SEARCHING FOR THE ROOTS:
A STUDY OF AMY TAN’S NOVEL JOY LUCK CLUB

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ABSTRACT

Amy Tan is one of the most important ethnic Chinese writers writing in America. Her novels are marked by the dilemma so natural of an immigrant. The first generation of immigrants try to assimilate in the mainstream society but their hearts remain grounded in their native cultures and they adopt the culture of their adopted countries, but the feeling of superiority of their native culture remain entrenched in their minds. The trouble begins with the second generation people who start living in the culture of adopted country from the beginning. The immersion of second generation in an alien culture creates the problems for the first generation. The problem is more acute for the daughters as they are expected to follow native culture only.

KEYWORDS: Immigration, culture, myth, patriarchy, daughters, Chinese.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper explores two texts by Chinese American author Amy Tan’s Joy Luck Club(1989) and Bonesetter’s Daughter(2001). The works are hewn out of a chequered experience and informed by a perspective that transcends narrow socio-political and geographical boundaries.

First, on the liberty with which we take Tan as a writer of texts representative of the Chinese American experience: the paper does not intend to prove a homogeneity within what have been labelled as Chinese American subjectivities, but just an attempt to bring into focus certain features common to these texts that emerge out of a similar position with respect to the assimilating culture. The characteristics shared do not pertain merely to issues or ‘mythemes’ but refer to the self-conscious use of traditional myths in the writings of these women authors.

This paper considers the justifiable reservation voiced by Katheryn Fong in “An Open Letter/Review: To Maxine Hong Kingston”: ‘Chinese Americans have commonalities, but I hardly think we are so homogeneous’(qtd. Deborah Woo 220). These texts continue to be our ready reference since we cannot but agree when Deborah Woo remarks: ‘There are insights which the ethnic writer can bring to the ethnic experience which outsiders cannot’ (226). However, we will have to remember that Tan is but an unconventional ethnic writer, since to her counterparts born and brought up in China, she remains an ‘outsider’. Besides Tan makes certain observations and
displays anxieties regarding her particular customs and food habits that seem to tally because now she is an American.

The texts offer themselves as sites of contests between myths: old and hallowed myths are personalized by the author; they are recounted in a way that makes them bear the author’s personal stamp. Myths are rendered into a ‘mythopoeia’ that is not just personal but also defies the tradition- modern, rebellious, contemporary and transcending the dictates of a particular culture. New myths that emerge in these texts challenge the traditional discourses, they are anti-establishment and critical of patriarchy. They form an important part of world literature as they are written by a women author who employs narrative techniques that may be old, takes up legends that may be ancient but are aware of the ‘gaps’ lending them to a critique- she deconstructs the myths she receives from tradition. Vocal about her unique subjective position, her peculiar place in this world as displaced people of second generation- absorbed in an alien society, yet a part of it; distanced from her native land.

By portraying a struggle of myths that texts draw attention to the writer comments on their genesis. The readers observe residues of myths ‘dominant’ in a specific culture, say the Chinese culture constituting only a ‘sub-culture’ in a different and future socio-historic context, as in America. In fact, ancient Chinese myths are subordinated to contemporary stories fostered by mass-immigration experience of Chinese people to America. These also find their cultural contestant in the Great American dream that is not peculiar to just the emigrant Chinese but all people who believe in the American way of life.

The Chinese ‘tell-tale’ tradition is the platform to the narrative and textual endeavours of Tan. Traditionally, myths are considered sacrosanct but post-Darwin, post-Enlightenment myths are associated with fiction, unreality and exaggeration. Tan covertly analyzes ancient myths and modern ‘myths’ (as Barthes calls certain hyped or cult objects) and where possible or desirable to suggest alternatives. Her unique subjective position as second generation Chinese American gives them an insight into the working of myths- their powers to manipulate, stipulate, impute and indoctrinate. They guide actions, fix norms, impose categories and instill values. Tan recognizes the power of myths as instruments of discourse; discourse uses the imaginative appeal of myths to prompt actions and modes of behaviour based on archetypes and precedents.

Tan displays a peculiar sensitivity towards ‘origins’ that is a natural outcome of the experience of displacement and ‘exteriority’. Readers observe a persistent concern with beginnings, endings and truth. The assurance of insular civilizations in handling these concepts is lost and we watch a manifestation of cultural anxieties in these texts. A quest for certainties and crystalline identity leads her to revise the myths with which she has grown up. The writer acknowledges and progressively learns that it is not easy to resolve related issues. Myths featuring in these novels refer to ‘place’, ‘displacement’ and relocation; by corollary to ‘origin’, ‘rootlessness’ and transplantation. Broadly, we could put ancient Chinese myths into the first slot; anecdotes and stories by first generation Chinese immigrants into the second slot and the narratives of second generation Chinese brought up in America as Americans into the third slot. So, we are not talking of just the geographical space but the subjective position in the cultural mosaic. In fact, the works under scanner belong to the third group that subsumes Chinese American identity into the larger American identity. America being the great Crucible, the melting-pot of cultures.
Tan offers strong alternatives; if these texts critique the appalling gender bias of Chinese traditions, she is also not shy of protesting against contemporary myths propagated by American capitalism or commercialism.

MICHAEL FISCHER NOTICES THIS

What thus seem initially to be individualistic autobiographical searchings turn out to be revelations of traditions, re-collections of disseminated identities and of divine sparks from the breaking of the vessels. These are a modern version of the Pythagorean arts of memory: retrospection to gain a vision of the future. In so becoming, the searches also turn out to be powerful critiques of several contemporary rhetorics of domination.

Tan deals with the Mandarin, but the anxieties she shares about Chinese food are similar to another Chinese American writers. She observes the Chinese culture as if from a distance- her view of China suggests an implicit identification with America. The texts are the second generation’s way of ‘claiming America’; the first generation immigrants’ way was action, their ancestors do the same through reflection. Walter Shear in his comparative essay on Joy Luck Club and Woman Warrior remarks:

Both these authors testify to a rupture in the historical Chinese family unit as a result of diaspora, but both seem to believe in cultural healing. However, as her conclusion suggests, Tan seems to place more emphasis on the Chinese identity as the healing factor. (448)

This is true only to an extent as both texts convey a feeling that the Chinese Americans are ‘outsiders’ for the Chinese back ‘home’. Homecoming never really happens; they are treated as American tourists in China. So the native Chinese also disown the emigrants, though the emigrants at least attempt to forge a broken bond and retrace lost roots. Tan’s Joy Luck Club concludes in a sojourn to China, identification with Chinese sisters as mother-surrogate but even there it is evident that the return to America is inevitable, and China is but an odd though indispensable via media.

In the texts, genealogical tables are traced out may be to reclaim the Chinese pedigree, but it may be equally to lay a claim on the adventurous spirits of their resourceful, enterprising ancestors who could leave the safe sanctuary of home turf to explore unknown horizons and that which lay beyond.

Anne Tyler in an essay (1980) remarks: “While the father of the family, preparing to be tested by American immigration authorities, may have had to memorize ‘another man’s life, a consistent life, an American life,’ his daughter has to memorize a “Chinese life” (212).

Veronica Wang in an essay dated 1985 underscores the dilemma that the Chinese Americans constantly have to deal with:

Both heritages impose external limitations and demand prescribed behaviours even though she(Kingston) is constantly aware of the remoteness of ancestral China and her essential
Vivian Hsu in “Maxine Hong Kingston as Psycho-Autographer and Ethnographer” (1983) notices elements of “ethnography” in The Woman Warrior which include: “an ambivalent cultural identity”, “difficulty in Communicating with members of the dominant society”, “the high social esteem in which men are held while women display their own strength and adaptability as guardians of family culture and heritage”, “a wider than usual generational gap, with cultural barriers compounded by language barriers,” and “a difficulty in integrating the world of dominant culture and that of one’s immediate family into a coherent whole” (qtd. Woo 219). These clauses in fact qualify Joy Luck Club, and Bonesetter’s Daughter too as ethnographies. In any case there is more imagination in these documents than in the forms the immigrant parents were required to fill at their entry in America in Kingston’s China Men.

Individuals unable to endure cultural changes succumb: mental derangement, depressions and suicides follow. Mad Sao in China Men, Moon Orchid in Woman Warrior, Ying-Ying in Joy Luck Club and Precious Aunt in Bonesetter’s Daughter suffer because they cannot or would not replace the old stories with new.

The texts are strewn with points where tradition and modernity, past and present, superstition and truth, realities and myths contend. What becomes apparent as the texts progress is that these oppositional concepts of truth and myth are interdependent but we are cautioned against taking one for the other: it is important to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Those who are cultural innocents risk encountering the Moon Lady not as a fairy granting wishes but as a hideous roadside player as happens to Ying-Ying St Clair in Joy Luck Club.

Veronica Wang points out that “for hyphenated Americans who are confounded by cultural and social complications, the task of separating reality from illusion, truth from myth, can be particularly unnerving” (213). Kingston addresses her peers: “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese?” In her works Tan articulates the prior frustration, later reconciliation, and ultimate celebration of her ability to neatly “separate” the Chinese part from her composite subjectivity. A new potency is recognized in her anomalous situation.

In an interview Paula Rabinowitz remarks on Kingston’s “decision to divide off (your) narratives in terms of a male and a female ancestry” (316).

Kingston believes the immigration experience to be exclusively male. She maintains “those men were making history. They were making a new myth, too. They were not so caught up I the old myths as the women were” (316). Thus, Kingston upholds the division between men as “people of action” and women as bearers of “memory” and narrators of the “history” made by men. Amy Tan on the other hand, does not exclude women from the realm of action or experience: women in JLC and BD display remarkable initiative. Their struggle in fact is carried out against odds strengthened due to prevalent gender bias. For An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, Ying-ying St Clair there is no welcome “home” in China and these women have their personal tales to tell. These tales of
individual struggle, rich though they are in cultural dimensions, certainly qualify for a position within the paradigm of immigration.

WORKS CITED


NOTES


4 Kareen Horton, interview with Maxine Hong Kingston, Honolulu Today, December 1979. See Woo.