

THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE FOLKLORES AND TALK STORIES IN AMY TAN'S NOVELS



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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on talk-story and folklore narrative patterns, which stem from the Chinese oral tradition, in selected works of Amy Tan's namely The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God's Wife and The Bonesetter's Daughter. Amy Tan has experimented a new kind of narrative patterns, which gives importance in blending family stories, cultural myths, fantasy, autobiographical details and history. She mainly confines these elements at a textual level as a healing narrative therapy between generations. I have depicted that Amy Tan exemplify talk-story and folklores as a form of self-expression and empowerment; it functions differently as they interact with the mainstream discourse. Tan refashions these elements as a kind of cureness as in Western psychotherapy and it becomes the vehicle to re-mark their existence, reclaim their Chinese heritage and reshape the American literary field.

Keywords: *Amy Tan's Novels, Chinese Folklores.*

Amy Tan hits the Asian American literary field with an immediate success with almost unanimous positive response in 1989. She became very famous writer and her book focuses on thematic mother-daughter relationship with Chinese-American background among many other literatures's in the world. Chinese has a great deal of

traditional out drop. They gave life to many mythical legends and oral traditions that prevails in China among Chinese people. The language and imagery are immensely powerful. Amy Tan articulates her new identity including her own voice within the Chinese myth. She belongs to the ethnic minority and hybrid and undergoes a double discrimination of gender and race. Exposure to the mainstream culture equips them to war against injustices.

The Chinese people give preference to their traditions and myths. Their stories do not have any specific literary shape; still they play a vital role in preserving the traditional history of the society. Hence 'Folklores' are indeed a great legacy to the literature. These traditional folklores and talk-stories had many undertakings. Chinese folklores began around 1910 to gain popularity and adapted a new style as the language of education and literature and named it as vernacular Chinese.

Folklore, a genre a of children literature, is always considered as one of the most mysterious and interesting genre. It is defined as stories that originated orally and have no authors. It is often considered as a mirror that reflects different groups of people's culture and moral values. It has its uniqueness and different perspectives both personal and culture. It teaches children about their As well as others heritage, moral world and way of behaving. Through Chinese-American writings it indicates that some Chinese and their families have been exposed to western culture. From this vernacular Chinese act as the dialect and through this folklore was created.

Hu Shih had published several articles in support of the adoption and created a new renaissance. The talk-story narrative patterns stem from the Chinese tradition. The term was borrowed from a Pidgin Hawai'i an expression. This was first generated by Maxine Kingston. Amy Tan depicts the relationship between mother and daughter relation and through literary analysis she aims out to confine the talk-story elements at a textual level as a healing narrative therapy between generations.

Amy Tan exemplifies talk-story as a form of self-expression and empowerment and it functions as a mainstream discourse. She refashions talk-story as a kind of 'talking-cure' as in Western psychotherapy. The talk-story is a narrative pattern, which stems from the Chinese oral tradition. It examines and acts as a narrative theme and structure of Chinese writers. It is exemplified in the portrayal of mythic or imaginary China and retelling of past Chinese stories are their strategies for seeking an identity and creating a voice for their "between Worlds" characters through connecting the past and the present (Ling 20).

This is essential for the bicultural characters as only by acknowledging their ancestral heritage would they be able to situate and define themselves in the state of “double-consciousness” (Ling 137). The Chinese-American writers works, the mythic Chinese past and the contemporary American present are linked through story telling. Oral story telling of folktales and stories has been practiced and developed in China for more than two thousand years from the time when most people were illiterate and the main way of bestowing knowledge and information was through word of mouth till the present day when written documents are prevalent.

The originality of oral tradition lies in the particular interaction with an audience of the time as Benjamin says “story telling is always the art of repeating stories” (91). Amy tan is very familiar in these skills and adapted many techniques in her writings.

Amy Tan has reflected the problematic relationships with their mothers in her three novels *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchens God's Wife*, *The Bonesetters Daughter*. Amy Tan portrays her mother's “emotional terrorism” (TOF 18) and she feels shame of her exoticism. Tan however, discovers that her mother and the stories she has heard in the past prove a great source of inspiration and storytelling becomes a communicative tool for easing the tension in the problematic mother-daughter relationship. Through story-telling, Tan weaves fragments of past stories she has heard and also the production of her own imagination into a coherent fictional world, an indication that she is able to embrace her mother's Chinese past and her American present, as she enters the “motherland” and appreciates the “mother-tongue” (TOF 89).

Folklores and talk stories depict the state of women in traditional Chinese society. They are commonly known jokes about Chinese delicacies and the preference for unborn mice, monkey brains hot from hacked-off heads, hundred year old eggs and snakes cooked alive in boiling rice. Alan Dundes in his well-known book *The Study of Folklores* points out that folklore has several important functions as it helps in the education of the young people provides a group's feeling of solidarity. It provides a socially sanctioned way for the individual to act superior or censure the group and serves as a vehicle for social protest.

Roger D. Abhram states “story telling is a fundamental way of codifying hard, won truths and dramatizing the rationale behind traditions” (78). Females were considered dispensable; it was the birth of a son that was cause for celebrations. Chinese girls were more likely than boys to suffer infanticide in poor families. They were married earlier and she is considered as an outsider because she would no longer bring any economic benefit to the family.

Amy Tan's novel delivers talk-story and folklore which promotes multiple levels of misunderstanding between both Chinese-speaking mothers and English speaking daughters and also between persons who speak different Chinese dialects. The problems caused by talk-story or oral communication in general occupy a major place in Amy Tan's first novel *The Joy Luck Club* is dedicated to her mother, Daisy Tan and to the memory of her grandmother. Tan captures the emotions and sensations as a daughter, who has once misunderstood her mother and rejected her Chinese heritage. This novel consists of sixteen interlocking stories about four Chinese immigrant mothers-Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-Ying St. Clair-who cross the ocean looking for a chance of making their lives a new in America and four American-born daughters-Jing mei Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong and Lena St.Clair, who are always convinced that their mothers are disappointed in them no matter what they have achieved.

The sixteen stories are narrated by four pairs of mothers and daughters in monologues separately. As they testify their relationships with one another in their narrations, the mother-daughter bond is examined and reassessed by the readers. The love and hate relationship between the mothers and daughters is finally resolved through talk-stories a kind of therapeutic 'talking cure' (JLC 11). In this novel, the mothers and daughters are in control of their subjectivities through the narration in the first- person in almost equal proportions.

As in this novel folklores are involved when the mother stories starts in the first section. The stories were told in four sections-for the mothers their past stories in China and for the daughters, the American lives and difficulties with their mothers. As Shu Jiang Lu suggests in *The Joy Luck Club* "the language of the mothers marks their positioning between two cultures" and "language might be said to be the ground for playing out cultural differences"(TOF107). As the mothers attempt to talk-story it is important that the daughters encounter crisis and changes in their lives. The mother takes the shape of folklore and talk-stories to bring out the pride of their own country and cultural behaviour.

In Amy Tan's second novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* bestows a specific example of mother who used to teach her daughter how to listen and understand her stories as she speaks. In this text Winne depicts her secret pasts and truth to tell her American daughter. Winnie uses talk-story to tell her own history but as she talks she must help her daughter to understand both her broken English and remains untranslatable. "Harry, we are soon taonam" (KGW 207). Winnie tries to answer her daughter by explaining the significance of the word. "Refugee is what you are after you have been taonam and are still alive. And if you are alive, you would never want to talk about what made you taonam" (KGW 207).

Winnie was confused between the two languages and the modes of expression demonstrates that talk-story works only in selective situations and that it is not the only choice Chinese women have for authentic self-expression. However talk-story cannot function properly for these Chinese mothers and American daughters without a source of meditation. The opening sentences of the book by Pearl, the daughter, has set the tone of the book in the middle of an ongoing debate between the mother and daughter “whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument” (KGW 11).

A pearl attempt to avoid her mother’s intervention in many areas of her life and that is another reason to keep her secret. On the other hand Winnie has also kept a terrible secret about her past in China from Pearl. When she arrives to America, she decides that past is the past and she would shut her secrets behind. The folklores play when the mother’s silence is finally broken as she articulates her past sufferings to her daughter. Through this event the daughter might find her mother a difficult person and represented as the typical submissive Chinese women.

In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* talk-story is obviously different from that of the other two novels. Here talk-story between the mother and daughter is not verbal, oral and direct communication; but textual talking place through writer words on stacks of papers. In this novel the talk-story is in the form of the written and a translated version from the original Chinese writing of Lu Ling. There is another story in the written story of Lu Ling – the story of precious Auntie, whom Lu Ling originally thinks is her nursemaid but later finds out that she is her real mother. Written story telling is also employed by Precious Auntie. Talk is not applicable but the written short story makes possible when the daughter is ready to know about her past. Hence talking element is maintained in this novel, which named as “mute” talk-story (TOF 46). Through the soundless- written and translated –talk stories and folklores the problematic and alienated mother-daughter relationship between Lu Ling and Ruth is solved. Ruth is the daughter of Lu Ling and Precious Auntie is her grandmother.

As Ruth reads the story of Precious Auntie she is able to understand the situation better as the mysteries from childhood are solved one by one. “She wanted to walk through the end of the world and make amends. She wanted to walk through to tell her mother ‘I’m sorry and I forgive you, too” (BSD 270). The folklore is learned from grandmothers’ story regarding the sand-writing which was followed by ancestors as a mysterious way of communication .The unburdening of secrets through talk-story and folklores gives voice to the three women spanning three generations.

These three novels depict the Chinese mothers and American born daughters are different in many aspects as they are reconciled through attempting to understand and accept their differences. Empathy is built up between them through talk-stories as they finally realise that their mothers are always in their blood and bones. As Chin Frank has observed, “the metaphor of translation is employed widely these days as a short-hand for cross-cultural exchange” (127). Talk-story and folklore functions to connect the past with the present and future. Tan had demonstrated an interactive activity and the dialogic relationship between tellers and listeners in the form of dramatic level. As Trinh T. Minn-ha, in *Woman native*, says “Story-telling, the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community, constitutes a rich oral legacy, who values have regained all importance recently, especially in the context of writings by women of color.” (148)

In a nutshell, there is a consensus among scholars to regard “talk-stories” in the works of Tan. It shows her as a feminist discourse or female self-expression for the articulation of female subjectivities, experiences and voices, which counteracts the white, masculinity, patriarchal and nationalist imperatives in mainstream American culture. She also focuses in talk-story and folklore as an integral part and as a cultural form of empowerment for the Chinese American literary characters. She also confines it as a tradition to a healing narrative therapy between generations of her characters.

Elaine Kim suggests that “reviews of our (Asian American) literature by Anglo –American critic reveal that the criteria used to assess their literary merit have been other than literary and aesthetic”.(90). Deborah Woo mentions that ethnic minority writers “have been more appreciated by their audiences for what they have to say about their respective ethnic experiences than for their work as artists” (173).

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