

ETHNIC ANXIETY AND IDENTITY IN AMY TAN'S *THE BONESETTER'S DAUGHTER*

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ABSTRACT²

The aim of this study is to discuss anxiety and identity issues pertaining to ethnic roots and heritage in Americanized life in Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. To express ethnic anxiety and identity, Amy Tan, a Chinese American writer, uses different stories of different characters mainly based on the mother and daughter relationship rather than focusing upon one story in her fiction. The tradition of storytelling is important for ethnic writers in order to attain their ethnic identity since stories enable those who are not able to experience past learn their culture, heritage and past. This study focuses on how the totality of individuality is split due to ethnic anxiety and how a diasporic mother functions to restore that totality by making her daughter understand her worth and reconcile with her Chinese culture and ethnic identity. The connection between mother and daughter is important to lessen ethnic anxiety. Mother functions as a transmission of heritage and culture and daughter reproduces culture in the light of mother.

Keywords: Ethnic, Anxiety, Identity, Heritage, Culture, Amy Tan, The Bonesetter's Daughter, Mother, Daughter.

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AMY TAN'İN THE BONESETTER'S DAUGHTER ADLI ROMANINDA ETNİK ENDİŞE VE KİMLİK

ÖZ

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Amy Tan'ın *The Bonesetter's Daughter* adlı romanında Amerikanlaşmış yaşamda, Çin kültürüne ve onun etnik kökenlerine göndermeler yaparak endişe ve kimlik konularını tartışmaktır. Etnik endişeyi ve kimlik sorununu ifade etmek için, Çinli Amerikalı bir yazar olan Amy Tan, romanında bir hikaye üzerine odaklanmaktan ziyade, anne ve kız ilişkilerinin konu alındığı farklı karakterlerin farklı hikayeleri üzerine odaklanır. Hikaye anlatma geleneği, etnik yazarların kimliklerini kazanmaları için önemlidir çünkü hikayeler geçmişi deneyimlendiremeyenlere kültürlerini, miraslarını ve geçmişlerini öğrenme fırsatını verir. Bu çalışma, etnik endişeden dolayı bireysel bütünlüğün nasıl zarar gördüğünü ve diasporik annelerin kızlarının kendi değerlerini anlamalarını sağlayarak ve Çin kültürü/ kimliği ile özdeşleştirerek o bütünlüğü nasıl yaratmaya çalıştıklarını anlatır. Anne ve kız arasındaki bu bağ, etnik endişeyi azaltmak için önemlidir. Anne, kültürün ve mirasın aktarıcısı rolündedir ve kızlar, anneleri sayesinde kültürü tekrardan yapılandırır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Etnik, Endişe, Kimlik, Miras, Kültür, Amy Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Anne, Kız.

To attain an authentic and autonomous self is not an easy process. This demanding process doubles in difficulty for ethnic people and as an ethnic woman, you are three times othered. As a woman, you are the Other in patriarchal society and as an ethnic person, you are the Other in white culture. Comparatively as an ethnic woman, you are the Other with your ethnic identity in that culture. Due to this othering process, ethnic anxiety and traumas emerge while forming an identity. To express ethnic anxiety and identity, Amy Tan uses different stories of different characters mainly based on the mother and daughter relationship rather than focusing upon one story in her fiction. The tradition of storytelling is important for ethnic writers in order to attain their ethnic identity since stories enable those who are not able to experience past learn their culture, heritage and past. Tan's novel illustrates ethnic anxiety of Ruth since she does not know to which culture she would adapt: Chinese or American. As Yuan asserts that "... [i]n a bicultural context, the generational dialogue turns into a site of contention between diasporic mothers and the culturally displaced daughters in this mother-daughter dyad" (Yuan, 2009: 119).

The Bonesetter's Daughter illustrates the story of three generations of mother and daughter relationship; Precious Auntie, the grandmother, LuLing, the mother and Ruth, the daughter. The novel begins with Ruth's life in America and her problematic relationship with her mother LuLing who has Alzheimer's. The relationship between mothers and daughters and how they have difficulty in understanding each other, stemming from generational gap, are emphasized in the novel. Mothers are grown up with strict rules and traditions of Chinese culture. However, Ruth, the daughter, lives in America and has a freer life style. On the one hand, the mother tries to bring her daughter up in a strict way and she wants her daughter to be successful in order not to be humiliated in society. On the other hand, the daughter cannot understand such a strict life governed by rules and traditions of Chinese culture.

The novel is divided into three parts; Ruth's life in America, LuLing's story about her past in China and Precious Auntie's story. Ruth tries to construct her real ethnic self by reading the memoirs that her mother writes in order not to forget her Chinese past. Writing the memoirs has a significant function to learn the past since silence pervades the story. The grandmother is dead and the mother has Alzheimer's and they cannot transmit the past that shapes their identity. Ruth is also silent since she does not know anything about the past of her grandmother and mother and in what conditions her mother came to America. The memoirs that LuLing writes enable Ruth to learn about her heritage and Chinese culture. The grandmother and the mother "...are the women who shaped her life, who are in her bones...They taught her to worry. But she has also learned that these warnings were passed down, not simply to

scare her, but to force her to avoid their footsteps, to hope for something better” (Tan, 2001: 257).

Nancy Chodorow illustrates possessive mother and daughter relationship in *The Reproduction of Mothering*: “Mothers by virtue of their gender (whatever the individualized conscious and unconscious fantasy and emotional casting they give to this gender) experiences daughters as, a certain sense, like them...” (Chodorow, 1974: viii). Daughters are supposed to be the continuation of their mothers. The mother figures in Tan’s novel suppose their daughters to be like themselves but in better versions of themselves. LuLing wants to shape the ethnic identity of Ruth who compares American and Chinese cultures. Ruth is split between her real identity and idealized self that her mother tries to create. Such a split and existence of a domineering mother sometimes create traumatic feelings for her and she wants to silence her mother and diminish the anxiety that threatens her existence. There is no mutual understanding between the mothers and daughters. Americanized Chinese daughter feels that her mother always criticizes her.

The Bonesetter’s Daughter starts with a prologue entitled “Truth”. It is a metaphorical beginning which summarizes the situation of Chinese people in America since they cannot attach themselves to their past in China and they feel lack of belonging and attachment to heritage. The fact that LuLing has difficulty in remembering her family name in China creates her traumatic situation in present. LuLing hides some things such as the bone that her mother gave her and the jacket that her friend gave and the dress that her husband gave her. She says: “I hid those things for so long I almost forgot I had them...Almost all that mattered in my life has disappeared, and the worst is losing Precious Auntie’s name” (Tan, 2001: 7). Hiding is a passive action which results in losing the link or connection between the past and the present. She seems that she has forgotten the past that forms her identity and especially she forgets her mother’s family name, which haunts her.

Mothers function as transmitters of Chinese culture and traditions and daughters function as those who cannot understand the essentiality of such a struggle. Hence language and writing become effective means to attach to culture. For instance; LuLing scolds Ruth for “not studying Chinese hard enough when s he was little” (Tan, 2001: 11). Writing is a way to transmit culture. For LuLing, “writing in Chinese characters is entirely different from writing English words. You think differently. You feel differently. ...Each character is a thought, a feeling, meanings, history, all mixed into one” (Tan, 2001: 39). Language is an issue of discussion and it emerges as a problem to be solved between the mother and the daughter as there is a generational gap, the daughter cannot speak Chinese properly and the mother cannot use proper

English and Ruth says: "...[w]hy couldn't her mother learn to speak English right?" (Tan, 2001: 90). The daughter tries to overcome the pressure of her Chinese mother and the consciousness that is created by her. This creates a kind of psychological fight between the daughter and the mother. The mothers are strict, strong, critical and seem insensitive and the daughters are depicted as those who are not aware of their worth. Mothers raise their daughters' self-confidence by advising them to internalize their past and make strong bonds to Chinese culture.

Appreciation from mothers is important for daughters in terms of shaping their identities. Although LuLing is a girl appreciated by the society and the members of the family, it does not satisfy her. She needs appreciation from her mother and she says: "[m]other knew what others were saying about me. Perhaps she might see these good qualities in me as well" (Tan, 2001: 138). LuLing as a daughter experiences such a problem with Precious Auntie and later LuLing as a mother experiences this problem with Ruth. "I'm an American, Ruth shouted. 'I have a right to privacy, to pursue my own happiness, not yours!'" (Tan, 2001: 106). The need to be appreciated is a tough situation due to being stuck between two cultures and the false consciousness to choose one side. The mother is perceived as so strict that daughter rejects her mother and her insistence to impose Chinese culture. LuLing goes to Peking to be introduced to the family she is going to marry. After her adventures there, LuLing misses Precious Auntie. When she turns back, Precious Auntie says: "...[h]ave you really come back to me, my Doggie?...Now you know why you need me" (Tan, 2001: 150). Precious Auntie implies that LuLing could not realize her identity and LuLing needs her in order to attain her authentic identity. The lack of mutual understanding and communication pave the way for a kind of fight for power and authority for their lives. Precious Auntie rejects LuLing's marriage to coffin maker since he is her enemy who killed her father and husband. However LuLing resists such a desire and shouts: "It's not for you to decide" (Tan, 2001: 151). The disagreement about the marriage is a kind of struggle to overcome oppression and to have an authentic self.

Mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves. Correspondingly, girls tend to remain part of the dyadic primary mother-child relationship itself. This means that a girl continues to experience herself as involved in issues of merging and separation, and in an attachment characterized by primary identification and the fusion of identification and object choice (Chodorow, 1978: 166-7).

Mothers are at the center of development of their daughters' identities, and thus girls feel connected to their mothers. However much they try to separate themselves from their mothers, they are unable to differentiate themselves from them, and their identities are merged with their mothers. Mother is a guide, protector, shelter and an affectionate person and thus she is an important figure for children.

... the mother always plays an active part in the origin of the disturbance, especially in infantile neuroses or in neuroses whose aetiology undoubtedly dates back to early childhood. In any event, the child's instincts are disturbed, and this constellates archetypes which, in their turn, produce fantasies that come between the child and its mother as an alien... (Jung, 1981: 85).

The fact that daughters and mothers do not have a relationship based upon mutual understanding makes daughters feel alone. Their mothers turn into an alien and frightening being for them. They assume themselves as unwanted children. However, mothers want their daughters to have better lives than they have and they do not want them suffer like they did. Daughters cannot comprehend such an intention.

The broken bond between the mother and the daughter causes Precious Auntie commit suicide and this fact results in the psychological breakdown of LuLing. Separation of daughter from her mother causes her to suffer since "separation from mother, breaking of dependence...remain difficult psychological issues..." (Chodorow, 1974: 58). LuLing falls into the pool and is almost drowned. After she is rescued, she looks at the point where she saw the phantom and says "I saw her [Precious Auntie] down here...She asked me to help her get out from under the rocks" (Tan, 2001: 247). The death and loss of mother create a trauma and it seems that LuLing cannot overcome such a loss. Her action of falling into pool stems from her anxiety since she wants to reunite with her mother. She is captured by "anxiety which is a reaction to a 'traumatic situation'- an experience of HELPLESSNESS in the face of an accumulation of excitation that cannot be discharged" (Evans, 2006: 10). Such a traumatic situation occurs when LuLing faces the loss of her mother. Precious Auntie gives LuLing a pocket in which there are an oracle bone and a photograph of herself. Both the bone and the photograph are links to the past, memories and especially the bond between mother and daughter.

...The first one was the oracle bone she [Precious Auntie] had shown me when I [LuLing] was a girl, telling me I could have it when I had learned to remember...I clutched that bone to my heart... I held the picture [Precious Auntie's] up to the light.... And then I realized: her ace, her hope, her knowledge, her sadness- they were mine. Then I cried and cried, glutting my heart with joy and self-pity (Tan, 2001: 172-3).

To transfer the objects from past to present stands for conveying identity, culture and heritage to new generations. The oracle bone that LuLing hides refers to her link to her mother and mother's identity. "The way 'bone' is written can also stand for 'character'. That's why we use that expression 'It's in your bones'. It means, 'That's your character'" (Tan, 2001: 255). When Ruth learns about her family's past, she reconciles with her mother, LuLing and moves to her house to take care of her. Ruth says: "I feel more myself" (Tan, 2001: 220). Reconciliation with the mother

enables her to feel her essence and as Shen states "...[t]o the daughters, cultural and ethnic identity is possible only when they can fully identify themselves with their mothers through their maturation into womanhood" (Shen, 2009: 6). The mother desires to have ethnic identity rather than totally experiencing acculturation in American life. LuLing helps Ruth, her daughter, to attach her ethnic identity by shaping her. Hence the grandmother, Precious Auntie, and the mother, LuLing are important figures for Ruth to reconcile with ignored Chinese culture. Ruth reconciles with her mother and Chinese heritage through the memories. She learns the history of China, her family and how the war between China and Japan destroys the lives of people there and forces them to immigrate to America. This is how Ruth attains her real self. LuLing says "[a] mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin" (Tan, 2001: 191). The quotation illustrates the close connection between mother and daughter to shape the identity of the daughter, hence the novel is entitled as *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

Fischer asserts that LuLing is the person who brings "revelations of traditions" whereas Ruth is the one who recollects the "disseminated identities" (Fischer, 1986: 198). The daughter born in America, is stuck between the East and the West and the mother tries to make her familiar to Chinese culture. The fact that the mother remembers the past and she writes the stories in American society stands for a kind of defense of her ethnic heritage.

There is a bond between mothers and daughters since "women are described as resembling/being the unconscious" (Whitford, 1991: 67). The unconscious of mothers arouses in the daughter's unconscious and it is the continuation of the mother's unconscious through her daughter's. Each daughter reconciles with her mother and they are able to unite in a similar identity with better life standards. As mothers have anxieties to bring their daughters up, they seem like strict beings. As Chodorow asserts "mothers transmitted to their own anxieties and conflicts about femininity" (Chodorow, 2004: 102); the mothers in Tan's novel transmit their own experiences and anxieties to their daughters whom they wish to be strong individuals.

To conclude, Tan illustrates ethnic anxiety by portraying the relationship between the mothers and the daughters. The mothers are influential characters in the lives of their daughters since the daughters may take their mothers as a role model or they ignore their mothers and follow a different way. The daughters in Tan's novel construct a relation with their mothers in order not to be assimilated and acculturated in Americanized life. In order to have an authentic self, they realize that past and heritage should not be ignored because they create the present. The diasporic mother, LuLing, functions to restore the totality of individuality of her daughter, Ruth, by

making her understand her worth and reconcile with her Chinese culture and ethnic identity. The connection between the mother and the daughter is important to lessen ethnic anxiety. The mother functions as a transmission of the heritage and culture and the daughter reproduces the culture in the light of the mother. The novel illustrates transformation of daughters to understand their ethnic identities by overcoming their ethnic anxiety. Before comprehending what their mothers want for them, the daughters are angry and reject the consciousness that their mothers want to create. In Tan's novel, reconciliation with the past or the heritage and culture is accomplished through storytelling and memoirs of the mothers consequently this constructs the identity of the daughters. The daughters experience a kind of transformation of their identities. They transform from fragile beings into those who are strong characters and aware of their worth by attaining their ethnic identities.

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