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Food As An Undercurrent In Consideration And Expression In Amy Tan's Novels The Joy Luck Club And The Kitchen God's Wife

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Abstract

“Culture” it is a complex word, the true meaning of the word is somewhere lost, it has vast meaning, which includes geography, customs, traditional, way of life, literature and arts, behavioral norms, modes of thinking, and values. One's language represents their culture, sometimes they communicate through culture. Culture is expressed through the social behaviors of the immigrants, costumes, music and their arts, and so on. In the same way, food represents culture, it is the mirror of the society and such culture is prevalently reflected in literature. Literature and culture are two mutually undivided things that are interconnected. This paper particularly focuses on food as a culture. Food plays an indispensable part in every individual's life. It satisfies our hunger, food blends with our emotions, and it always plays a vital part in reflecting one's mood and culture. This paper aims to bring to the forefront the intrinsic connection that exists amongst food, human, and society.

Keywords: culture and literature, food and tradition, immigrants, identity, diaspora.

Introduction

Amy Tan was born in America to the immigrant parents from China. The writer's cultural background and her experiences play a significant role in their writings. She has grown up influenced by both Chinese and American cultures. Amy Tan whose real Chinese name is 'An- mei' that means 'Blessing from America', and she has a dual identity in the hostland, and assimilates into the mainstream American world, only by surviving the cultural conflicts. The most important theme, symbol, and semantic figure found in the Chinese literature is their food it strongly represents their culture.

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Tan foregrounds the anthropological and cultural elements of food, its preparation, and people's eating habits. Tan's novels focus on two cultures; her works are in melting pot styles, trying to depict the chaotic facets of cultural clashes on multiple levels. Tan's novels are situated in a cross-cultural and cross-generational setting.

This paper aims to discuss the cultural elements in the select novels of Amy Tan namely *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Tan is one of the contemporary Chinese American writers who received an enormous response in her debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). It explores the generational gap, cultural, religious differences between Chinese-born mother and their American-born Chinese daughters. *The Joy Luck Club* is inspired by the author's life, her relationship with her mother and the death of her loved ones mainly her brother and her father and it highlights the relationship between the different races, between men and women, and then between different generations. After the remarkable success of her first novel, she published *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991). It is a semi-autobiographical novel, in this novel Tan shares the story of her mother Daisy Tan, and the intergenerational conflicts between them. A novelist foregrounds the wife of kitchen God 'Lady Sorrow free' in this novel. In mainstream Chinese mythology, the Kitchen God's wife has been completely ignored. But Tan wants to give the right place for her in Chinese history. This paper focuses mainly on how one's ethnic food represents their whole culture. It also depicts the cultural background of Chinese American immigrants.

Food as a Culture

We have to understand the term culture, it has a vast discipline. It has various definitions; it differs from critic to critic. According to Clifford Geertz, culture is a semiotic one i.e. based on signs, symbols, and systems. He claims that as follows:

Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (68)

Culture is a human invention; it creates by the individual for their conventions. Every individual has their their idea about culture. Stephen Greenblatt is an American historian, Shakespearean critic, he states that culture is not always in the part of literary criticism, and he defines culture as "capabilities and habits" adopted by human beings. Many people define culture from different perspectives. Through culture, individuals and groups shared their values, and contribute to society.

In Amy Tan's works, the Chinese characters are very often sitting together and talk, eat the same kind of food. They thought that these kinds of gatherings are strengthening their familial relationships. It means retaining their cultural roots. Tan, a Chinese American woman, uses her Chinese cultural values in American society as the main concept in her first novel *The Joy Luck Club*, it refers to the lives of the first generation and the second-generation immigrants from China. *The Joy Luck Club* is a novel that deals with many controversial issues like their own history and identity. The two cultural value systems create clashes between characters. *The Joy Luck Club* portrays the clash of cultures effectively. The novel was divided into four parts namely *Feathers from a Thousand Li Away*, *Twenty-six Malignant Gates*, *American Translation*, and *Queen Mother of the Western Skies*. Each section has four short stories overall sixteen stories are interconnected. The first section gives importance to the stories of *Joy Luck Club* mothers life in China, the second section focuses on the stories of their Chinese American born children, in third section writer focuses *Joy Luck* children as an adult, the final section of this novel describes how the mothers use their past experiences to help and shape their daughters' life in the present. Cultural ethnicities are apparent throughout all of the

stories in the novel. The novel opens with a parable, before each section author intentionally gives parables to connect the four narratives. The four daughters portrayed in *The Joy Luck Club* are of Chinese descent, yet they are not Chinese. The daughters speak in English, not in the language of their mothers. The daughters are addressed by their English names, not by their Chinese names. The daughters eat American foods they hate repeated Chinese food.

Anne Murcott states that: “what people are ready to take inside their bodies replicates their social identities and their membership of social groups. To view eating habits as a matter of culture is to understand that they are a product of codes of behavior and the configuration of social relationships of the society in which they occur (204). Normally, the varieties of food served during festival times or a family celebration and the way they are served reflect the tradition and culture of the country to which the family belongs when people migrate from one country to another country, they take their food habits as well as to the new country to preserve their customs. Even in the hostland they are connected with their ethnic groups through food culture and they found happiness in that.

Immigrants are expressing their culture through food. Food features in our daily lives in innumerable ways. Food expresses one’s ethnic, cultural, religious, and class association. It establishes gender roles, it played an essential role in rituals and customs. Food and cuisine are powerful indicators of the culture and the people of the particular society. Food has the quality to bring about a sense of fraternity as it unapologetically defines the spirit of the nation and unites cultures.

The Joy Luck Club title itself shows as a regular gathering of the community especially four female characters, they cook, eat, play Mah Jong, and chit chat with others. According to Chinese mythology, the Kitchen God (Zao Shen) takes charge of the kitchen and makes an annual report to the Jade Emperor of heaven. Prominently, critic views those evident subject matters of the novel like mother-daughter relationships, female identity, and other ethnic identities. But some of them try exploring new meanings. The long lists of food items are shows Tan's Chinese background and that list is attributed to her.

It deals with the cultural cuisines of China. The very first character introduced in this novel is Suyuan Woo. Suyuan leaves her two daughters in her homeland (China) during World War II and she migrated to America. Later, she remarries, had children, and died without found her daughters in China. Suyuan abandoned daughters are lived in their homeland and think their parents have died during World War. After the death of Suyuan, her Chinese American daughter Jing-Mei Woo is assigned to satisfy her mother’s wish. Jing-Woo searches for her lost stepsisters in China. At last, they met but the stepsisters' trouble communicating because of the language. And then Jing says:

And although we don’t speak, I know we all see it: together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open I surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish (*The Joy Luck Club*, pg.332)

The mother’s mouth remnant opens in this scene points out a facial expression that eludes the desire to speak and eat. Jing- Woo describes her mother always miss her homeland, foods of her native and she failed to find fulfillment in her immigrant life. Suyuan recalls her Chinese days when she arrives in Kweilin during the Sino- Japanese war, she describes the landscapes and mountains like "giant fried fish heads" and the caves in the mountain look "hanging rock gardens in the shapes and the colors of cabbages, winter melons, turnips and onions” (21). In the same way in *The Kitchen*

God's Wife, Helen at the sight of starving beggars starts to swallow everything but still feels hungry. This is how the immigrant's minds are filled with Chinese foods.

The term authentic or authenticity is often indicating the food, particularly one's ethnic food. Food is one of the main cultural heritage. The word authentic foods have different meaning in various contexts, someone who is an outsider to that nation or community. In the beginning Jing- Mei's description of the food examines the importance of food and the impact of the food in this novel.

The protagonists of the two novels are given more value to the food especially their homeland Chinese cuisine. In *The Joy Luck Club*, during the Chinese New Year, Suyuan Woo and her daughter Jing-Mei Woo go to the market to buy some fresh crabs for the dinner celebration. The mother explains to her daughter about the crab, and how to select the good one. The aggressive crabs are good in quality and don't buy dead crabs like that. She tells her daughter like this "even a beggar won't eat a dead one" (200). After such alerts mother and daughter chooses the best crabs by checking whether they are alive or not.

Likewise, in the novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (lady of Sorrow free) writer explains the food imagery, semantic devices for ethnic narratives. She explains the particular food habits for the specific Chinese festivals or occasions. According to Chinese mythology, they eat some foods for some purpose, for example, sun-dried oysters were eaten by the Chinese people for good wealth, for laughter and happiness they eat a fast cooked shrimp, for good fortune, they select the soaked black hair fungus (248).

Immigrant literature often speaks about the centrality of food, in specific Asian American literature gives more space, immigrants always connect their culture into that. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Chinese immigrant mother Winnie tells her American-born daughter about her past life in China to reconcile with her. Whenever Winnie narrates her story is filled with food, shopping essentials, preparation, cooking, and consumption. In Winnie's life, food items mark significant turning points. Symbolically, Chinese food serves to bridge the cultural gap between Chinese immigrant mothers and American-born daughters.

Tan uses food as a means of exploring cultural identity by situating the consumption of food within the mother-daughter duo. As An-Mei Hsu points out, food is one of the 'keen sensual pleasures of our childhood' attached to our memories of food is the enjoyment of limitless expressions. The influence of food is one kind of identity. Food is the major representation of any culture. Tan uses food in her memory of their homeland. According to Tan food acts as a connection between self and the homeland. It is tangible, visible, and sensory and hence, food plays a potent vehicle in which culture can take on a corporeal form, for example, Chinese have a myth in their food habits as An-Mei Hsu points out,

...then my mother cut a piece of meat from her arm. Tears poured from her face and blood spilled to the floor. My mother took her flesh and put it in the soup. She cooked magic in the ancient tradition to try to cure her mother this one last time. She opened popo's mouth, already too tight from trying to keep her spirit in. She fed her this soup, but that night popo flew away with her illness. Even though I was young, I could see the pain of the flesh and the worth of the pain. This is how the daughter honors her mother. (*The Joy Luck Club*, pg.45)

Through this, we can understand the connection of food with their rituals and traditions. Many people are associates with particular food or cuisine from their childhood onwards. Food is an

emotion, it recollects our memories, traditions, and so on. Traditional cuisine is representing of our culture its pass through one generation to another generation. Immigrants bring their food habits to the host country whenever they cook their traditional food they preserve their ancestral culture. In the same way, An-Mei Hsu recollects the story of her mother with the food.

This connection between food and their cultural identity can be seen through the mother's narratives when they meet together in a club and speak about their culture, traditional food, and all, where eating is often portrayed as spiritual, cultural, and ritualistic. For example, when she is alive Suyuan tells one story to her daughter Jing-Woo. Now Jing- Woo recalled the story and tells behalf of her mother how they set up The Joy Luck Club.

The hostess had to serve special dyansyin foods to bring a good fortune of all kinds- dumplings shaped like sliver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, and of course, many good- luck oranges for a plentiful, sweet life. (The Joy Luck Club, pg.12)

From this perspective, food assumes a central, symbolic element in her mother's experience of the club, dumplings, noodles, peanuts are their native food culture, and food introduced their folklores to one generation to other generations, from Suyuan Woo to Jing Woo.

The association between food, tradition, and culture is demonstrated across the story of Ying Ying St. Clair recollects her childhood memories, when she was a little girl at the Chinese moon festival, her mother gives her a moon cake. She recalls the taste of that particular cake and says that "food is one of the keen sensual pleasures of our childhood."

Conclusion

Food is the major imagery or symbol. The description of food in this novel can also examine through the ritual of eating and the connections that food has with the material. Food plays a unique potion that will heal their memory. This idea can be seen throughout the novel, and the influence of food on cross-cultural identities is also explored. Tan genuinely addresses the problematic concussion of western and eastern ideas. Consequently demonstrating the impact of cultural beliefs, such as those surrounding food, can affect the identity of individuals who find them located in the cross-cultural territory and they felt like alien country.

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