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Portrayal of Bicultural Daughters and Immigrant Mothers in Amy Tan's "Two Kinds"

Abstract

This paper outlines the specific ways in which the bicultural daughters depicted in Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" struggle with identifying themselves with her mothers' cultures and the dominating American culture in which they grow-up. It correlates the relationships between immigrant mothers and their bicultural daughters and provides examples of this bond as viewed in this short-story. This study brings out the prominence of current criticism the struggles portrayed in story that a bicultural daughter deals with while attempting to revive her mother's culture while being forced to adapt the dominant culture.

Keywords: Cross-Culturalism, American Culture, Bicultural Daughters, Immigrant Mothers

Amy Tan is one of the most original and dynamic Asian-American writers of American literature. She has strongly affiliated herself with two driving forces in the literary world of the late twentieth century: cross-culturalism and feminism. This positive union of themes and style does not surface from a planned attempt to manoeuvre the fiction world, but from Amy Tan's internal struggles with self, society, mother, and the past. Amy Tan herself parallels the first-generation Chinese-American characters who people her top-selling inter-

generational works, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). Influenced by the stories of memorable women throughout her mother's life, Amy Tan has in these works honoured a sisterhood whose power and vigour are as inspirational to her writing as is her typical cultural upbringing.

It is significant to read and understand mixed race stories because they give a chance for us to open our eyes, to acquire new perspectives and thus revive ourselves. Taking his concept a step further, the prominence of analysing mixed and bi-cultural stories to acquire new perspectives on the ever-changing world is perceived in the very makeup of the contemporary America - a nation where more and more people are identifying as ethnically and culturally fused. By examining literature that has been penned by and about bi-cultural people, specifically bicultural women, the challenges encountered by this marginalized group will extend what it means to be an American woman with multiple identities.

The prevailing ideas of race in America require, multicultural and bicultural, authors to choose one identity, thus erasing others that they might believe. This is the reason why daughters in mixed race and cultural literature manage to have tough relationships with their mothers. They regard themselves to be "American" and belonging to their mother's culture, but the prevalent culture in America - and sometimes even the immigrant mother - tells bicultural daughters to choose only one, leaving no space for hybridization. And multicultural and bicultural authors are possibly to create characters who struggle with their identity because that is what happens to them. If the author's writing is set in that society, the characters will also have such struggles.

"Two Kinds" is a short-story in Amy Tan's hugely successful maiden novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. She intended the novel to be read as a loose collection of interconnected stories, but it is mostly referred as a novel. Most of the short-stories come out in periodicals which purchased the serial rights to the book prior to its publication. It is initially published in *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1989, one month before the book is released. In "Two Kinds," Jing-Mei learns something new from her mother's tales as well. In this short-story, one sees that compliance of the ethnic culture often comes when the daughter has grown up, and is recollecting the tales that her mother used to recount her.

> America was where all my mother's hopes lay. She had come to San Francisco in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. Things could get better in so many ways. (258)

In “Two Kinds,” Jing-Mei’s mother only narrates her one story - the story of her twin sisters who passed away in China. Jing-Mei’s mother attempts to implant her Chinese moral beliefs of how an ideal woman must behave in her American daughter by story-telling - a correlation to the homeland’s concept of identity. In “Placing Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Gooze write that “no single or fixed definition of identity can be universally applied” (xiii). This present paper also discusses about the relationship with another Chinese-American family portrayed through “Two Kinds.” Amy Tan was born in America to immigrant Chinese parents. Yet, she is unambiguous that her first-person short-story “Two Kinds” is fictional. Even though it can stand alone as a short-story - since it also has been published separately in the *Atlantic Monthly* - “Two Kinds” is a slice of the novel, *The Joy Luck Club*.

A story becomes universal when the reader is brought into the story by the story-teller who is also the protagonist. And when the narrator is disclosing her emotions and experiences growing up, all readers can connect better or will want to connect to such instances. The narrator in “Two Kinds” has grown up and is writing retrospectively of her childhood days in a universal manner. “Two Kinds” happens totally in America. The central character and narrator Jing-Mei grows up in San Francisco in 1950s. Due to her nightmarish experiences back home in China, Jing-Mei’s mother is all for her daughter’s assimilation into American culture, just as long as she attains perfection:

> Every night after dinner my mother... would present new tests, taking her examples from stories of amazing children that she had read in Ripley’s Believe It or Not or Good Housekeeping, Reader’s Digest, or any of a dozen other magazines she kept in a pile in our bathroom. My mother got these magazines from people whose houses she cleaned... She would look through them all, searching for stories about remarkable children. (259)

It is due to these pressures from so-called phenomenal prodigies that Jing-Mei grows to neglect her mother, in spite of her mother’s purpose. After being questioned on things such as the state capitals of America, capital cities in Europe, magic-tricks, and other memorabilia, Jing-Mei grows bored of her mother’s strategies. More so, she feels embarrassed because she cannot quite reach her mother’s ethics.

> And after seeing, once again, my mother’s disappointed face, something inside me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night I looked in the mirror… and when I saw only

> my face staring back - and understood that it would always be this ordinary face - I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! (260)

In the scene above, Jing-Mei feels that her accomplishment is bonded to her appearance. Jing-Mei has learnt that a prosperous Chinese woman in America accomplishes greatness with both her proficiency and her gorgeous look. But despite Jing-Mei's mother wishing her to become a prodigy of talents and looks, an ethic she seems to have assimilated the American society, Jing-Mei still perceives an unpleasantness about herself when she cannot reach her mother's ethics. And it is through this anguish of not feeling good enough that Jing-Mei realizes that she does not want to become the child her mother wants her to be. It is Jing-Mei's mother's Chinese spirit that leads Jing-Mei into American condition. By revolting against her mother – in spite of having internalized American ethics for her daughter's welfare - the girl is renouncing her mother's dreams and stating an identity devoid of perfection. Jing-Mei continues to look at the "ugly girl" she views in the mirror, as rebellion and anger become sources of her identity:

> And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me - a face I had never seen before... The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. She and I were the same. I had new thoughts, wilful thoughts - or, rather, thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not. (260)

Part of the plan to remain unaffected by her mother includes Jing-Mei not taking her daily piano classes sincerely. Indeed, Jing-Mei's tutor is partly deaf and partly blind, making it effortless for Jing-Mei to "be lazy and get away with mistakes, lots of mistakes" (263). To such an extent that Jing-Mei extremely embarrasses her parents at a local talent show because she is unrehearsed. After playing her terrible recital of the piece "Pleading Child" - whose title itself connotes the inadequacy of a baby - Jing-Mei feels "the shame of [her] mother and father as they sat stiffly though the rest of the show" (265). She not only fools herself in front of her parents, but also before the total audience. The worst part is what Jing-Mei gets from her mother - "a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything" (265), telling Jing-Mei that her mother perceives only hyperbolic triumph as the method to assimilate in America. It is through this incident where one can see the redoubling clash between the bi-cultural daughter and her immigrant mother. Only two days after the terrible recital, Jing-Mei's mother urges her to practice the piano again. After yelling back and forth to each other, her mother pulls Jing-Mei towards the piano and shoves her hard onto the bench. A tear-streaked Jing-Mei reacts, "You want me to be someone that I'm not! …I'll never be the kind of

daughter you want me to be!" Jing-Mei's mother asserts, "Only two kinds of daughters… Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter! (266).

It is not until this feud between the two that one can see the mother's loss while fleeing China years before as being a supporting factor to the bond between Chinese-American Jing-Mei and her immigrant mother. Heretofore, Jing-Mei's mother has attempted to impose American talents on her daughter. Not realizing that Jing-Mei's mindset of revolting against parental regulations is ideally American, her mother is embarrassed by Jing-Mei's resistance. And ultimately, at the story's climax, Jing-Mei employs the most dynamic weapon she thinks to attack her mother: "And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that's when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. 'Then I wish I'd never been born!' I shouted. 'I wish I were dead! Like them'" (266). Instantaneously, the retrospective Jing-Mei wishes she has not said those words. But at the moment, she does feel in that manner. Jing-Mei, even though still just a child, believed that if she cannot do what she wants to do - if she cannot be the American girl that she knows she is - then she would rather not live in her mother's house. She would rather be dead than have to obey her Chinese mother's orders. Most of daughters seek to become the opposite of their mothers in order to discover their own identity but find slowly that they remain profoundly bonded by the umbilical cord. This is viewed towards the end of "Two Kinds" when Jing-Mei is an adult, her mother is dead, and she returns to her parents' residence. She takes up the same music that she failed to play at the talent-show, and "for the first time, or so it seemed, I noticed the piece on the right-hand side" (268). She realizes that both pieces are part of a larger piece. Whereas she strived to play "Pleading Child" when she is younger, now she is able to play both that and the second piece titled "Perfectly Contented" and realize that both "were two halves of the same song" (268). Moreover, all of the habits and rituals that Jing-Mei's mother forced her to endure paid off in the end because she now plays the piano well-enough. After all these years, It is not until Jing-Mei plays both pieces that she realizes just how intensely she remains bonded with her mother. Because unlike her mother, Jing-Mei "did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be" (267) - an American beliefs that her mother has adopted for her daughter. Because Jing-Mei is both Chinese and American, growing up she thought that her hybridity meant that she could not become great. And so, rather than living up to her nightmares of failure, she rather failed to live up to her mother's dreams of success. Marie Booth Foster states in "Voice, Mind, Self" that these "problems of biculturalism" are witnessed when "daughters who do

not know their mothers" "importance" …cannot know their own" (225). It is not until going back to her mother's residence as an adult that Jing-Mei realizes that it is possible to be both pleading and content. Amy Tan overstates the clash that drives to a "balanced blend," admitting the Chinese and the American attitudes of herself to coexist. "Two Kinds" perfectly portray the struggles that an immigrant mother and her bicultural daughter endure, and bring awareness to this specific mother-daughter combination in America.

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