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CONFLICTING PAST AND PRESENT IN GISH JEN'S *WORLD AND TOWN*

Abstract

Patterns of buried history occur and re-occur in course of time in human psychology. In their day to day life people meet new people and these new acquaintances and their activities remind them of good old days. These people fill a part of their life. Diasporas in Gish Jen's novel *World and Town*, is not simply Chinese, but also Cambodian. With the combination of these two diasporic senses, we can compare and contrast the patterns of diasporic perspective differently. Past and present are constantly compared to prove the past to be better, hence the old days in homeland. Gish Jen's *World and Town* portrays a situation in which the surrounding instigating factors make one remember the roots. Apparatuses of modernity are not always helpful in rooting modern ideas in human minds. Two binary worlds are portrayed, which are constantly in conflict. But the spirit of the past is so strong that finally it overpowers the modern rational self. Understanding the patterns of conflicting past and present is the primary aim of this paper.

Keywords: Buried History, Diaspora, Roots, Binary Worlds and Apparatuses of Modernity

The aim of this paper is to evaluate diasporic essence of a person and a whole community who constantly remember their past and a strong urge comes out of their hearts to go back to their roots, to the origin. This spirit of past and sense of loss trouble them more than anything else in that new situation. This is the most vital problem that hampers in their assimilation and acculturation. Our prime concern here will be to evaluate this strong sense of past as a part of self-identity and recognition.

Gish Jen is a Chinese American novelist writing about problems of assimilation in an atmosphere totally new to a person. Her *World and Town* is "A triumph of a novel... Jen reflects America, at Volume V, Issue V May 2017

its best, its worst, its most vulnerable” (The Miami Herald), through the processes of assimilation of two different kinds of immigrants: one Chinese and the other one is Cambodian. Both the families share different kinds of immigration histories, but the assimilation problems are same for both. Problem lies also in the assimilation between the two. Moreover, these peoples’ smooth easy-going lives are often disturbed by the appearing and re-appearing past. Ghost or spirit is always the symbol of the past, which has direct relation to human psychology: occurring again and again in memory. Ghosts or spirits are humanized in the novel, and are given diasporic characteristic to them. Hattie is the protagonist and her feeling of belonging to nowhere foregrounds the novel.

The Prologue of the novel sets the tone for the novel. It is named as “A Lost World”. “- the thousand-year-old cypresses” are symbolic of a grand old culture and civilization of Chinese people. More specifically they are symbolic of Confucius and his ideologies. These are trees standing in between the graves of the descendents of *Kongzi*- Confucius, the great Chinese spiritual and religious leader. The descendents are known as Kongs. Thus it becomes the Kongs’ family cemetery, situated at Qufu, in Shandong province, in China. Among thousands of graves, the grave-mound of Confucius is higher than any other, reclaiming his supremacy. Cemeteries are treasure house of past essences, in this case a reminder of the grand old past, which is going to unfold itself in the novel. Hattie Kong, the protagonist of the novel, herself becomes a cemetery burying memories inside. Her mother was an American missionary, and her father belonged to China. Hattie grew up in Qingdao, also in Shandong, but on the ocean-a port city- “a cosmopolitan city, occupied by the Germans before the Japanese, and a city known therefore for its ‘charming Bavarian architecture’”. Though her parents were from different origins, she becomes a typical Chinese. Hattie’s parents were progressive enough. They were more interested in Hu Shih and Darwin than the old sage. They were against the old rituals and the idea of ‘five relationships’- “what a lot of hogwash it all was” (5). They did not even appreciate women obeying their husbands as children obey their parents. They were also critical of the ritual of burying only the male Kongs and their wives in Qufu. Hattie’s mother also wanted her to have a choice regarding marriage because, “she was growing more American all the time instead of less-”(6). Accordingly, later in life she marries an American and becomes a schoolteacher. She settles in the Riverlake district, the ghetto of many more immigrants from different regions of the

world. Unfortunately she loses her husband Joe and best friend Lee almost at the same time. Her son Josh is also working abroad, who keeps calling his mother. Now, she has a family transcending the human barrier: consisting of dogs. She shares her attention in neighbourhood families also.

Forgetting is a device that helps one to merge with a different kind of lifestyle, a different situation. But if there are some instances which remind one of his/her past, then buried memories are dug up and wounds fester. Hattie settles at a place, where immigration is a day-to-day phenomenon. Each time Hattie sees a family moving in to the town, her past is revived. Each time she notices someone struggling to cope with this new situation, she remembers her own struggle and days of suffering. It is inevitable, because in Hattie's words, "this is an age of flux"(13). She also says how the place has changed in course of time: "Brick Lake overflowed its banks a hundred years ago and came pouring down in a flood to here, and ... the resulting body of water had to be renamed to avoid confusion. Riverlake,...- a lake born of a river"(14). This is symbolic of overflow that occurred in the topography of the town. This flux in population reminds Hattie that once she was also amidst people, who loved her: her husband and her best friend. As much as the noise grows outside, Hattie becomes lonely in heart. She creates a world of her own with three dogs: Cato, Reveille and Annie. Unoka in *Things Fall Apart* says that failure is "more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone"(Achebe 19). In that neighbourhood, she is not the only sufferer; but there are so many. This thinking lessens her sufferings and makes her able to withstand plight. She is inspired by her best friend's words: "The un-lived life is not worth living"(14).

Hattie, though an American since her childhood, is a Chinese in heart. No matter, how far she proceeds in life, how much she becomes progressive, at the end of the day she has to go back to her roots. She was born in China, and that is the reason for which she feels a close affinity with her native land. That is why, when she meets Mr. Chhung, and he asks her: "Chi-nee?" And with pride, she would answer: "Half. My father was Chinese, my mother was white." Hattie's excitement in talking can be seen, whenever China is mentioned:

"You speak Chi-nee?"

"I do. I grew up in China- a city called Qingdao. When I was going up they spelled it T-S-I-N-G-T-A-O..."

“Eat Chi-nee food?”

“Do I eat Chinese food? Of course.”(22) One other instance of Hattie’s weakness for China is, she used to teach Mandarin in school. This is not only to earn money, but the reflection of her inner urge to learn the language well and make the next generation learn the language, through which they will be able to know their own culture, own roots, because language or literature is the mirror of a culture. Hattie likes the surrounding of Riverlake. The narrator says: “Hattie likes the barns, especially. It’s hard to say why plain nature would be improved by a red barn or two, but she does feel it so. May be it is just *the Chinese in her*, always partial to the civilized...” (19)

Hattie’s spirit is one that never submits to the sorrows and sufferings of the world. She is always inspired by a spirit world, a world left behind long ago. She is like a “Bamboo: the plant that, as every Chinese knows, bends but does not break” (26). She is always encouraged either by her dead father, or by Lee, or Joe- all dead, but matter the most for her than this living world. She wants to contact with the dead from past. This thinking is initiated whenever she receives an e-mail from someone. She tells in her mind, “Joe! Lee! I’ve been thinking about you!”(41) In her days of youth Hattie was called by Joe, Miss Combustible: she was always provoked by the blindness of the world than its beauty. She was an activist against all the staff firings, and library closings in Vietnam. She fought them all. But, now is the age of her reconstitution, taking account of her works. While recollecting Lee’s words from an old warrior: “I’ll but lie and bleed awhile. Then I will rise and fight again.”(25).

Hattie has one son who stays away from her. He wants to marry one girl named Serena, who is a Chinese Brazilian girl. Hattie is so engrossed with the past that she does not deny or ponder over even once over the matter. The issue here is that this girl also has a history that is connected somewhere or the other with Hattie’s national history. Her weaker point is known to her son well. That’s why he attacks her pulling the exact thread that makes her weak and leaves her with no answer. He tells her, “She’s very warm. You know- Chinese. Speaks Chinese, by the way, Russian and Portuguese and English. Her parents are very Chinese, too. Especially her mother”(296). Using all theses emotional tricks, he persuades his mother.

E-mails are like pokers for her, they are messages from her relatives who are very much in trouble due to some family issues. They are very superstitious and that is why thinking that spirits of those people of the family, who were not given a decent burial at their family cemetery at Qufu, are responsible for everything wrong that has been going on in the family. Hattie has a progressive mind and she does not believe in all these things. For her all these rubbish have no use in this twenty first century. But it is a ritual in Chinese society, very important, very valuable. Because “Chinese have always sent bones home, having been brought up from birth to recite *Shu gaoqianzhang, luo ye gui gen*: Fallen leaves return to their roots.”(41) These Chinese people make a web of superstitions by associating various words: ancestors, luck and tradition.

In course of time, Hattie becomes all responsible for all her family decisions, past and future of the family. It is imposed upon her from nowhere. She is away from a life overseas. But past is the recurring motive here that each time Hattie tries to penetrate in her own small world, which is free from outward worries, she is disturbed by the past, a world demanding much more from her. For the Chinese, age matters, kinship matters, affinity matters. Knowingly or unknowingly, she becomes the sole family head after her younger brothers’ death. Her revolutionary spirit is thus given a shape or else one can say, caged; because from now onwards she is required to act in a certain way, mostly fixed. A whole lot of people, a society is looking at her, her works; being a Confucian she cannot escape all these. But the progressive self in Hattie does not content to all pleadings of her niece and she gives stern replies:

“This is the twenty first century, excuse me.”

“I am a scientist of sorts, please recall. A retired scientist, but still a scientist.”

“This is hogwash, don’t you see? Hogwash!” (42)

She thinks that in this twenty first century remaining stuck to superstitions is a mere hogwash.

Hattie, though calls all these things hogwash, is not totally free from all worries and thoughts of history. Appearance and reality are not always the same. At the outset, Hattie gives the impression that she is modern in thinking, but in reality she is not. After hearing so many times about the family troubles from her niece and other relatives, her psychology takes a stern turn inside. But she shows as if she is unaffected by all these issues. Somewhere or the other in her mind she feels as if the consecutive deaths of her husband and best friend are results of her arrogance. Even she goes to the extent of thinking that her arrogance may have influenced her

neighbour's fate also. While writing an e-mail, Hattie says that probably Tina thinks that in order to avoid troubles, "the graves should be moved. I do not believe so, but who knows, maybe you are right. Recently my neighbours, too, had a terrible thing happen..." (387). She stops and cannot write ahead of this. She dreams for a few nights that her parents are "waving their arms, whether in warning or greeting is not clear" (382). She sees "Qufu- the ancient trees, the mounds, the dust. The airless air. Though this Qufu lies right on the beach, somehow, like Qingdao; some of the grave mounds are made of sand"(382). This is the time that compelled Hattie to ponder over the matter again. All these things made Hattie's tone indecisive. She says, "I don't know what to do". When she talks about all these things with Grace, she cries and decides, "I have to do something" (383). Her reply to her niece's repetitive e-mails is reflective of her realization:

I have reconsidered my decision re: the graves. I do not myself believe in this sort of superstitious nonsense, let me say. But as I have come to see that many are in distress, I would like to do what I can. And so, all right. If you can arrange for a bone picker, I'd like to meet with him or her this weekend. (384) {Italics author's own}

Hattie conforms to the urges of her relatives and asks the niece to help her in getting a bone-picker to get the ashes from the graves.

Though for the family people of Hattie it is very important to send the ashes to Qufu, on the other hand, Hattie is suggested by Greta, "Some people are keeping their parents' ashes instead of burying them. I know someone who made a receptacle out of a prayer wheel. She put it in her kitchen, so she can give it a spin every now and then" (384). Hattie thinks that these graveyards are dear to her because she does not have anyone with her there and therefore in her subconscious mind she feels as if she is sending her courage away. She keeps the ashes some days with her in an urn and after a long time only she sends it. Though she does all these, over and over she asserts, "I am modern, like my parents. Of a scientific disposition, as you know" (385). This is only because she has been feeling insecure if her position after doing this is not in crisis. After receiving and burying the ashes of the far away relatives, the relatives from China feel secure and express their hope that from now onwards Hattie also will find her "*fengshui better all the time too*" (464), though they know that Hattie does not believe in all these things.

Hattie is like an unread history, untrodden land, which unfolds itself with the coming of this Cambodian family and Carter. Her life is a mere role-playing: roles of a widow, mother, matriarch, scientist and a community member since the death of her husband and best friend. She has been suffering from something inexpressible through words. She has contact with her relatives and her son through e-mails and phone-calls. But these things are unable to cater to her heart. She has been living a life of retirement and “self-imposed isolation” and she needs company to share her loneliness. At this point of time, a rhythm comes back to her heart in guise of the Cambodian family and Carter, old lover of hers. Katherine E. Echols rightly puts this new condition and assimilation with this Chhung family, “The Chhungs' difficulty assimilating and Hattie’s developing relationship with the children, particularly the fifteen-year-old Sophy, recalls her own memories of being an immigrant, and her intervention in their lives is an ethic of care that forces her to reconsider her sense of self and sense of place”(Echols 1). Human psychology is not always something predictable. This new busy schedule of hers reminds her more of the past, each time she counters some new incidents.

Hattie meets Ratanak Chhung for the first time and she feels some kind of affiliation with him. She comes to know that originally Ratanak is also Chinese. From this aspect we come to know that this novel is not a call from the past for Hattie only, but for Chhung, his wife and his family also. In the course of history he and his ancestors were doubly displaced. In one of the encounters, Chhung opens up his history, “My grandparents Chi-nee. Come from Chi-nah. My father speak- Teochew dialect. But me, no...”(111). This incident reminds her of a past, of which she herself is a part. As we feel a sense of loss in Chhung’s voice, the same tone can be heard in Hattie’s words. An undertone of loss is overwhelmingly present in Hattie’s words, “Once upon a time I spoke better Chinese than English. But yes. Now I speak both equally poorly.”(111) The implication here is that she is comfortable neither with American nor with Chinese ways of living. Now Hattie feels that she is cut off from her roots and blown through by the severe wind of reality. Her feet are neither here, nor there.

Ratanak and his wife Mum, both are often disturbed by their past, their immigration history. The plight of leaving one’s familiar ways of life is like harassment for these people. Jen says through

Sophy, their daughter “how her dad flips out sometimes, and how her mom misses Cambodia” (112). This troublesome spirit of past makes them feel insecure all the time. Mum resists, in her own way, becoming an integral part of this newly imposed way of life, “how even though she’s been here forever she still eats with her hands if she’s in a hurry, my dad has to tell her she should eat with a spoon and fork every time” (116-7). She does not have faith in new devices or apparatuses. She thinks, “college doesn’t make people happy... its more important to be good than smart” (116).

Ratanak comes to know that Hattie used to teach Chinese in school. After knowing this, a sense to make his children learn about their origins, their culture, the traditions and so on make him desperate and that’s why he requests Hattie to teach Sophy Chinese. Though it has been a long time of leaving China and Chinese culture behind, their hearts have always been remained weak for China and anything and everything belonging to China. Ratanak expresses his satisfaction by saying:

“Fate sent you for teach Sophy.”
 “Chinese? To teach her Chinese?”
 “Chi-nee.” (111)

Moreover, these people are very much religious in heart. They regard Hattie as one who is sent by God to give them a touch of good old days. They think even God also wants them to sustain their Chinese self.

Ratanak offers to pay Hattie for teaching his daughter. But Hattie in turn says that it would be her pleasure to teach Sophy Chinese. In fact “she’s been thinking of adding some calligraphy to her bamboo anyway- afraid as she is that she’s losing her Chinese” (112). These lines imply that at any cost Chhung wants to keep his and his family’s older Chinese self alive. Hattie also, on the other hand, wants to enliven her Chinese lexicon and thus keep her root alive. Besides, she (and others also) wants the coming generations to prolong and sustain their Chinese identity. But in spite of all their efforts and endeavours to keep the origin intact, they feel some insecurity in heart as if they are losing something very dear to them. Not even now, long ago Hattie’s father expressed this insecurity, “-the essence of China. Though what does that matter here?”(112). The same ironical undertone of a sense of loss can be heard in Hattie’s voice also. She comes to a

mutual friendship with Sophy and unfolds her life stories “how it was like being carried out to sea by a riptide. How she has been swimming for shore for fifty years.”(112)

Sophy’s father, very religious in heart is a true follower of Buddhism and believes in teachings of Buddha. He blames Pol Pot regime for their displacement. They associate *Dhamma* with other ways of life and comfort themselves. He remarks,

Our land needs two wheels. One is the wheel of *Dhamma*- that is the Buddhist wheel, the eightfold path, the way. The other is the wheel of law. If the wheel of law is not strong, the cart cannot go. If the wheel of the *Dhamma* is not strong, the cart cannot go, either. When Pol Pot came, the wheel of the *Dhamma* was okay, but the wheel of law was not good. Because of all the corruption. (133)

Chhung believes that if religion and law both are not in balance, a nation can never progress.

The second section of the novel, “Sophy: How They Even Got Here” gives us Chhung’s views regarding the contrast between American ways and Cambodian or Chinese ways. For him always the Cambodian or Chinese way is better. Each and everything he encounters, he makes a contrast of it with the Cambodian. It is his weakness for the past, blind fascination for the origin that bars him from appreciating the newer ways of life, or accepting new life ways to be better than the earlier. Starting from food to religion, Chhung compares with American things and declare the superiority of the Cambodians. Ratanak has diabetes and heart problems and he is suggested by doctor to eat brown rice. But he does not believe in diabetes. He even does not like the brown rice which is found in America. For him, “*It doesn’t taste like rice, Cambodians eat white rice.*”(141).

Next, we are told that Cambodian rules are very strict. Their life ways are rule bound that even is very hard bound. The author says Cambodians are just strict. So that if anyone does anything wrong, Sophy’s father would not say that you were wrong. Instead he says, “*You should be ashamed to have been born. You should be ashamed. Why were you born? Why?*”(143) Respect is very important thing for the Cambodians. Sophy’s father thinks that if someone had caused harm to one’s honour, he does not have the right to live. He does not want his children to become

like Americans. Sophy is an obedient daughter, but Sarun is not an obedient son. For Ratanak, whenever one commits mistake, he must have the repentance and he should confess it by saying: “*we are sorry we are born. There is no reason for us to live. We’re sorry we are born. We’re sorry.*” (143) {*Italics author’s own*}

These are not only some contrasting elements but also some devices through which Chhungs unconsciously want to keep a distance from the Americans. These differences help them to keep away from losing their identity. These help in standing away without merging with the Americanness, a futile effort to stay away from the engrossing influence of Americanness. Another instance of this strategy is to keep Cambodian names for the children. Though some Cambodian families keep American or English names for their children, Sophy’s father keeps Cambodian names for his children, all with meanings like “hardworking”, “polite” and “beautiful”. Sophy’s father deeply admires Cambodian ways of life and wants his children to get influenced by these. Jen says, “Sophy’s dad said if they ever went to Cambodia they would see how people are so respectful and polite, not like here.” (160)

Sophy is so much engrossed with the “being Cambodian” rules that she becomes outdated for her own generation. She hangs out with an American boy named Ronnie. He gives her his guitar and teaches her how to play. In between they talk what to do with their lives. He suggests that he should just be a rock star and she should be a model. But Sophy feels in herself that “becoming a model is not realistic for a Cambodian” (153-4). On the other hand Sophy’s sister Sopheap wants to make an “ironical return to Cambodia”. She says that she is “going to be an independent woman and not get married or have children or anything” (320). In ancient Cambodia women were more powerful than men, and that she is willing to go back to that and be like a she-man.” This is nothing other than the spirit of the past that makes up these people’s mind in a certain way.

Ratanak Chhung, in spite of all the miseries he underwent during his process of displacement, feels in the core of his heart that a day will come when they will be able to return to their origin. Myths or stories have always been comforter to people in need. Religion also gives new hopes, options to think again and comfort at the time of distress. Therefore, religion is the last resort for

a man in trouble, when there is no hope; religious belief gives people a new hope and this hope keeps people alive. Sophy's father keeps his faith intact believing one of the monks' sayings: "Do you know what the monks say? They say every thousand years we return to places we've lived before" (164). This was an ultimate faith that instills courage in the hearts of this diasporic community. Even he has deep belief in the Bible's saying: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss" (179). This kind of saying, on the other hand, does not let people get defeated. Even if one fails, he feels that it is his fault that he did not do it with that sincerity. "Man can be destroyed, but not defeated" (Ernest Hemingway).

Despite all these, Chhung had a confident remark regarding America's power. They are fascinated by power of America. After watching the DVD, *Killing Fields*, these scenes are very real, terrorist attacks are very severe and inhuman. Then, Sophy's father says, "He cannot win. American destroy him right away. American verry srrong"(267). Hattie remembers her father's saying which was same with this. He said that America is not weak like China. This is not only a simple assertion, but a strong feeling that America will win over them. All their resistances, quests for identity, clutches upon older culture and traditions are not worth anything. They are not going to be able to free themselves from the clutches of America.

Thus we see an overwhelming sense of past penetrating into two different people: Chinese and Cambodian. There are some, who share the both: Chinese-Cambodian. This sense of past on one hand makes their presence bitter in that locality and they feel like *waigoren*. On the other hand this sense of past gives them inspiration to work hard and sustain a hope of going back to the originary. This sense does not let them lose hope and thus in the novel through these two peoples, we sense the diasporic urge to go back, to revisit the past and have a feeling of satisfaction.

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