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Identifying American Asian Literature

The term ‘Asian American’ is in use since the late 1960’s and it includes people from diverse national origins like the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, East Indian, Pakistani, Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, Laotian and Pacific Islanders. The term ‘Asian American’ is intrinsically complex. It embraces all the contending sociopolitical and cultural forces that affect the daily life of the Asian Americans. This semiotic status of the term ‘Asian American’ shapes the understanding of Asian American literature.

Frank Chin and his co-editors limited their selections to three subgroups – Chinese, Japanese and Filipino, for inclusion in their Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian – American Writers (1974) whereas the editors of Home to Stay - Asian American Women’s Fiction (1990), Sylvia Watanabe and Carol Bruchac, have included the works of Korean and Asian Indian writers. King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi chose a non-prescriptive approach in their, Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography (1988), where they list works of writers of Asian descent, who had settled in the United States or Canada, regardless of where they were born.

In her book, Reading Asian American Literature - From Necessity to Extravagance, (1993) Sau-ling Cynthia Wong says that the diversity of perception, is a “result of Asian American literature’s inter-discursivity in history and in contemporary life” (8).

Asian American literature ensures that the voices of the Asian American are heard, and their experiences interpreted. It proves the power of literature to break through barriers of culture and national boundaries.

The Chinese Americans

It is estimated that the Chinese Americans number more than 2.3 million (Schaefer 2006: 334). The Chinese were the first Asians to migrate to America. The severe drought that destroyed the crops in the Canton province in 1847 – 1850 led to the massive influx of labourers to build the transcontinental railroad in the 1860's. In 1882 the United States Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act, which, among other things, prevented the formation of Chinese families in the United States. Since they intended eventually to return to China and also because of the enormous expense of the journey most men left their families behind. The long and arduous separation often threatened the family unit and made life difficult on both sides of the Pacific.

The men were busy labouring eighteen to twenty hours a day to earn their livelihood and were also troubled by their White tormentors and immigration officials. The women who were left behind had to shoulder the responsibilities alone and a few who risked journeying alone to the United States were either kidnapped or sold to prostitution. The effects of this were not reversed till the Immigration laws in 1965.

Spread of Chinese Americans

'Chinese American' is a term of recent coinage used to refer to the persons of Chinese ancestry residing permanently in the United States. In 1915, the Chinese-American Citizens Alliance was founded to protect their civil rights, and this also indicated the psychological shift of commitment and the importance of the American part in Chinese American.

Much of the creative energy had been consumed in the breaking away from Chinatowns, where the Chinese had all huddled together in the beginning, and the rest had been devoted to the pursuit of middle class American values – financial and social status.

The predominantly male labourers and the poorly educated peasants were engrossed in supporting their families left behind in Southern China. The gender- imbalanced bachelor societies in Chinatowns experienced physical and psychological hardships which were coupled with limited schooling, and this did not favour artistic creation.

Later as they developed, there was no dearth of Chinese- American doctors, lawyers and engineers, but writers were few.

A Cultural Creation

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The emergence of Chinese American literature labelled a cultural creation. There were few firsthand records left by the nineteenth century Chinese immigrants, the first generation Chinese Americans.

A glimpse of its original cultural creation can be gained from the collection of folk rhymes of Chen Yuanzhu and Hu Zhaozhong, exhibiting harsh conditions forcing young men to emigrate coupled with their wishes for success.

Vestiges of the oral tradition of Chinese American can be found in the genre of the wooden fish song or 'muyu' which is a small percussion instrument. These lyrics created a crucible of folk sensibility.

A few poems carved by immigrants into the wooden walls of the barracks on Angel Island in San Francisco bay which was used as an immigration station between 1910 and 1940, were preserved through community effort and collected in Island (1980). They constitute the angry poignant voices of the early Chinese immigrants. Songs of Gold Mountain : Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown, (1987) by Marlon K Hom who rendered selected poems from the 1911 and 1915 volumes of Jinshangeji, were songs composed in written form by members of the San Francisco Chinatown. They covered topics of American hardships, their triumphant return to China, the pain of the separation of family and the Republican Revolution of Dr. Sun Yat Sen.

The Second Generation of Chinese Americans

From the ranks of the second generation Chinese Americans who started writing imaginatively about their experiences were Pardee Lowe with his Father and Glorious Descendant (1943) and Jade Snow Wong who wrote Fifth Chinese Daughter (1945).

The works of Lowe and Wong were autobiographical and charted Chinese American life from tradition to modernity and from conformity to individual freedom. Twenty years lapsed before Virginia Lee published her semi-autobiographical The House That Tai Ming Built (1963). These works confirmed a stereotyped image of the Chinese and their culture. They portrayed the Chinese immigrant either withdrawn and totally Chinese or quietly assimilated and unobtrusively American. These books are however considered landmarks in Chinese-American Literature.

C Y Lee's The Flower Drum Song (1957) catered to the white stereotypes of the Chinese and earned great popularity. This was followed by Louis Chu's Eat a Bowl of Tea (1961) which provides a tale of community renewal in the postwar period. This novel departs from the autobiographical and provides a narrative of community life in the New York Chinatown after World War II. Chuang Hua's Crossings (1968) is a sustained example of high modernism in Chinese American literature picturing attempts to come to terms with deracination and has affinities with Hualing Nieh's Mulberry and Peach (1981) where the refugee woman, unable to resolve her conflicts splits into two personalities.

The Women Writers

The women writers of the Far East, can be traced to the ninth-century Chinese poet Yu Xuanji who produced some of the finest lyric poetry in her language, while writers such as Murasaki Shikibu, in her innovative novel written in the early eleventh century The Tale of Genji, and Sei Shonagon, in her Pillow Book completed in the year 1002, recorded the flowering and decadence of the imperial court in Heian, Japan around the turn of the eleventh century. Despite such literary accomplishments, the essential social and political status of women in the medieval period declined.

By the twentieth century, Asian American women writers had produced a rich body of literature. There are, however, very few who received literary awards and creative writing fellowships like Gwendolyn Brooks who received the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for her poem Annie Allen. Alice Walker won the Rosenthal Award of National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1973 for In Love and Trouble (1973), a collection of short stories about black women and Maxine Hong Kingston won the national Book Critics' Circle Award for her The Woman Warrior in 1976.

Despite these impressive achievements, most minority women writers remained virtually unknown. Women, in particular, are now seeking a new understanding of their present goals and life styles. There is strength and diversity in their story, each woman writer writing from her own ethnic perspective, often in a very American setting. They have something unique to share, teaching what it was like to live in a country which always viewed one as an outsider. At the same time, they share the universal tragedy of loneliness, facing anyone who leaves family and homeland, and also many other issues common for sisters of all colours that weave women together.

Amy Tan's Art – Focus on Women in the Face of Adversity

Amy Tan is an artistic member of the Chinese American women writers who addresses the issues of inequality meted out to women in other cultures, the different cultural expectations of women, abortion, friendship, generation gaps between mother and daughter and the strength of women in the face of adversity. The novels of Tan have created an indelible mark on the literary scene depicting the lives of Chinese American women with their generational and cultural differences and her novels has formed the foundation of this study.

Amy Tan's Own Story

Amy Ruth Tan was born to Daisy and John Tan in Oakland, California on 19th February 1952; her parents had emigrated from China in 1949. They had left behind three young daughters, planning first to find a place to live in and then to send for them. This dream was shattered with the Communist Revolution. Tan's mother tried hard, but failed to establish contact with her children.

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Tan won a writing contest when she was eight, mostly due to the influence of her father. Her engineer - Baptist - minister father told her Bible stories, and innumerable fairy tales. When Tan was twelve she learnt of the existence of the sisters, and could relate to the pain which continued to haunt her mother. At fifteen, she lost her brother Peter, a year older than her, to brain tumour. The next year her father succumbed to the same disease.

Her grief-stricken mother, believing that their house was imbalanced in feng shui (wind and water), fled with her two remaining children to Switzerland, where Tan attended the Monte Rosa International College, in Montreux.

At sixteen Amy was arrested for drug possession and later tried to elope with an escaped mental patient who claimed to be a German army deserter. Her mother sent the police after her and Tan was grateful for this help and began college at Oregon, where she met Lou De Mattei, and married him in 1974 against her mother's wishes.

She received a master degree in linguistics at the San Jose State University and she started her Ph.D. programme in linguistics at the University of California but left school after the murder of a close friend.

She worked as a language development specialist for handicapped children, and later took up free lance writing and joined a writing group. She was a workaholic and this led to depression and Tan began seeing a psychiatrist but was soon disillusioned.

In 1985, Tan read a novel Love Medicine (1984) by Louise Erdrich, a set of interwoven stories narrated by different generations of a native American family, and this changed her life, she was captivated by Erdrich's images and voice.

Another great influence on Tan's writing was her mother Daisy, whom Tan refers to as her muse, and the tumultuous life that her mother led in China has served as an inspiration for Tan's novels. Daisy Tan was born to a wealthy Shanghai family. After the death of her father her mother, Jing mei, was raped by a rich man who wanted her to be his concubine. When she gave birth to a son, one of the man's wives claimed him as her own and Jing-mei committed suicide by swallowing opium infused New Year cakes. Years later Daisy entered an arranged marriage with an abusive husband and had to abandon three daughters in China to escape her marriage and came to the United States.

All this led Tan write her novels with the suffering of women in the forefront and she also projected the victory that the women strived for and often achieved.

Today, Tan lives in San Francisco with DeMattei, her husband, and her two Yorkshire terriers. The death of her mother was a very disheartening episode and she is at times haunted by her mother's sense of doom and relies on antidepressants. When she

experienced the loss of her mother she became totally involved with writing and voiced forth her mother's story.

Amy Tan wrote these novels: The Joy Luck Club(1989), The Kitchen God's Wife(1991), The Hundred Secret Senses(1995), The Bonesetter's Daughter(2001), and Saving Fish from Drowning(2005). All her novels were New York Times bestsellers and she was the recipient of various awards. She has also authored a memoir, The Opposite of Fate (2003), two children's books, The Moon Lady (1992) and Sagwa (1994), and numerous articles for magazines. Her work has been translated into thirty five languages such as Spanish, French, and Finnish, Chinese, Arabic, and Hebrew. She was the Creative Consultant for Sagwa, the Emmy-nominated television series for children, which has been aired worldwide. Tan has lectured internationally at universities and her essays and stories are found in hundreds of anthologies and textbooks. She also serves as the Literary Editor for the *Los Angeles Times* magazine, 'West'.

Tan's The Joy Luck Club received the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award and the Commonwealth Gold Award. It has been selected as the American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adults and also selected for the National Endowment for the Arts' Big Read. The Kitchen God's Wife was elected New York Times Notable Book and the American Library Association Notable Book. The Hundred Secret Senses was the finalist for the Orange Prize, and The Bonesetter's Daughter has been the New York Times Notable Book and was also nominated for the IMPAC Dublin Award. Saving Fish from Dying was also nominated for IMPAC Dublin Award and was the Booklist Editors' Choice.

Apart from fiction for adults, Tan has branched out into other kinds of entertainment. Occasionally she indulges her rebellious side by performing with a literary rock band called the Rock Bottom Remainders, a band composed of best – selling authors, along with writers Stephen King and Dave Barry. She specially enjoys performing her signature song “These Boots Were made for walking”. She has joined the San Francisco Symphony for a reading of her work set to music. Tan's debut novel The Joy Luck Club has been reproduced as a movie directed by Wayne Wang, and was released in 1993. She served as Co-producer and Co-screenwriter with Ron Bass for the film adaptation.

The Joy Luck Club

The Joy Luck Club, Tan's maiden novel reveals her power as a master story teller. The novel portrays the stories of four mothers and their daughters. It has been divided into four parts, each of which carries four stories. The Chinese mothers left China wishing to forget all their dark past and start afresh in America. They dreamt of a better future for their children, which would have nothing to do with the China they knew. The mothers wished that their children would speak perfect English and lead free lives without sorrow. Michael Dorris in his review “Mother and Daughters” comments, “The Joy Luck Club is that rare, mesmerizing novel one always seeks but seldom finds. Tracing the poignant

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destinies of two generations of tough, intelligent women, each gorgeously written page welcomes the reader and leads to an enlightenment that, like all true wisdom, sometimes brings pleasure and sometimes sadness”(1).

The Joy Luck Club has a short story sequence and focuses on the Chinese mothers and their American daughters who are at odds with their mothers, and how they later inherit the power of the mother's wisdom and strength. The mothers had become strong, either by seeing their own mothers suffer or by their own suffering. The difficulties they faced made them strong; they did not bend or break when the storms of life hit them hard. They wished that their children would have a bicultural heritage, the best combination that the cultures could offer. But they observed that their children drifted away to embrace only one - the American and the mothers strove to reach out and forcibly link up with their daughters and reveal to them the strength they needed to take from their mother and grand mother. The daughters often experienced moments of revelation after they underwent trauma in life and then they recognised the value of the rich experience of the mother and began to listen and assimilate the mothers' stories. Ben Xu, in his article "Memory and the ethnic self; Reading Amy Tan's, The Joy Luck Club" comments, "They become less resistant to identifying with their mothers and more receptive to the humble wisdom of the previous generations. The change from resistance to acquiescence signifies simultaneously the growth of a mature self and the ethnicization of experience" (15).

Not on Collective Awakening – Concerned More with Individuals

Tan insists that for her, writing is not a political experience; her novels are concerned with individuals rather than collective awakening. In her article "Why I Write" in the Literary Cavalcade she says:

Because my childhood disturbed me, pained me, made me ask foolish questions. And the questions still echo. Why does my mother always talk about killing herself? Why did my father and brother have to die? If I die, can I be reborn into a happy family? Those early obsessions led to a belief that writing could be my salvation, providing me with the sort of freedom and danger, satisfaction and discomfort, truth and contradiction I can't find in anything else in life...

Writing, for me, is an act of faith, a hope that I will discover what I mean by "truth". I also think of reading as an act of faith, a hope that I will discover something remarkable about ordinary life, about myself. And if the writer and the reader discover the same thing, if they have that connection, the act of faith has resulted in an act of magic. To me, that's the mystery and the wonder of both life and fiction - the connection between two individuals who discover in the end that they are more the same than they are different. (14)

The Kitchen God's Wife

Tan followed her initial success with a second critically acclaimed novel, The Kitchen God's Wife. It is the story of a Chinese mother and her daughter in America. The first two chapters are narrated by the American born daughter, Pearl, and then the mother Winnie (the Americanised version of Weili) takes over and the book takes flight as she relates her story from the time she was a young girl in China.

Tan recalls how just after The Joy Luck Club had been published, it had become the best seller, people started asking her about the second book. They, however, warned her that it could be nothing like the first and that the second book was always doomed. In her article "Angst and the Second Novel" Tan recalls a warning from a writer friend and her reaction to it:

"Well, don't sweat over it too much," the other writer said. "The Second Book's doomed no matter what you do. Just get it over with, let the critics bury it, then move on to your third book and don't look back." I saw the bar graphs of my literary career falling over like tombstones...

Who knows where inspiration comes from? Perhaps it arises from desperation. Perhaps it comes from the flukes of the universe, the kindness of muses. Whatever the case, one day I found myself asking, "But *why* is she telling this story?" And she answered back: "Of course I'm crabby! I'm talking, talking, talking, no one to talk to. Who's listening?" "And I realized: a story should be a gift. She needs to *give* her story to someone. And with that answer I was no longer bumping my nose against a dead-end maze. I leaped over the wall and, on the other side, I found enough emotional force to pull me through to the end.

So what I have written finally is a story told by a mother to her daughter, now called The Kitchen God's Wife. And I know there will be those who will say, "Oh, a mother-daughter story, just like The Joy Luck Club". I happen to think the new book is quite different from the old. But yes, there is a mother, there is a daughter. That's what found me, even as I tried to run away from it...

And the story is, in fact, about a woman who does the same thing: she fights to believe in herself. She does battle with myths and superstitions and assumptions-then casts off the fates that accompany them. She doesn't measure herself by other people's opinion... And sometimes, in secret, she lets her imagination run wild with hope."(4,7)

The Hundred Secret Senses

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After The Kitchen God's Wife, Tan created The Hundred Secret Senses, a novel that portrays an exploration of sisterhood.

Olivia the protagonist had Kwan, her half sister, who safeguarded her through life, and showered on her joy, love and care, though she received nothing in return. Olivia's mother Louise was always interested in a lot many programmes and had no time for home or children. Kwan proved to be the perfect honorary baby sitter. Kwan became Olivia's surrogate mother and considered herself responsible for anything that happened in Olivia's life. Kwan believed that she has the ability to communicate with ghosts with her yin eyes (eyes that could see dead people). Olivia was skeptical and fascinated with Kwan's visions and belief in the afterlife. In the second half of the novel, Olivia strived to come to terms with her marriage which was on the verge of breaking up because of their inability to have children and her husband's memories of his earlier girl friend.

Despite the problems, Olivia and Simon went to Changmian, Kwan's native town, on a professional trip to study the cuisines of China with Kwan who accompanied them as interpreter. Kwan narrated the story of her fate in a former life, when she was a one eyed servant girl Nunumu, working for Western missionaries in Changmian in the 1860's and her friendship with Miss Nelly Banner, an American with a complicated love life and a tragic destiny. This past is connected to the present and Kwan believed that Olivia was Nelly Banner. Nunumu in the end disappears and is reincarnated as Kwan, designated to create for Olivia a bridge to reconciliation.

The readers of The Hundred Secret Senses are left reeling under the quick changes of time and space. The world of yin leaves the readers in fantasy wondering what Tan will come up with next.

The Bonesetter's Daughter

The fourth novel of Tan, The Bonesetter's Daughter is as engaging as her previous novels. Ghosts play an important part here too, but they appear only to lead and guide their loved ones. In the preface to the novel Tan acknowledges "As luck and fate would have it, two ghost writers came to my assistance during the last draft. The heart of this story belongs to my grandmother, its voice to my mother. I give them credit for anything good, and have already promised them I will try harder next time". Tan also gives a dedication at the beginning of the novel:

On the last day that my mother spent on earth.
I learned her real name, as well as that of my grand mother.
This book is dedicated to them.
Li Bingzi
and
Gu Jingmei.

The mother daughter relationship is once again given a thorough delineation and it differs from The Joy Luck Club in being a single story encompassing a lineage of three women. Tan writes that her novels throw light on individuals and relationships rather than culture, history and the Chinese back ground. Her stories are, however, always set in America as well as in China and she deals with the importance of knowing one's heritage and lineage to live a meaningful life.

Saving Fish From Dying

Saving Fish From Dying is Tan's latest creation. It is narrated by the dead Bibi Chen, who was the tour guide engaged to take a group of eleven people on a trip to Burma. The group follows their plan with a new guide but Bibi Chen stays with them in spirit, even to the point that the travelers go missing.

The different characters portray idiosyncrasies, bringing to mind the travellers in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

Tan in an interview displayed on her home page states, "I took fictional devices from a number of genres. There are twelve travelers, and twelve or more genres here—murder mystery, romance, picaresque, comic novel, magical realism, fable, myth, police detective, political farce, and so forth" (Amy Tan Home Page). On the surface the novel talks of politics and philosophy, but it also deals with love and family ties.

Mother-Daughter Relationship

Tan has in her novels highlighted the mother – daughter relationship, not because she is an expert in the matter she says, but because she wanted to tell her mother's story. The voice of her mother has helped her find her identity and endowed her with all the strength she needs for the future. The story that the mother says seems to help not only in recreating but also in reshaping the past. Tan deals with cultural identity and familial relationships that are part of growing conflicts, misunderstandings and collective memory. Her plots are usually composed with an aging Chinese mother who is considered abusive and mired in tradition, who is also dissatisfied with her family life. Her American born daughter is torn between filial duty and individuality. With an opening up of the mother's cultural and personal history, catharsis is achieved and the daughter accepts her mother as a unique person with profound and abiding love for her. This foray into the legacies of her Chinese heritage also provides her with a renewed sense of self worth which helps her to confront and resolve problems in her own life.

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