

طعام صيني على مائدة امريكيه: سر الانتماء:

دراسه عبر الثقافات لروايه ايمي تان نادي الحظ السعيد

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**Chinese food on American table: The secret of belongingness:**

**A cross-cultural Study of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

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## Abstract

Undoubtedly, most of the emigrants live a state of alienation since they are physically far away from their native lands. They, in one way or another, strive to reconcile with their cultural and historical roots. Food, therefore, can be regarded as a mean to express belongingness to the ancestral land. Yet, Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* holds that any attempt to create a connection with the native land alongside with the host land may engender a sense of "Double Consciousness". Consequently, this article argues the fact that a desire to lump two different cultures together may generate a mental conflict which may result in forming a fragmented identity. This article also extends our knowledge of woes that emigrants endure to set a sort of attachment to their native land and at the same time to motivate scholars to be familiar with the relationship between food and psychological status of emigrants.

**Key words:** Amy Tan, belongingness, Double consciousness, Post-colonialism.

## ملخص البحث

مما لا شك فيه أن معظم المهاجرين يعيشون حالة من الاغتراب لأنهم بعيدون جسدياً عن أراضيهم الأصلية. إنهم ، بطريقة أو بأخرى ، يسعون جاهدين للتصالح مع جذورهم الثقافية والتاريخية. لذلك ، يمكن اعتبار الطعام وسيلة للتعبير عن الانتماء إلى أرض الأجداد. ومع ذلك ، يرى فانون في كتابه *Black Skin, White Masks* أن أي محاولة لإنشاء اتصال مع الأرض الأصلية جنباً إلى جنب مع الأرض المضيفة قد يولد إحساساً بـ "الوعي المزدوج". وبالتالي ، فإن هذه المقالة تجادل في حقيقة أن الرغبة في الجمع بين ثقافتين مختلفتين معاً قد تولد صراعاً عقلياً قد يؤدي إلى تكوين هوية مجزأة. توسع هذه المقالة أيضاً معرفتنا بالمصاعب التي يتحملها المهاجرون لإرساء نوع من الارتباط بأرضهم الأصلية وفي نفس الوقت لتحفيز الدارسين على التعرف على العلاقة بين الغذاء والحالة النفسية للمهاجرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ايمي تان ، الانتماء ، الوعي المزدوج ، ما بعد الاستعمار .

## Introduction

It is noteworthy to mention the fact that wars play a vital role in the existence of the migration phenomenon on the one hand. Wars also pave the way to possible cultural clashes on the other hand. Thus, the colonial period has received noticeable interest from viewers, thinkers, and critics since it has generated catastrophic consequences to whoever became a victim of wars. Admittedly, colonialism adverse legacies have appeared on the surface in the post-colonial period. That is to say, the struggle between the colonized and the colonizer on the one hand. The desire of the dominator to impose his pseudo ideology and colonial persona on the dominated societies has compelled the latter to be hyphenated and to establish lame identities on the other hand.

By the same token, Leela Gandhi in her book *Postcolonial Theory: A critical Introduction* states that post-colonialism "is a disciplinary project devoted to the task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past" (4). Arguably, the struggle between different cultures has engendered a cultural chasm and is also responsible for the appearance of phenomena like inferiority complex, stereotype, and double consciousness. In this regard, Frantz Fanon argues that the strategy of embracing two cultures simultaneously in a bid to live up two different experiences may generate a sense which he calls "Double Consciousness". "Double Consciousness" a term that is coined by W.E.O Du Bois who believes that it "is a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others... One ever feels his twoness...two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (2-3). Fanon outlines that even if the colonized man "conceives of European culture as a means of stripping himself of his race, he becomes alienated" (174), he may later discover that he is trapped between two different spaces. In other words, the colonized man may realize that he has to split his loyalty between the native land and the host land.

Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* reflects the experience of the first generation of Chinese emigrants who fight to sustain their spiritual, cultural, ethnical, and historical bonds with their native land. Yet, their endeavors to come to terms with their ethnic roots have caused them psychological conflict because they simultaneously cling to their American lifestyle. Between Chinese heritage and American mentality, Tan's characters of her novel have experienced a shaky position in both cultures. In other words, they are confused whether to embrace or ignore their Chinese roots. But, in this article, the researcher aims at showing how those Chinese emigrants have established an attachment with their ancestral land and why they began to suffer as a result of this attachment.

## Theory

It is, at the outset, important to realize that Fanon's concept of "Double Consciousness" comes as a result of an actual experience for being black living in a white world. Fanon in his outstanding book *Black Skin, White Masks* outlines the fact that the trend toward acclimating with the host culture and simultaneously clutch to ethnic roots have compelled most emigrants to be on the horns of a dilemma. That is to say, Fanon believes that "[w]ithout a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned" (106). Arguably, Fanon argues that the inclination to occupy double spaces at the same time may be the regarded the leading cause for a feeling of "Double Consciousness".

As far as colonialism is concerns, Fanon articulates that even if the black man "conducts himself like a white man. But he is a Negro. That he will learn once he goes to Europe" (114). Fanon in his theory has metaphorically used the word "black" to refer to "non-west" and the word "whites" refer to "Europeans". Thus, emigrants have no conspicuous perspective since they become captive to two cultural spaces. In this respect, Fanon believes that the reason

behind black man's dual identity is the idea that "he is required not only to be black but he must be black in relation to the white man" (xiii). The issue of belongingness becomes a haunting problem because "[f]or the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (4). Therefore, the black man is forced to behave like the whites, but he has to preserve his ethnic roots. This double belongingness comes as a result of a feeling of "Double Consciousness".

For Fanon "[t]he black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro" (1). This double behavior and existence leads the black man to grow up with dual identity. In a similar token, Fanon asserts that the black man is a victim of a sense of "Double Consciousness" and he states that:

Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics... his customs... were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (83)

The black man's desire to carve a niche in the white world and to sustain his roots at the same time declares his psychological collapse. In other words, the black man has gone through a painstaking experience of belongingness in which he has viewed the world with dual lenses.

## Discussion

It is noteworthy to mention that Asian-American writers' novels mirror the real plight of emigrants including language barriers, traditions, and culture. Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is a case in point. The bitterness of living within two different spaces with two various cultures is the gist of Tan's writings. Tan's novels, in fact, portrays her mother's experience of biculturalism which Tan considers it as a "fuel she needed to create a spark in her fiction, which would dramatically impact the American literary scene" (Darraj, 11). In *The Joy Luck Club* Tan shows the lovesick desire of mothers to preserve their ethnic roots alongside with their spatial belongingness for America. Torn out between two different cultural systems, mothers experience a sense of dual identity. They try to strengthen the cultural thread between China and America hoping to find a safe shelter for their divided-self. Yet, they kept vacillating between their Chinese heritage and their American lifestyle. In an interview, Tan has expressed her disapproval of her parents' willingness "to have American circumstances and Chinese character" (Woo). To trace the life of Tan herself, it is obvious that she has experienced an identity crisis because she felt she is neither insider nor outsider. E. D. Huntley, in this respect, shows the fact that "at school—where she frequently was the only Chinese student in her class—she was the Asian outsider who looked different from...white American world" (2). A polemical reading of Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* may highlight the mothers' desires to gain a foot hold in both spaces, China and America, to create a balanced identity.

As a matter of fact, food can be considered as one of the factors which may reflect a culture. In this respect, Susanne Skubal in her book *Word of Mouth* argues that "food is a language that we speak, for the most part unwittingly" (45). Yet, other people regard food as a way of expressing self and culture on the one hand. For emigrants, food is also a way of showing attachment to a native land on the other hand.

Consequently, Tan was keen on manifesting food as a means of expressing the spiritual attachment of cultural minorities to their native land and their respect to traditions. Food imagery in Tan's novel is meant to express the vigorous ties between Chinese mothers and their land of their childhood. Furthermore, mothers aim at drawing their American-born

daughters' attention to their mothers' deep-rooted culture. In this regard, Sarah Sceats points out that "[e]very meal incorporates political, cultural, personal and psychological ingredients" (125). In *The Joy Luck Club*, food is used by mothers as a disciplinary strategy to teach their daughters how to respect food because such a respecting reflects a respect for the Chinese customs. For instance, Ying-ying tells Lena that if she keeps wasting food, her husband will certainly have pockmarks equal to the number of rice grains she may leave in her bowl. Besides, she informs her that a man with pockmarks is filthy type of person. In a bid to convince her mother to marry Rich, Waverly and Rich have Chinese dinner with her mother Suyuan. Furthermore, they send a letter informing Suyuan that "it was the best Chinese food he [Rich] has ever tasted" (176). In both situations the characters show a respect to the Chinese tradition to achieve some of their purposes.

The mahjong table where the mothers serve the Chinese food symbolizes the solid attachment to ethnic roots. It is also a table which reminds the daughters of their mothers' ancestral land. Huntley asserts that "the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*...attempting to transmit to their daughters the remnants of a culture that is fading even from their own lives" (32-33). Tan inspired culinary images from a realistic experience when she said that "being very ashamed when people came over and saw my mother preparing food. She didn't make TV dinner and use canned foods. She used fresh vegetables and served fish with heads still on" (Schleier). In an attempt to create an imaginary motherland, Tan portrays cooking and eating habits which belong to China. This strong desire to find any sort of connection to Chinese heritage has driven Tan to reflect her quest for belongingness in her novels.

Tan's Ying-ying shows a partial connection even to her American husband Clifford because she has divided her loyalty between China and America. In this respect, Ying-ying describes her husband "[a] bowl full of rice but without my appetite to eat it. No hunger. No fullness (251). In other words, Ying-ying's attempts to adapt both cultures at the same time have been dwindled. Lindo, on the other hand, realizes that Rich is not suitable husband to her daughter Waverly and he cannot be an insider since he has failed to appreciate Lindo's Chinese food. According to Chinese traditions, it is acceptable for the cook to criticize his/her food, but Rich agrees with Lindo's criticism which is considered against "the Chinese cook's custom" (178). That is to say, Rich unintentionally insults Chinese culture and traditions. In another situation, Rich again fails to convince Lindo that he is familiar with Chinese food customs when he attends with Waverly to Chinese New Year party.

Chinese of Chinatown reveal their actual connection to the traditional Chinese ways of selling and eating food. Waverly depicts the market inside the Chinatown stating that:

Farther down the street was Ping Yuen Fish Market. The front window displayed a tank crowded with doomed fish and turtles struggling to gain footing on the slimy green-tiled sides. A hand-written sign informed tourists, "Within this store, is all for food, not for pet." Inside, the butchers with their blood-stained white smocks deftly gutted the fish while customers cried out their orders and shouted, "Give me your freshest," to which the butchers always protested, "All are freshest. (90)

At this point the American-born daughters have confused since pets in their mothers' traditions can be eaten. In other words, people in Chinatown express their attachment to their motherland in that all types of animals are edible. By the same token, Jing-mei expresses her experience in witnessing her pet becomes food:

When I was eight, I had played with a crab my mother had brought home for my birthday dinner. I had poked it, and jumped back every time its claws reached out. And I determined that the crab and I had come to a great understanding when it finally heaved itself up and walked clear across the counter. But before I could even

decide what to name my new pet, my mother had dropped it into a pot of cold water and placed it on the tall stove. I had watched with growing dread, as the water heated up and the pot began to clatter with this crab trying to tap his way out of his own hot soup. (201)

It is obvious that mothers have failed to transmit the right message to their daughter about their motherland which made the daughters reluctant to accept their mothers' ethnic roots. But mothers have succeeded to establish a connection thread with China through cooking and eating Chinese food. Yet, mothers' success to reunite with their motherland has a passive impact on them because they could not maintain a single attachment. In other words, they become a victim of dual belongingness. As far as "double consciousness" is concerned, Ralph Waldo Emerson states that:

One key, one solution to the mysteries of human condition, one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge, exists, the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and his public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of one, and the other foot on the back of the other. (21-22)

Being an American person, Rich has little knowledge about Chinese traditions and he always insult's Waverly's mother for her outdated Chinese customs unintentionally. For example, when Rich and Waverly have made their decision to travel to China, Lindo has decided to join them. Rich was glad that Lindo will be with them because she can translate the menu in the restaurant for them to eschew "eating snakes or dogs by mistake" (184).

Furthermore, it is important to shed light on the role of the mahjong table in connecting mothers of the joy luck club with their Chinese roots. Mahjong table contains different types of Chinese food which bring luck for the mothers. Jing Mei narrates the stories that Suyuan had told her about arranging the Joy Luck Club:

The hostess had to serve special dyansyin foods to bring good fortune of all kinds – dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, and of course, many good-luck oranges for a plentiful, sweet life. (23)

Jing Mei's description of the food on the mahjong table illustrates the fact that food can link people with their ethnic roots and it can pass through generations. Food, therefore, plays a vital role in connecting Chinese to their traditions. The connection between Chinese food, customs and culture is illustrated through the story of Ying-ying St. Clair when she remembered her childhood at Chinese moon festival. Chinese celebrate the moon festival by making moon cake. In this context, the moon cake serves as a means to connect American-born daughters to the Chinese heritage. Thus, the moon cake reminds Ying-ying of her mother's ethnic roots.

Arguably, mothers' relentless effort to create an attachment with their motherland have made them vacillating between China and America. In relation to the clash of cultures Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin state that such a clash is "an experience of imposing Western culture on native culture resulted in a clash between two cultures ultimately leading to an internal conflict in the indigenous people" (33). In this way, mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* have experienced a sense of dual belongingness which causes them identity crisis. In other words, they feel that they are neither insiders nor outsiders.

## Conclusion

Tan's pen craftily transmits the anguish of Chinese-Americans who have been trapped between two cultural systems. She, in fact, reflects her mother's suffering being a Chinese

woman living in America. Her novels are colored with the experiences of Chinese families and their perpetual endeavors to embrace two cultures at the same time. Moreover, Tan throws a focus on the American-born daughters who also become a victim of following Chinese traditions at Chinatown and indulge in the American mainstream.

Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* the characters wish to have voices to strengthen their position in the white world. Yet, they grasp each chance to enlighten their American-born daughters about the value of Chinese culture. Tan was keen on exploring the state of alienation that the mothers undergone due to the continuous struggle between their Chinese and American identities. Using food as a way of attachment to the ancestral land alongside with their spatial attachment to the host land, mothers realize that there is cultural gap which cannot be bridged. Thus, they view the world with double lenses in an attempt to satisfy both of their dual characters. This sense of doubleness has forced them to grow up with fragmented identities.

Discrepancy between cultures, double existence, and cultural diversity are the core of Tan's novels. She devotes most of her theme towards the suffering of emigrants and how they live as "Others" in the host land. They forced to be hyphenated due to the treatment of others for them. Due to intercultural collision those emigrants witness psychological changes which left them a prey for "Double Consciousness".

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