Global Journal of Arts Education

Volume 9, Issue 1, (2019) 029-034

www.gjae.eu

A study of cultural reconciliation in Amy Tan's novels

Tmailselvan Selvakkumar*, Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, A.V.V.M Sri Pushpam College, Bharathidasan University, Thanjavur 613503, India

Suggested Citation:
Selvakkumar, T. (2019). A study of cultural reconciliation in Amy Tan's novels. . (1), 029–034.

Received from March 2, 2018; revised from June 12, 2018; accepted from January 15, 2019.
Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Ayse Cakir Ilhan, Ankara University, Turkey.
©2019 SciencePark Research, Organization & Counseling. All rights reserved.

Abstract

The paper analyses 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 realised due to the actual barriers, the hybridism in cultural background, the specification of Chinese American cultural in Tan's works, the discontinues of the cultural connection and the overemphasis on Chinese identity.

Keywords: Cultural reconciliation, Chinese identity, mother childhood.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Tmailselvan Selvakkumar,** Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, A.V.V.M Sri Pushpam College, Bharathidasan University, Thanjavur 613503, India.
: selvaa1446@gmail.com / Tel.: +0431-2407048

1. 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.

2. Cultural reconciliation in Amy Tan's novels

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 spoken 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 19th-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 cultural uneasily embracing European goods while striving to maintain a Chinese way life. and 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 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 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 specialised in making of statues of the principal deities. In the final scene between mother and daughter, Winnie proudly presented a new Goddess to Pearl.

While in 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' (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 Cheesiness but have been resisted for a long time, and then they change the way, ever imposing their own wishes on daughters; while daughters come to understand what the again mothers have intended and realise 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 form a mother, which is expressed in daughter's returning to the homeland.

Jing-mei's concluding is 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. Traveling to China to meet her twin half-sister—the now-growing babies for whom Suyuan had searched for almost 40 years—Jing-mei brings closure and resolution to her other'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 aunties, 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 aunties 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, Jig-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 favour of the ore 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' (218). 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' (306).

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, 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 things as a pure state of being Chinese, a pure state of being American; all individuals are amalgams of theirs 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 daughters fare badly in marriage. Waverly Jong is divorced for her high school sweetheart who turned out to be irresponsible and stingy as well as inclined towards 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 Jing weili diligently schools her 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. 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 and they live a comfortable life. This cross-cultural marriage is a success. 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.

3. The possibility of the cultural reconciliation

Amy Tan gives her novels happy endings where the characters finally begin forgive and understand one another. In 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 fulfil her promise; in 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 in a Chinese ancient village, Olivia knows what life means to her and understands how to appreciate.

As Edward W. Said stated '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 Europe; it is a place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisation and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the others. In addition, the Orient has helped to define the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience' (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 globalisation, 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.

4. The difficulty of cultural reconciliation

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 globalisation 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 experience the each stage of cultural wholeness, we have to cope with the actual barriers of geography, politics and cultural distinctness. 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.

In addition, the Chinese culture that Amy Tan describes in her novels is not the real Chinese culture. First, 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. Second, 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 westernised 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 colonised and influenced by the dominant literature of the society they are living in. Thorough America 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 did not show interest 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 of deeply. Third, the immigrant literature in the late 20th century is always regarded as the post-colonial literature. Emerson thinks that the cultural immigrants are universally acknowledged as the essence core of this literary trend.

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 culture, as a cross-culture 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 culture balance works. Even a balance can be reached in a single or a small group of people, but still there does not be the reconciliation for the whole culture.

6. 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 holds on to the Chinese culture, shutting out the American culture, while the second generation welcomes the American culture, excluding Chinese culture. It is hard for the first generation to accept the western culture provides us with a good opportunity of better observing and understanding ourselves. Both of them are matter-of-faculty struggling and suffering due to the seeking of the culture identity. The earlier period of Chinese and American cultural conflicts in Chinese American literature steps towards reconciliation.

In this cultural context, Amy Tan follows the historical trend and abbreviates this 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 culture conflicts, concerting these problematic relationship at the end and telling us how possible it is to reconcile the tow culture. 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.

References

Gang, Z. (2002). . Shanghai, China: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press [in Print].

Schell, O. (1989). . New York, NY: New York Times Book Review [in Print].

Tan, A. (1996). . New York, NY: Ivy Books [in Print].

Tan, A. (1989). , New York, NY: Ivy Books [in Print].

Tan, A. (1992). New York, NY: Ivy Books [in Print].

Yamin, H. (2001). Nostalgia, rejection and convergence: on the acceptance of traditional Chinese culture in Chinese American literature, , 45–47 [in Print].