

THE DYNAMICS OF ASSIMILATION IN AMY TAN'S NOVELS

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Abstract:

This article examines the dynamics of assimilation in Amy Tan's novels, with a particular focus on "The Joy Luck Club" and "The Kitchen God's Wife." Tan's works offer a profound exploration of the immigrant experience, portraying the struggles and conflicts faced by Chinese-American families as they navigate between preserving their cultural heritage and integrating into American society. Through intricate mother-daughter relationships and multi-generational narratives, Tan highlights the tensions and reconciliations that arise from differing cultural expectations and values. The article analyzes how characters negotiate their identities, the impact of cultural assimilation on familial bonds, and the role of language and tradition in shaping these experiences. By delving into Tan's portrayal of assimilation, this study provides insights into the broader discourse on multiculturalism and identity formation in contemporary American literature.

Keywords: cultural expectations and values, assimilation, multiculturalism and identity formation, diaspora features

According to studies, up to 30% of Chinese immigrants were repatriated to China from the Angel Island Immigration Station in the three decades from 1910 to 1940. Those who survived the complex inspection experienced torture physically and



psychologically. Some of them lay down forever due to hard living conditions and despair. Their lives and emotions were reflected in the poems written and carved on the walls of their rooms. Later, these poems were collected and edited into ISLAND Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940 in 1880 by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. The three editors explored this period of American history with a serious attitude. They visited thirty-nine Chinese immigrants (eight women and thirty-one men) who had been detained on Angel Island at that time and recorded their bitter memories.

Thanks to the collection of Island poetry, this horrible period of history is known to the public. It draws attention both in America and in China. Many researchers gave a positive evaluation of its significance and status in Chinese American literature. Yin Xiaohuang argued that “Angel Island Poetry is a witness to the life and experiences of early Chinese Immigrants. According to research, 135 Chinese poems have survived on Angel Island” [1]. Shan Dexing remarked that there is a common mentality of “passersby” and a sense of “return” in the poems included in the “ISLAND Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940”. The poetry is a significant part of American literature that cannot be ignored. It is not only the cornerstone of Chinese American literature but also provides a new interpretation of American literature. Its historical and literary value also provides a foundation for future generations to continuously re-understand and develop the history of Chinese Americans”[2]. Hence we see the historic and literary significance in exposing the life and experience of early Chinese American immigrants.

San Francisco Chinatown is another setting where the protagonists live in many Chinese American literature. Chinatown is the oldest and largest of the four notable Chinese enclaves within San Francisco. Since its establishment in 1848 during the Gold Rush, it has been important and influential in the history and culture of ethnic Chinese immigrants in North America. Chinatown is an enclave that has retained its customs, languages, places of worship, social clubs, and identity. In the 1850s, Chinese pioneers, mainly from villages in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong, began immigrating in large numbers to San Francisco, initially drawn by the California Gold Rush and the building of the first transcontinental railroad. They settled in Chinatown for refuge from the hostilities in the West. “Working-class emigrants from Hongkong began arriving in large numbers in the late 1960s. Despite



their status and professional qualifications being quite decent in Hong Kong, most of them had to take low-paying employment in restaurants and garment factories in Chinatown because of their limited English” [3].

The life and experiences of Chinese immigrants and their descendants are reflected in various works, sharing some common characteristics of diaspora literature. What are the main characteristics of diaspora literature? According to the widely quoted definition proposed by William Safran, the key components of this classical diaspora paradigm are “(1) dispersal from a homeland; (2) collective memory of the homeland; (3) lack of integration in the host country; (4) a ‘myth’ of return and a persistent link with the homeland” [4].

Robin Cohen supplemented this list of key diaspora features as follows: “(1) dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions or expansion from a homeland in search of work/for trade/colonial ambitions; (2) a collective memory and an idealization of the homeland and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation; (3) the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation; (4) a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate; (5) a troubled relationship with host societies; (6) a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; (7) the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.”[5].

Hence, diaspora literature mainly focuses on immigrants and their descendants wandering and displacing psychological states between their homeland country and host country. They struggle for success and integration in the host country while cherishing a return to and a persistent link with their homeland.

Based on the characteristics of diaspora literature, we can see that Chinese American literature also shares common diaspora characteristics. The writers tend to describe the protagonists’ traumatic experiences in old China and their striving for integration into American society on the one hand and nostalgic feelings towards China. They have a troubled relationship with the social mainstream and with the family members due to general gaps and cultural conflicts.

Among the Chinese American writers, female writers take up a considerable proportion, pioneered by Sui Sin Far (born Edith Maude Eaton), then led by Maxine



Hong Kingston, Jade Snow Wong, Fae Myenne Ng, Amy Tan, and Gish Jen. They focus on the female Chinese life and experience living in the United States and traumatic stories in old China, especially their marriage.

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