



Ethnic And Hybrid Identity: A Study Of Amy Tan's The Bonesetter's Daughter And Gish Jen's Mona In The Promised Land

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Abstract:

Asian American literature is turning to receive attention from critics. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, immigrants from different countries are starts writing their own experiences in the host country. The writings of immigrants from China and their descendants in America reflect their Chinese American experiences in their works. Chinese immigrants in America are started writing their experiences in the 1850s and it continues to the present. In the early period, it is not that popular in the host country, it was mostly their autobiographies. Afterward, in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century 'Cultivated Chinese' and students are migrating to America their writings are lifting the Chinese American literature to the highest position in the United States. They are Sui Sin Far, Jade Snow Wong, and Frank Chin. In addition to Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Gish Jen are the unavoidable women writers of Chinese American literature. These two writers have received attention from literary critics with their debut novels.

Keywords: Asian Americans, diaspora, identity, ethnic, hybridity, Chinese American culture.

Introduction

Werner Sollars in his brief introduction to *The Invention of Ethnicity*, claims that the premises upon which naturalization of ethnic purity is based. Raising the following questions, he uncovers the "invention of ethnicity":

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Are not ethnic groups part of the historical process, tied to the history of modern nationalism? Though they may pretend to be eternal and essential, are they not of rather a recent origin and eminently pliable and unstable? . . . Even where they exist over long periods, do not ethnic groups constantly change and redefine themselves? What is the active contribution literature makes, as a productive force, to the emergence and maintenance of communities of ethnic distinctions?
(xiv; italics added)

The above quote and the last question put Asian American writers into the double task of signifying their communities, home cultures and offering a subtler representation of ethnic subgroups. Corresponding to the ethnic awareness, Asian Americans are divided into the subcategories of Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Japanese Americans, and so forth specifies that the focus of ethnic politics has shifted from its early stress on the collective struggle to an emphasis on the uniqueness of ethnic subgroups.

In “Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies,” Cheung argues that as Asian American literary criticism develops, the analysis of race, sexuality, gender, and class will combat increasing importance, for “[such] analysis is probably going not only to reveal the unequal conditions of Asian Americans but also to prompt a refinement of current critical concepts like hybridity and diaspora” (14). There is the reorientation of Asian American literary studies effected through new emphasizes of multiculturalism and the heterogeneity of various ethnic groups.

Among other Chinese American writers, Amy Tan and Gish Jen are distinguished by their writings. Their stylistic innovations such as the ironic way of representing the failure of a Chinese family, the hybridity of ethnicity, the construction of ethnicity, and inter-ethnic conflicts to retain the origin. When American literature is dominated by male writers, but the diasporic literature gave space to both female and male writers to express their views and experiences. Chinese American literature examines the immigrants’ life in the host country. This study aims to examine the ethnic and hybrid identities of immigrants. This paper aims to discuss the issue about the roots of immigrants and heritage in Americanized life in Amy Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* and Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land*.

Order to attain identity in the host land is not an easy process. It is very difficult for the individual and especially for the ethnic people and it is a double burden for the ethnic women. It affects them traumatically. Immigrants are in other patriarchal society and as ethnic people, they face lots of issues in the racially dominant country America. In the process of attaining their identity, they face ethnic anxiety and traumas emerge while forming their own identity in the host land. This paper tries to indicate the mother-daughter relationships and shows the relocation of Chinese immigrants and their families in the novels.

Background to the study

The Bonesetter’s Daughter is the fourth novel of Amy Tan published in the year 2001. The novel compacts with the story of a Chinese immigrant mother and her American-born daughter. The novel

has two main stories, the first is the story of the Chinese American character Ruth who lives in San Francisco, and the second story is about the letters to Ruth, it is by her mother LuLing. These letters show the Life of LuLing in China. Tan accumulates three-generation stories in the novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

In the same way, Gish Jen shares her experiences through her second novel, *Mona in the Promised Land* it is published in year 1996. Her novels explore the themes of immigration, familial relationships, assimilation, and her anxiety with other ethnic communities. In her first novel *Typical American*, Jen explores her ideas of how the different cultures force their peoples to change their behaviours. The novel *Mona in the Promised Land* is the sequel to the *Typical American*. *Mona in the Promised Land* shares the story of a Chinese mother and Chinese American daughter and explores the boundaries between them. Both Tan and Jen are contemporaries they share a common theme in a different style. The novels contain the story within the story so the writers sustained the flashback technique to narrate their experiences. As women perform a significant role in the novels and every women character has been suffering from their own way socially and mentally.

Ethnic identity and the Mother-Daughter Relationship

One person's identity is defined or shaped by their relationships with others, especially with their mother. In a mother-daughter relationship, whether they share a close or strange relationship, every daughter has an attachment with their mothers to some point. However, Tan and Jen distinguish themselves from the other Chinese American writers. Traditionally, identity is closely associated with the identity of the individual with a particular group, ethnic or culture, which has some values and rules. The problem of identity is one of the major themes in diasporic literature. Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* illustrates the story of three generations of the mother-daughter relationship. The relationships between them and what are all the difficulties in understanding each other, stemming from the generational gap, are highlighted in the novel. Ruth and LuLing have conflicts with their thoughts and ethnicity. Likewise, in *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jen constructs the character Mona, she has numerous conflicts with her mother Helen, and it leads to an interrogation of ethnic construction.

Stuart Hall's views on cultural identity are different, he states that cultural identity is being and becoming. Being indicates the shared cultural history of the ancestry it emphasizes the similarities, with the individual to the group. The dynamic process of knowing the culture and accepting the cultural identity is called Becoming. Hall's assumption on Cultural Identity is equally emphasizing the similarities and the differences amongst an imagined cultural group. He claims that:

Cultural identity...in his second sense is a matter of becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power. (225)

The above quote is examining Hall's view that identity is an ongoing process of becoming as well as of being.

Switching between two cultures is depicted in the novels of Amy Tan and Gish Jen. Initially, in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the mother LuLing is struggling to adopt the new American culture. But the American missionaries are spreading the new culture and religious views to the immigrants.

However, her daughter Ruth is born and brought up in America so she tries to construct her identity in the United States. After reading her mother LuLing letters and memoirs she attempts to create her real ethnic identity, LuLing writes these letters to remember and not to forget her Chinese past and tradition. The mother tries to transmit the culture and traditions to the daughters through letters. Similarly, in Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*, Mona the second-generation Chinese American is not an Asian American model minority in longer. Jen explores how the Asian American changes their identity as a Jew. Mona Chang is a second-generation American who decides to build her identity. She thought, through the blending of racial, religious, and political thinking Mona seeks a better version of herself. But there she fails to fulfill her parents' expectations.

Hence language and writing become an effective way to attach to one's own culture. Language is an identity when first-generation immigrants are struggling to speak the language of the host land; meanwhile, the second generation is struggling to understand their native language. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, LuLing scolds Ruth for not studying Chinese when she is little. Language plays a major role in the identity process; writing is a way to transmit the culture from one generation to another. LuLing writes letters in Chinese characters is entirely different from writing in English. She thinks each Chinese character has a special meaning, emotion, and history. The same in *Mona in the Promised Land*, Mona is no longer obsessed with her own ethnic identity. Jen highlights the immigrants' experiences of the Chang family in *Typical American*, she specifically foregrounds the relationships of mother-daughter in *Mona in the Promised Land*. Chang's family always lives predominately in the white community, but in the eyes of whites, they are still the Chinese or the outsiders. Mona and Callie face unpleasant experiences because of their Chinese identity. On school days Mona knows the little Chinese like five to six words to manage. Mona starts studying Jewish history meanwhile; Callie starts her education at Harvard University. She takes classes in the Chinese language and the sense, her ethnic consciousness is raised, learns to be Chinese.

Mothers force the daughters to follow the traditional native culture there the conflict between the relationships is a start. Tan creates the character LuLing like this, she is a strict typical Chinese mother who needs her daughter to be under her control. But Ruth is growing up in American society and grasps the western culture which emphasizes individuality and freedom. So she is against the Chinese tradition that is forced by her mother. The mother always has anxiety about her daughter's westernization. In *Mona*, the characters Helen and Ralph Chang represent the first generation immigrants they struggle to adopt the culture is shown in Jen's first novel *Typical American*, but the well-established status of the Chang family is mention at beginning of the sequel *Mona*, it is the results of their blending with the host society.

Later, LuLing displays her ambivalence to both native Chinese and host American culture and tradition. Occasionally, she mixes the cultures. Even in her orphanage life she equally respects the Chinese and Buddhist Gods. Likewise, she follows certain ethics. LuLing accepts the multiplicity and pluralists in immigrant life, by showing hybridizing the cultures. Race as a term suggests relations with the politics of opposition, while ethnicity might request additional to the hybridity of identity formation. In *Mona*, people gathering in the different races at the Gugelstines represent such a cultural association but it fails. Jen explores the multiplicities of ethnic communities. Ethnic identity is not that easy, as one sees in the performance of identity switching in *Mona*. In *Mona*, mother-daughter conflicts appear because of the daughter's disobedience towards her mother. Later on, the daughter knowing her mother's past she also starts accepting her native culture.

Conclusion

To conclude, Tan and Jen both are illustrated ethnic anxiety, identity by portraying the relationships with their family and particularly with the mother and daughter. The mothers are the influential characters of their daughters' life. The daughters in both the novels construct the relation with their mothers in order not to be assimilated and acculturated in the Americanized lifestyle. Finally, the writers have a great sensibility to the politics of identity, Tan and Jen examine the possibilities of being a Chinese American, that identity requires such elements as ethnicity, class, and gender. The transformation of the identities and redefine the culture is worth it by attaining the ethnic identities.

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