

Recalling History: A Reading of the Select Works of Amy Tan

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Abstract

Amy Tan, the promising Chinese American writer, in her fictional landscape, demonstrates the turbulent nineteenth and twentieth century historical China so as to authenticate the Chinese American diasporic experience. Tan locates several events of the novels at the backdrop of the Sino- Japanese War that shape and mould the characters while defining their subjectivity. The Chinese American diaspora cannot be separated from the history of China as the historical reflections are felt even at the intergenerational relationships. The second- generation finds it difficult to embrace the Chinese history and culture as they are ethnically, historically and linguistically alienated from the homeland. The present paper attempts to explore the historical representation of Sino- Japanese War in Tan's novels, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), while investigating the socio-cultural and socio-political repercussions of Chinese American literature's distinctive inclination to organize crucial events of Chinese history in order to contour the interconnected themes of national belonging, relocation, and ethnic identity. Tan's acquaintance with Chinese culture and history involves multiple levels of mediated discourse which includes mother's "talk- story," father's memories, and cultural retention and practices of Chinatown. The several historical events of the Chinese history assist the writer to facilitate her connection with the maternal culture.

KEYWORDS: Chinese American diaspora, intergenerational, ethnic, maternal culture

Introduction

Amy Tan, the promising Chinese American writer, in her fictional landscape, demonstrates the turbulent nineteenth and twentieth century historical China so as to authenticate the Chinese American diasporic experience. Tan locates several events of the novels at the backdrop of the Sino- Japanese War that shape and mould the characters while defining their subjectivity. The trauma and the distressing memory of the war devastates the generations, even when they are temporally and spatially distant from the site of war. While China endures as a memory for the immigrant first-generation mothers, it serves as a definite traction for the propagation of maternal culture to the second- generation Chinese American daughters. When mothers are the first- hand veterans of the significant Sino- Japanese War, the daughters regard it as an obscure bygone event experienced by their parents in China, prior to their dislocation to America.

The Chinese American diaspora cannot be separated from the history of China as the historical reflections are felt even at the intergenerational relationships. The second-

generation finds it difficult to embrace the Chinese history and culture as they are ethnically, historically and linguistically alienated from the homeland. As the daughters struggle to embrace their maternal culture, they also manage to traverse time to associate with the history. The daughters cross the boundary of East Asia, where they spiritually experience the political and social upheavals unfamiliar to them. The present paper attempts to explore the historical representation of Sino-Japanese War in Tan's novels, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), while investigating the socio-cultural and socio-political repercussions of Chinese American literature's distinctive inclination to organize crucial events of Chinese history in order to contour the interconnected themes of national belonging, relocation, and ethnic identity.

Amy Tan amasses the history amid the early 1920s and the late 1940s in the novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* set in the pre- World War II China and modern San Francisco, "forges connections between two generations of women, traces four family genealogies that span the twentieth century, and stresses the importance of the ethnic heritage, suggesting a heavy investment in history and historical representation" (Marc Singer 83). The stories of all the four mothers take place shortly before and during the Sino- Japanese War. Suyuan, the mother of the first mother- daughter pair, along with her twin babies, absconds from the city of Kweilin and moves towards Chungking in order to escape the progressing Japanese army. The coerced journey separates her from her twin baby daughters whom she will not perceive again in her life. The war certainly becomes a significant aspect in the lives and memories of Chinese American individuals who manage to cross the boundary of China, not out of choice, but out of morbid circumstances. Towards the end of the novel, Tan allows the daughter Jing Mei/ June to make a physical and symbolic return back to her motherland, China, to meet her long lost half- sisters and thus fulfil her mother's dream.

Apart from the Sino- Japanese War, the period also covers many significant political battles. Winnie, the mother in *The Kitchen God's Wife* describes the chaotic social order in China thus:

The old revolutionaries, the new revolutionaries, the Kuomintang and the Communists, the warlords, the bandits, and the students- gwah! gwah! gwah!—everybody squabbling, like old roosters claiming the same sunrise. And the rest of us—women and children, old people and poor people—we were like scared hens, letting everyone chase us from one corner to another. (KGW 166)

Tan's lingering portrayal of the family history within the framework of the war depicting the horrors of "the bombs [that] fell on Shanghai... on the roofs of houses and stores, on streetcars, on hundreds of people, all Chinese" (KGW 191) announces the threatening ambience of the early twentieth century China. The novel powerfully enlarges on the Nanjing Massacre, which resulted in the tragic end of thousands of Chinese people. The Characters, Helen and Winnie experience the atrocities of the event which is referred to as the 'Rape of Nanking.' Rape of Nanking of 1937 was one of the atrocious events of Japanese occupation of China. The Japanese soldiers entered the then capital city of China, Nanking where they did mass rapes, executions and public beheadings. Tan manages to bring in the horrifying atmosphere through the memory of Winnie:

[The Japanese soldiers] raped old women, and little girls, taking turns with them, over and over again. Sliced them open with a sword when they were all used up. Cut off their fingers to take their rings. Shot all the little sons, no more generations. Raped ten thousand, chopped down twenty or thirty thousand, a number is no longer a number, no longer people” (KGW 234).

Tan melds the paroxysms of the macrocosmic Nanjing Massacre with the microcosmic challenging family life as experienced by Winnie. Winnie’s repeated rape by her husband Wen Fu and her defencelessness equates with resulting overhangs of both the despotic Chinese patriarchy and the helpless China under Japan. Although Winnie describes all these events in the temporally and spatially distant America, the sharpness with which she narrates the incidents resonate the plaguing historical event encountered by the Chinese nationals.

Tan again brings in the brutalities of the Sino- Japanese War in her third novel, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. The mother character, LuLing, refers to the pathetic condition of the captives of the war in the Japanese war- camps and prisons. The anarchic political situation in China is intensified as “the Japanese were doing unspeakable acts with innocent girls, some as young as eleven or twelve. That was what had happened in Tientsin, Tungchow, and Nanking. “Those girls they didn’t kill afterward tried to kill themselves”....” (BSD 309) There are also allusions about the detention of the Marco Polo Bridge by the Japanese troops.

Apart from the Japanese invasion of China, there were military conflicts in China between the Communists and the forces of Chian Kai- shek’s nationalist government. These political commotions urge many desperate Chinese citizens to leave China in hope of a better life and future. LuLing, after the conclusion of World War II, receives an opportunity to migrate to the United States, “the Christian heaven... where Kai Jing had gone... waiting for [her]” (BSD 317). Tan also incorporates the historical event of the excavation of “Peking Man” in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. The geologist and the calligrapher Kai Jing, who worked with the project in the quarry, gets dreadfully bayoneted by the Japanese soldiers. The insinuation of the “Peking Man” aids to accentuate the historical significance of Chinese culture while sketching a connection between the ancestral land, the cultural roots and the ethnic identity.

Conclusion

Even when Tan’s thematic concern is about the interpersonal relationships, her inclusion of the Chinese historical events indicates the indispensable influence of the ancestral history in the lives of the immigrants that touch their interpersonal lives in America. Being Born and brought up in America, Tan’s acquaintance with Chinese culture and history involves multiple levels of mediated discourse which includes mother’s “talk- story,” father’s memories, and cultural retention and practices of Chinatown. The several historical events of the Chinese history assist the writer to facilitate her connection with the maternal culture. Tan shoulders the role of a historian who effectively shares the history while outlining the lives of mothers and daughters in her novels.

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