how to appreciate. All these good endings express Tan's intention of inheriting traditional Chinese novels. More importantly, we can see her eagerness for the eradication of the conflict between Chinese and American cultures.

As Edward W. Said said, "The Orient is almost a European invention. 'otherness' is invented by the west as its other to consolidate self... The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is a place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience" (Zhu, p. 297). Said's theory clearly illustrates the relating closeness between the East and the West. There is no absolute difference between them. With the development of the globalization, it is inevitable for Chinese American writers to choose the cultural wholeness as the major theme. It is not only the dream of the Chinese people in face of the cultural chasms who are living in the United States, but also the wish of the whole world and the whole human being. It is true that when we read Tan's novels, we cannot help wondering at the way she arranges the plot, characters and style, especially her gift of dealing with the cultural healing for the Chinese Americans from alienation and reconciliation.

IV. The Difficulty of Cultural Reconciliation

1. The Actual Barriers

However, if probed deeper, it can be found that this sort of reconciliation to some extent is most difficult or less practicable, because the absolute globalization of culture would involve the creation of a common but hyper differentiated field of value, taste, and style opportunities, accessible by each individual without constraint for purposes either of self- expression or consumption. Returning to China is only a first step. If we really want to reach the stage of cultural wholeness, we have to cope with the actual barriers of geography, politics and cultural distinctness.

2. The Hybridism in Cultural Background

The reconciliation in Tan's works is not pure or complete. On the contrary, it is hybrid. The contrasting cultures between Chinese and American are not different as they seem because they all share a single human nature. For example, within the main conflict of the story both the mothers and the daughters struggle with identity issues: the mothers attempt to balance their past with their American present; the daughters attempt to balance between independence and loyalty to their heritage.

3. The Specification of Chinese American Culture in Tan's Works

In addition, the Chinese culture that Amy Tan describes in her novels is not the real Chinese culture. Firstly, it is traditional culture in old China, not the current situation of Chinese culture. It is too stereotyped or out of date compared with the modern American society. Two different cultures on different levels concerning time, place and space are hard or impossible to reconcile with each other. Secondly, the Chinese culture in Tan's works is Chinese American culture. Amy Tan and other Chinese American writers are "banana people". They have Chinese yellow skin but have been westernized in the thinking pattern and the living style. They have lost the connection with Chinese culture. They are actually combining the new experience in the United States with the deformed memory about the Chinese traditional

literature to express themselves. Therefore, what they write is not the original, the ancient traditions and cultures but something colonized and influenced by the dominant literature of the society they are living in. Through American culture's veil, what they see about Chinese culture may be ambiguous, intersecting or misvisioned. Amy Tan herself ever confessed that it was through listening to her mother's stories in Cantonese and reading the literary books translated in Chinese that she came to understand Chinese literature and culture, in which she was not interested at all until the return to the homeland. As a result, as a Chinese immigrant of the second generation, Tan knows only a little about the mainland's culture and cannot express Chinese culture truly or deeply. Thirdly, the immigrant literature in the late 20th century is always regarded as the post- colonial literature. Emerson thinks that the cultural immigration is universally acknowledged as the essence core of this literary trend. It influences much the writing and even makes it globalized. The post- colonial writers are just like cultural travelers. They are cross- national and not confined within one single nationality. Their works thus have the characteristic of hybrid. Chinese American literature stands at the marginal of two cultures. Chinese American writers and their works have two identities of being "other": to American culture and its readers, they are "other" with the profound orientalism, while to Chinese native readers loyal to Chinese traditional cultures, they are still "other" who are Americanized and misunderstand and distort Chinese cultures. That is, due to the specification in their background, the Chinese culture in their works is only an expression of combined cultures in specifically cultural circumstance. In a word, the Chinese culture in the novels is not the Chinese culture in the real sense, so the reconciliation between Chinese and American cultures is not the reconciliation in the real sense (Hu, p. 46).

4. The Discontinues of the Cultural Connection

What's more, successful cultural reconciliation requires a long process of communication. It is chronological. In Tan's books, the mothers serve as a link between past and present. The task of linking the present with the future is up to daughters, who, as a matter of fact, are becoming more and more Americanized and less Chinese. Complete Americanization is not the true reconciliation, but colonization.

5. The Overemphasis on Chinese Identity

Amy Tan poses the cultural issue from three different layers, the cultural dissimilarities, and the two conflicts that the mother- daughter bond and the husband- wife relationship express. If a successful cultural reconciliation can be achieved, it has to be able to solve such problems as clearing up the cultural differences, compromising mother and daughter, accommodating husband and wife. Because harmony and wholeness are indispensable for the reconciliation between Chinese and American cultures, as a cross- cultural writer, Tan has to shoulder the responsibility of balancing the two cultural heritages.

It is true that Amy Tan grew up as an almost completely assimilated Asian American, but she is well aware of the price that she and other members of minority groups have paid for their partial admission into the dominant culture: there was shame and self- hate. There is this myth that America is a melting pot, but what happens to assimilation is that we end up deliberately choosing the American things--- hot dogs and apple pie--- and ignoring the Chinese offerings. However, she relies too heavily on Chinese identity as the cultural healing. It is impossible to be completely Chinese or American. In Amy Tan's novels, though the daughters understand more and more their mothers and the Chinese cultures at the end, it is not easy for them to find a point where the cultural balance works. Even a balance can be reached in a single or a small group of people, but still there does not exist the reconciliation for the whole culture.

V. Conclusion

The Chinese American literature especially the cultural issues in it such as the cultural conflicts and the cultural reconciliation has drawn more and more attention. The duality of Chinese American writers in their life experience and family background determines the doubleness of their works. In many novels, we can see that the Chinese American immigrants

undergo the strong cultural convulsion and impact. Out of the instinct for survival, they make their best effort to adapt to the new surroundings, learn the foreign language, and understand the western customs even the religion. But in their hearts, they still doggedly cling to the Chinese traditions. The mothers in Tan's novels come to the United States from the far- away China. The peace and serenity in their mind fade away and they live in strains and fear all day long. It is clear that the first generation of Chinese immigrants hold on to the Chinese culture, shutting out the American culture, while the second generation welcome the American culture, excluding the Chinese culture. It is hard for the first generation to accept the western culture while it is hard for the second generation to accept the eastern culture. The subtle shift provides us with a good opportunity of better observing and understanding ourselves. Both of them are matter- of- factly struggling and suffering due to the seeking of the cultural identity. The earlier period of Chinese and American cultural conflicts in Chinese American literature steps toward reconciliation.

In this cultural context, Amy Tan follows the historical trend and abbreviates this theme into her best books, showing how different Chinese and American cultures are, taking mother/daughter bond, husband/wife dyad and sisterhood as vehicles to present the cultural conflicts, concerting these problematic relationship at the end and telling us how possible it is to reconcile these two cultures. However, the cultural reconciliation in the real sense is not so simple as the human relationship. It is at most the writer' and the readers' beautiful wish. Or we can say there is still a long way to go before achieving the goal.

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