Spatio-temporal Chronotope: A Diasporic Reading of Amy Tan’s The Bonesetter’s Daughter

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ABSTRACT

Amy Tan is one of the most important ethnic Chinese writers settled in America. Her novels mark the dilemma so natural that of the immigrant. The Bonesetter’s Daughter dramatically chronicles the tortured, devoted relationship between LuLing and her American-borne Chinese daughter, Ruth. Diaspora in literature mainly deals with the problem of those who settle in another geographical location with the mixture of culture. Though immigrants live in the settled land for a long time, they mull over the land which they left as their own country. The present paper analyses the spatial and temporal scope of the Chinese immigrants in an alien land and shows how they assimilate into mainstream culture and create multiple identities distinctive from the identity they previously held. It also examines the issues of immigrated families' adaption problems, crisis and cultural clashes in terms of mother-daughter relationship.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Ethnicity, Assimilation, Immigration.

Amy Tan is an American writer whose works delve deep into mother-daughter relationships and the Chinese-American experience. Her novel The Bonesetter’s Daughter, unveils the ways of Chinese immigrants’ integration into the mainstream culture and their ways of generating a new identity, distinct from the identity previously held. The novel is a judicious supplement to her other popular oeuvre of fiction writing, including The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God’s Wife, The Hundred Secret Senses, Saving Fish from Drowning, Rules for Virgins and The Valley of Amazement. Amy, being born to Chinese immigrant parents vividly depicts “day to day world of Asian Americans” (362) and focuses on predilections of the hyphenated characters. Standing on the threshold of modernity, Amy brings into limelight the cultural conflict between first generation and second generation Chinese immigrants as they venture to grapple their American dreams.

The term ‘diaspora’ can be defined as the dispersion of any people from their original homeland. It is the movement, migration, or dispersion of people away from an ancestral homeland or people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location, or people settled far away from their ancestral homeland. Chinese immigrated to the United States to get away from the intense conflicts of British opium war in China. Some Chinese migrated to the states to look for better opportunities and yet there were others, who were forced to leave China either as a contact laborers or person in exile. And during migration, the settlers face many problems like desolation, estrangement, identity crisis and communication barrier.
The diasporic community, even though they live in the present, they are often haunted by the memories of their homeland. It deprives them from accepting the settled land’s cultural practices. In spite of living for a long time in the settled land, they mull over the land which they left as their own country and this curbs them to blend with the society in the settled land. In many cases, the diasporic community happily accepts the practices of the settled land and assimilates with it and in other cases they practice both cultures, homeland and settled land, and integrate with it which leads to the formation of multiple identities. The formation of multiple identities leads to a condition of heterogeneity for the diasporic community. Hence the diasporic community can never be a part of the homeland’s cultural practices nor the settled land’s cultural practices. Somewhere or the other, spatio-temporal factors are split indicating that the diasporic chronotope leads to the edifice of the diasporic community’s many identities. The present paper analyses the spatial and temporal scope of the characters in an alien land and shows how they assimilate into mainstream culture and create multiple identities distinctive from the identity they previously held. It also examines the issues of immigrated families’ adaption problems, crisis and cultural clashes in terms of mother-daughter relationship.

Amy Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* dramatically chronicles the tortured, devoted relationship between LuLing Young and her American-born Chinese daughter, Ruth. The novel is broadly divided into two major stories. One is the story of Ruth, an American-born Chinese woman, a freelance writer, in a relationship with a white man, stepmother to his two teenage daughters, and finally, daughter of LuLing, who Ruth fears is becoming demented. However through her mother’s memory loss she realizes and understands her family and renders a feeling that she is part of a larger story. In the second section, Ruth learns about her mother’s hard days in China, and regarding LuLing’s life in a village called Immortal Heart, and the secrets passed on by her nursemaid Precious Auntie, who is none other than LuLing’s mother. Once Ruth learns the details of her mother’s past, she gains a new understanding of her and her seemingly erratic behaviour.

Amy Tan through using the life history of three women characters namely Precious Auntie, LuLing and Ruth touches upon the history of China. Her novel poignantly discusses the cultural and behavioral difference between the two generations of the diasporic community and also outlines the Chinese culture. LuLing and Ruth represents the first and second generations of the diasporic community. There often exist clash between LuLing and Ruth. The core reason for the tension that crops up between LuLing and Ruth is based on two specific factors. One is based on the misunderstandings caused by generational gap and the other factor is because of growing up in different cultural environments. Marina Heung argues that “In tan’s novel, the maternal experience of generational conflict and differentiation takes into account the realities of cultural difference” (32).

LuLing’s hardship in life makes her as a strong and strict woman. Her sufferings in the orphanage home, in Hong Kong and in the US after the death of her second husband, mould her as a strong woman. Ruth as a child believes in an emotional relationship with her mother. Like other American girls, she wants her mother to be much friendly with her. She expects her mother to provide her with ample freedom. However her mother’s strictness hates her and moreover Ruth at many occasions feels embarrassed to acknowledge her mother before her friends. “Experience had taught her that her mother worried too much even when she had no reason to worry” (120). LuLing often forbids her daughter from intermingling with White Americans, for she believes that alien culture would thwart Chinese heritage and tradition. “Things too bad to say. They could not trust each other. That was how dishonesty and betrayal started, not in big lies but in small secrets. secrets” (139). LuLing’s constant nagging towards Ruth creates in a rift between the mother and the daughter relationship.

It is common that, when people migrate to another place, they face some changes like adhering to the settled country’s time, adapting to the settled country’s climatic changes and fiddling with the customs and culture of the settled society. Amy Tan in her novel *The Bonesetter daughters* assists her readers to comprehend the tribulations encountered by the diasporic community in a strange land by following the unknown language and culture. In the novel, spatial movement brings incredible transformation in the nature of the characters and it changes the basic nature of the character itself. In the case of Gao Ling, tremendous changes in her behavioral pattern is obvious. In China, Gao Ling was an innocent, ignorant woman, caught up in the hands of vindictive husband. However, when she migrates to America, she becomes a self-centered woman. In a few cases, spatial displacement helps the characters to lead an improved and a kind of sophisticated life. LuLing faces tremendous changes in her life in the new-fangled spatial location. In China, LuLing was not able to lead a happy life. However when she settles in America, LuLing was able to lead a contented life.

The sense of belonging is a strong theme in Amy Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. The novel revolves around the issues of worldwide identity and the struggle of an immigrant, especially within the luminal, ‘Third space’ created by the immigrant. The ‘Third Space Theory’ explains the uniqueness of each person, actor or context as a ‘Hybrid’ which is attributed by HomiBhabha. In the novel, characters juggle with several identities which society, family, and history superimpose on them. Almost all the diasporic women characters stumble upon the crisis of dual identity. Some of the characters experience this crisis through self-doubt while others experience this through passiveness.
Of all the other immigrants, it was Ruth, who articulates her extreme angst over cultural identity. Upon settled in America, LuLing clings on to mere superstitious beliefs. She believes that her Precious Aunt tries to contact her even though she was dead and gone. She insists Ruth to learn Chinese characters for she believes that Precious Aunt uses Ruth as a medium to convey her thoughts. Ruth finds hard to learn Chinese letters, however she learns it for the sake of her mother. Moreover, LuLing forbids her daughter to intermingle with the Whites. She does not want Ruth growing up in the Western culture and hampers Western food. In spite of Chinese upbringing, Ruth identifies herself with American culture. “I’m an American,” Ruth shouted. “I have a right to privacy, to pursue my own happiness”(140). The recovery of Ruth’s throat problem indicates that Ruth has finally come out from her predicament of fractured consciousness about the Chinese and American culture. “… Ruth and her grandmother begin… They know where happiness lies, not in a cave or a country, but in the love and the freedom to give and take what has been there all along” (402-403). Thus, Ruth accepts her hyphenated identity and creates her own ‘self’. Ultimately, the characterizations and situations in the novel The Bonesetter’s Daughter clearly shows the many forces working upon the creation of the immigrant characters ‘self’ which is evidently achieved in course of time and space given to them.

Works Cited

Primary Source:

Secondary Sources: