

MULTI-CULTURAL ASPECTS IN THE NOVELS OF MAXINE HONG KINGSTON AND AMY TAN

K. Hema Latha, *Research Scholar, Scott Christian College, Nagercoil,
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University Tirunelveli*

Dr. A. Linda Primlyn, *Associate Professor of English, Scott Christian College,
Nagercoil, TN*

Abstract:

American Literature in twentieth century has risen to its prominence with the development of literature written by and about ethnic minorities. The new ethnic literature establishes worthy objects of academic study, alongside such other new areas of literary study as women's literature, gay and lesbian literature, post-colonial literature and literary theory. Asian American Literature achieved widespread notice through the writings of Asian American writers. One among the Asian American Literature is Chinese American writing. Chinese-American literature refers to the work written in English by Americans of Chinese origin. As Chinese began to migrate to the United States most of them have been struggling at the bottom of the American society, the representative image of Chinese-Americans described in American literature used to be a weak female. In the eyes of Westerners, they were always 'outsiders.' Under such circumstances, even America-born Chinese writers went against their mother culture in their creations. To the American culture, they are Chinese who followed the Chinese tradition, but in front of the Chinese civilization, they are also outsiders.

The contemporary Chinese American women writers are Maxine Hong Kingston, Sui Sin Far, Amy Tan. With the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the Chinese American writing has come to its existence. Maxine was followed by Amy Tan, who is best known for her novel *The Joy Luck Club*. This paper focuses on the multicultural aspects in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*.

While representing multicultural American's life Asian American writers inevitably confront their cultural origins and adduce perspectives that are foreign to the American mainstream. Asian American writers, while depicting the images of diaspora either interrogate or seek answers to the problems of ethnicity. It is visible that the Asian American writers particularly focus on the issues like ethnic identity which are strongly and sensitively represented. The same like, the Chinese-American writings also dealt with the cultural uneasiness manifested in the relationship between the Chinese mothers and American daughters which many immigrants faced with.

Culture can be considered as one of the most formative factors of a person's identity and it is regarded as a reference to the creations and cultural practices that are intellectual and artistic such as music, literature, painting and sculpture. It is explained as a process and development that cultivates one's mind. It has the responsibility in shaping the thoughts and behavior of individuals. When we see the culture in China and America, there is a vast difference. The Chinese mothers expect their daughters to obey their elders and to learn obedience by observation and by imitation as the mothers did in China. In America the mothers' warnings, instructions and example are not supported by the context of American culture and so their daughters do not understand. The daughters resent and misinterpret their mothers' alien Chinese ways and beliefs.

Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* explores a variety of mother-daughter relationships between the characters and the ramification of cultures and tradition inside a family can be burdensome and cause

the family tree to fall down. *The Joy Luck Club* focuses on the relationships between intercultural mothers and daughters. The four Chinese immigrant mothers want to raise their daughters in the Chinese tradition but allow them to be all that they can in America. This paves a way for conflicts between the mothers and the daughters. There is a lack of communication between the mothers and daughters because of their linguistic barriers. They try to communicate with each other, still in circumstances it results in misunderstandings.

Amy Tan's women are torn between the culture of two worlds, that are Chinese culture and American culture. Racial, cultural and class differences between the mothers and daughters lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding. The cultural translation demands the effort of immigrant mothers to pass their Chinese heritage to their daughters, who have been brought up in American circumstances.

The language also becomes a barrier in their communication. The mothers are not good at English and the daughters are not good at Chinese. As we notice in the words of Jing-meithat, "These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (*JLC* 23). Because of their mothers' inefficiency in perfect English the daughters are ashamed of. The mothers cannot read English and the daughters cannot read Chinese. They have to communicate orally to overcome their linguistic barriers. Jing-mei criticizes her mother's language as, "I think my mother's English was the worst, but she always thought her Chinese was the best" (*JLC* 29).

The mothers used to tell stories to the daughters and the major theme of their story is pertinent to an Asian-American mythology, concerns the mother's displacement in American society. Chinese and other cultural immigrants face the language problem. Their inability to speak grammatically perfect English marginalizes the immigrants from the dominant group. All the Chinese immigrant mothers encounter this marginalization. Even though they face linguistic and cultural difference, the mothers are able to help their daughters embrace their racial identity.

The Chinese-American daughters try their best to become Americanized that makes their mothers to disappoint. Moreover the daughters rebel against the Chinese tradition of heeding their elders and pleasing parents. The mothers are horrified at their daughter's insolence. They fear that their daughters' passion to achieve American dream will block them from ever understanding their Chinese heritage. In spite of all these fears, the mothers try to give them the best of both worlds. As Lindo states, "American circumstances but Chinese character" (*JLC* 254). Each of the major characters expresses anxiety over her inability to reconcile her Chinese heritage with the American surroundings. The daughters except Lena are genetically Chinese and have been raised in Chinese households, but they feel at home in modern American culture. The daughters Waverly, Rose and Lena have white boyfriends or husbands and they consider their mothers' customs and tastes as old-fashioned or even ridiculous.

The challenge for Jing-mei is not only to find out her long-lost sisters, but also to find her inner Chinese identity, and to use that as a bridge to the cultural, linguistic, and generational gap, which has been the bar between mothers and daughters. Jing-mei is the representative of the Chinese daughters in the novel. Earlier she believed that her mother has been a hurdle to acquire American culture, but later she understands that her mother's love and faith has insisted her not to lose her Chinese identity. All the other mother-daughter pairs- in the novel experience the same misunderstanding, with their daughters. Amy Tan is successful in presenting the conflict between the traditional Chinese and modern American ideologies in the novel. Jing-mei becomes a bridge between china and America, between mothers and daughters. She reconciles the cultural and generational differences and provides hope for better understanding among the other mother-daughter pairs in the novel.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* portrays the traditionally subjugated position of Chinese women both in China and in the United States. The mother

and daughter suffer oppression because not only they are women but also they are Chinese. The clash between Chinese and American culture and the deliberate attempt of the narrator in succeeding American culture demonstrate the constructed nature of Chinese culture. It also highlights the culmination of stereotypical images and perceptions of Chinese Americans juxtaposed with the opposing point of view of the narrator, Kingston. *The Woman Warrior* also finds an empowering social bond that links the dynamics of Chinese-American women's intergenerational and inter-ethnic communities.

Asian American Literature focuses on the transmission of the original culture that has been studied in terms of a generational conflict. The parents of *The Woman Warrior* are clear about the discrimination between home and America. The narrator notes that "whenever my parents said 'home', they suspended America" (*WW* 116). The parents keep their sense of security by not moving beyond the confines of the Chinese enclave. But for the young generation tensions arise between China and America, the traditional Chinese-American community and American society at large. Kingston's complicated relationship between home, identity and community begins with the narrator's revisionary of her aunt's story.

Kingston's novel is something more than that of memoirs and it functions as a collection of oppressive ideologies of identity construction. It speaks a referential event of gender and culture. In Kingston's novel, there are moments where the narrator challenges and highlights marginality by making the invisible visible and by complicating the negotiations and tensions of identity construction, which are moments of empowerment. While Kingston frames the novel as a series of memoirs, which reveal some experiences surrounding her lifetime, it is a work of fiction in which her main focus is to articulate an account of growing up having to negotiate the social construction of gender and race. Because the novel is framed as a work of fiction, Maxine Hong Kingston mixes truth and fantasy.

The story of 'No-Name Woman' serves as a backdrop for Kingston's own experience growing up as a Chinese-American, torn between the world of Chinese customs and traditions and her new permissive American environment. Kingston's struggle is especially difficult because she is effectively forbidden from talking about it with anyone. "You must not tell anyone," her mother tells a powerful, ironic opening sentence to a memoir (*WW* 15). As the aunt of Kingston is forbidden, she knows nothing about her aunt beyond the broad details given by her mother in the form of a story. This forced fabrication presents us with a dichotomy that is of fiction versus truth. Kingston probes to know really what has happened to her aunt. The ambiguous nature of reality and fantasy surfaces throughout the book. Kingston is also concerned with how gender and language are bound together in contexts of cultural practice. She explores how one young woman experiences her developing identity as a Chinese American through language experiences at home and at school. Kingston's piece is aggressive in echoing the cultural contradictions she absorbed in an upbringing that bridged two cultures.

Kingston's own difficulty in finding a voice parallels the plight of many of many Chinese-American children who are silenced and reined in by their parents. The narrator exposes the violence implicit in the negations on which gender and ethnic identities are based. Despite her sympathies for the victim of patriarchal Chinese society, she has participated in her aunt's punishment. She makes it clear that the awareness of women's oppression is constructed at various levels of China. The intersection of identities is reflected when she is not sure of which aspects of herself are tied to various facets of her identity:

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? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (*WW* 06)

The oppressed position of being female is compounded by the low status of an immigrant. In China daughters are considered as dispensable property. During times of dire poverty, parents sell their daughters. In the story about Brave Orchid's independent life in China, the narrator describes how her mother has bought a slave girl from a seller of little girls, inspecting her at the market like any other piece of

merchandise. The story makes the narrator in dilemma that she also can be sold if the family returns to China. The mother and daughter bond in *The Woman Warrior* is ambivalent at best.

When the narrator sees the new Chinese girl in school, she thinks of herself and tells:

I looked at her and I HATED her. I HATED her silence. I HATED her China doll haircut. I HATED being seen next to her. I HATED that she reminded me of my own quiet self. Surely the others would remember my own awkward silence. I could not let this happen. (*WW* 24)

The narrator sees herself in the new Chinese girl and doesn't want to be 'othered' further. The narrator struggles to find home of identity as she is punished for not speaking perfect English loudly as her classmates do. She is also ridiculed for her body's failure to perform an American identity which is accepted and appropriate. Her shame of her 'othered' identity has internalized thoughts of cultural self-hatred, marginality and inferiority. So she torments the new Chinese girl verbally and physically to erase her 'othered' identity. *The Woman Warrior* explores the negotiations of gender and the construction of cultural identity of a Chinese American woman which is filled with complexity. In her later life the narrator takes her stance against her mother and her talk-stories. The protagonist leaves her home to gain a distance to her past: "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing" (*WW* 237). The narrator's departure has been seen as an "outright rejection of ethnic culture", meaning that she prefers a stereotypically white lifestyle (Cheung 93).

Like most immigrants, Brave Orchid has had to come to terms with profound disillusionment. A medical doctor in China is unable to find work in the United States, other than that she gets menial labor in tomato fields and canneries. Brave Orchid, born and educated in China, manages to adjust, even to acculturate to the life in the United States, although she never assimilates completely. As Brave Orchid slowly relinquishes her mental and emotional connection with China and she understands and accepts that there is little chance for her to return to the country of her birth. Unfortunately, she has nothing to replace China. The United States continues to be a mystery and an alien culture inhabited by strange people to whom she refers as ghosts because to her, they have no definable identities.

Kingston explores the nature and construction of identity. Two types of identities are the focus of *The Woman Warrior* - the immigrant identity, exemplified by Brave Orchid and the Asian American identity which is embodied in the narrator. While the two types share common elements, they are sufficiently distinctive as to warrant separate consideration. Brave Orchid and her daughter must negotiate issues of gender, cultural conflict, and assimilation and they must deal with their alienation from the dominant culture. The narrator incessantly faces differences between Chinese and American ways of living while she grows as a Chinese girl in America. She records the patriarchal culture in one side and the racist on the other. The ethnic autobiography explores "cross-cultural, diasporic identities ... constantly producing and reproducing themselves a new" (Egan 122). The book also explicates cross - cultural aspects in terms of traversing cultural distance between home and the outside world. It portrays the experience of two conflicting worlds that is the Chinese daughter in America.

Works Consulted

1. Cheung, King-Kok. *Articulate silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1993. Print.
2. Egan, Susanna. *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999. Print.
3. Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977. Print.
4. Kumar, Vinod. "Quest for Chinese Identity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." *Critical Perspectives on American Literature*. Ed. S.P Dhanavel. Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2008. 375-384. Print.
5. Lauter, Estella. *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984. Print.
6. Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Random House Publishers, 1989. Print.