

On the Representations and Subversions of Orientalism in *The Hundred Secret Senses*

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Received: September 17, 2014 Accepted: November 5, 2014 Online Published: November 25, 2014

doi:10.5539/ells.v4n4p45

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v4n4p45>

Abstract

The Hundred Secret Senses is one of Amy Tan's most acclaimed novels. This paper attempts to study the representations and subversion of Orientalism from the perspective of Said's post-colonial theory. By depicting the protagonist Kwan's marginality as the Other, exotic images of Chinese, Amy Tan actually reinforces the negative stereotype of the Chinese in the version of Orientalism. But her efforts to subvert and transcend Orientalism cannot be neglected. Amy Tan develops her writing strategies to challenge the mechanism of the American mainstream and subvert the stereotypes of Chinese. Kwan's exotic and rebellious voices also act as a powerful weapon to break the silent stereotype and to fight against western language hegemony. And the Oriental representative Kwan functions as an active guider for her spiritually-lost sister Olivia. The limitation of Chinese American writers' double identities inevitably covers their works with veils of Orientalism, but Amy Tan's novels are imbued with superb artistic techniques to subvert and transcend it. The co-existence and co-benefit of different cultures and beliefs could be the consideration for Amy Tan's wish in presenting this novel.

Keywords: *The Hundred Secret Senses*, representations, subversion, orientalism

1. Introduction

The Chinese American writer Amy Tan proves herself to be a most distinguished one. She firstly gained acclaim in 1989 for *The Joy Luck Club* in the bestsellers lists, and continued to remain a popular writer with works such as *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Moon Lady* (1992), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2000), *Saving Fish From Drowning* (2005), *Rules for Virgins* (2012), *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) etc. Among all these works, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, a shift from previous mother-daughter relationship to problematic sisterhood exploration, attracts readers' attention and then remains as *New York Times* hardcover best-seller for nearly three months. Amy Tan takes advantage of her own identity in weaving the past and present lives of two half-sisters respectively from Chinese and American culture background, exploring the ethic sisterhood and unfolding the many-layered narrative skills. Because of multiple settings employed in this novel—twentieth century San Francisco in America and Guilin in China interwoven with the Taiping Rebellion in 19th century China, Ma Sheng-mei holds that the success of this novel lies in "a New Age Ethnicity mongrelized with primitivism", such as the profusion of mission scenes and exotic banditry from the Taiping Rebellion, which appeals to westerner's long-held view of Asian and Asia and satisfied the westerner's curiosity about the Oriental." (Ma, 2000, p. xx-ii). Actually this follows the view that many American Chinese writers including Amy Tan are always criticized for constructing Orientalism in their works, but this is not objective or just if a through study is conducted. This paper attempts to argue that Orientalism is not only represented but also subverted in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, especially by focusing on the characterization strategy.

2. The Representations of Orientalism

It is usually agreed that Edward Said comprehensively redefined the term "Orientalism" as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1979, p. 2), which is a great contribution to postcolonial studies by criticizing the cultural hegemony of the western colonial discourse. The West impose the hegemony on the East by producing the East as the West's exotic, silent and inferior Other, thus strengthening its superiority over the subaltern. Being an "Other", the Oriental is lack of a sense of belonging and becomes a silent and fixed stereotype. It helps to understand why western journalists, fiction writers, and

scholars create the prevalent and hostile image of eastern cultures as inferior, stagnant, and degenerate. As Said says that “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 1979, p. 1). To assert their superiority, westerners always like to depict the Orient and the Oriental as exotic, brutal, and backward. The United States which mainly consists of European immigrants shapes its Orientalism of the Orient based on their distorted imagination. In American imagination, China is an exotic and degraded place and the Chinese are mysterious, uncivilized, and barbarous, which shows American inexplicable hostility towards the Oriental especially the Chinese partially for historical reasons.

Amy Tan was brought up in a western world, even though her works, her subjects, settings, characters, plots and themes are concerned with the East, with the differences between China and America. She actually succumbs to “the latent Orientalism”—the unconscious, untouchable certainty about what the Orient is (Said, 1979, p. 206). Judging from the following criteria, Orientalism is represented in *The Hundred Secret Senses*.

2.1 The Protagonist Kwan as Other

The protagonist Kwan, who arrives in America at the age of 18 to fulfill her father’s wish, is considered as “an outsider”, “a marginal person” in such an alien world. The marginality of the Other can be reflected in Kwan’s pidgin English, Chinese superstition, and her animalized image under the hegemony of Western culture.

When Kwan explains the mysterious power, namely secret senses, that she is bestowed with, she lists the various animals’ keenest sensory organs “like ant feet, elephant trunk, dog nose, cat whisker, whale ear, bat wing, clam shell, snake tongue, little hair on flower. Many things, but mix up together”(Tan,1995,p.102), trying to bring out the magical power of secret senses. However, the painstaking expression uttered in Pidgin English reaches a nonsensical effect to western listeners. Her half-sister Olivia gets frustrated with Kwan’s explanation, which clearly echoes the westerners’ inability to understand Kwan.

Kwan is also rejected by the white culture for her phenomenal ability to see into the world of “Yin.” Her supernatural ability to see into the world of “Yin” and communicate with ghosts or dead people reveals her peculiarity, which is regarded as representative of the superstitious Chinese to combat against American scientific background. The minute Olivia’s Italian-American stepfather Bob gets to know about Kwan’s alleged Yin eyes, he decides that Kwan is mentally disordered and has to be treated by a psychiatrist. The American Bob character is undoubtedly science-oriented to act as the opposite character of the abnormal superstition-oriented Chinese Other.

Kwan’s animalized image is impressive and prominent for the constant reoccurrence and reinforcement. Kwan has in fact been accompanied all the way by animals and insects especially when Kwan comes from China and goes back to China. Kwan brings a grasshopper, a common plaything as a gift for Olivia from China, it is however de-familiarized as “a six-legged monster, fresh-grass green, with saw-blade jaws, bulging eyes, and whips for eyebrows” (p. 10) in Olivia’s eyes. This kind of microscopic, unpleasant description of the cricket adopted to refer to the gift from a Chinese Other fully demonstrates rejective and frightening attitude the Western Olivia feels towards Kwan. And the strategy of de-familiarization functions to enhance the alienness of the Oriental. The same device occurs when the three, Kwan, Olivia and Simon, arrive in Guilin China, Kwan’s hometown, where a peddler is peddling a “snowy-white owl with milk-chocolate highlights”, which Olivia “falls in love” at the first sight. Unfortunately the lovely bird, according to the peddler, is hunted purposely for the Chinese dining table and this really triggers off Olivia and Simon’s angry and disgusting complaint. Ignorant of Olivia and Simon’s opposition, Kwan takes the owl, even though her purpose is to free this captive bird in Young Girl Wish Mountain. Clearly another barbaric practice is designed here for the affluent civilized first world.

Moreover, Kwan’s pre-life story in late-19th century China when she was a servant girl named Nunumu served for the Western missionaries in 1860s. Nunumu befriended with Miss Banner, an American girl with unsmooth love story and tragic fate. It is clear that Kwan’s fidelity to Olivia echoes Nunumu’s to Miss Banner: the pre-existence in the past resurrects in the present life. For young Olivia, Kwan serves as “a willing, able, and free, handy baby-sitter”. (p. 9) This also proves that the inferior Orientals are always willing to be the Westerners’ servants, which always accord with the identity of being Others.

Being a woman in the marginal ethnic group and without formal education, Kwan could not be given a decent social status. Therefore, she is easily dismissed as a stereotype. In the Western eyes, people from the East have such stereotypical images as being superstitious, abnormal, miserable and uncivilized.

2.2 The Exotic Images of Chinese

In the *Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan presents not only detailed Chinese food processing and preparation through Western (American and Chinese American) eyes, but their stunned reaction to such barbarity. When Du lili's killing a live chicken is vividly elaborated in Changmian "Her left hand firmly clutches the chicken's neck. In her other hand is a small knife...pressing the blade against the bird's neck... slowly saws. A thin ribbon of blood springs up." then the chicken's agony, "it stumbles and gurgles" after its blood is almost drained into the bowl, and "with dazed eyes, it slumps over." Simon thinks that's "fucking barbaric" (p. 264). Chinese Americans' vehement sensitivity and shock aroused by this killing close-up forms a sharp contrast with the Chinese killer's calm and indifferent attitude towards dealing with the chicken. Due to the development of processing industry in the United States, killing live stock at home had become increasingly non-existent in American, So the real issue here is not so much how a chicken is killed as how many chickens and where the killing is done in American. It is a matter of individual killing versus mass slaughter or primitiveness versus industrialization. Olivia brings her readers the primitiveness and brutality of the Chinese society through the depiction of the Changmian village.

Besides the foodstuffs and food preparation, the depiction of the Chinese lacking of food and their food-hunting is presented, thus the image of the Chinese society characterized by food scarcity is created. "To me, duck egg was too good to eat. That egg could have become a duckling. That duckling could have become a duck. That egg could have fed twenty people in Thistle Mountain." (pp. 171-172) Thus Chinese scarcity and American abundance are in close contrast to each other: Kwan's comments on the preciousness of duck eggs moves to a picture of Western abundance, "On Sundays, the Jesus Worshippers always ate a big morning meal. This was the custom: long prayer, then chicken eggs, thick slices of salty pork, corn cakes, watermelon, cold water from the well, then another long prayer." (p. 172) Kwan and Laolu had to hunt for frogs, grubs and bats, but the Westerners were enjoying their routine feast.

Displaying China and the Chinese as the Other, Tan dissociates herself from her parents' culture and creates the impression that she is identified with mainstream America. Amy Tan is unconsciously reinforcing the negative stereotype of the Chinese in the version of Orientalism, and all of her depictions participate in the dominant American discourse of Orientalized Chinese.

3. The Subversions of Orientalism

Actually Amy Tan herself has a feeling of being a Chinese Other in America. She has lived the classic minority experience as E. D. Huntley explains "at school—where she frequently was the only Chinese student in her class—she was the Asian outsider who looked different from everyone else in the predominantly white American world." (1998, p. 2) Amy Tan's identity plus the discrimination she has suffered in the white society makes her voice dissatisfaction towards American Orientalism. She actually develops the dual psychology and blurred, hesitant, ambiguous psychology and attitude towards American Orientalism, which could also be detected in her novels, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong explains the wavering of Amy Tan's tone, "She manages to balance on a knife edge of ambiguity, producing texts in which Oriental and counter-Oriental interpretive possibilities jostle each other, (Wong, 1995, p. 191) She tries to "lift the Iron Curtain of Language"—the stereotypes and dominant paradigms in American Orientalism—with the strength of her mighty pen in her novels (Wang, 2007, p. 30). In *the Hundred Secret Senses*, she has her own writing strategies to challenge the mechanism of the American mainstream and to subvert these stereotyped Chinese images.

3.1 Smashing the Stereotypes

In creating female image, Amy Tan also contributes her efforts in establishing Kwan's identity by breaking the silent stereotypes, retaining the differences, and being a wise woman in transcending the confrontations. This also reflects how Chinese-American females search for their identity from silence to subversion and finally transcend the binary opposition and live harmoniously in the multicultural world.

As a newly-arrived immigrant, Kwan encounters rejection, loneliness and discrimination in the new land. Nevertheless, she seeks to empower herself and does not give in. For instance, Kwan is sent to the hospital to have electroshock treatment when young Olivia tells her Caucasian mother about Kwan's "Yin" eyes. After she receives the electroshock treatment, she says in Chinese, "When the doctors and nurses ask me questions, I treat them like American ghosts—I don't see them, don't hear them, don't speak to them. Soon they'll know they can't change me, why they must let me go." (p. 16) Kwan, with a determined and bold mind, talks about her treating American doctors as ghosts, which may be her disparaging Chinese term for whites just as Chinese once call Japanese invading army "Xiao Riben Guizi" (Japanese Dwarf Devils) during Anti-Japanese War, and fights back with her "Chinese silent treatment." and her preservation of difference as the Other is her strategy to disrupt the closure of the hegemonic culture. The character of Kwan is an innovative creation by Amy Tan. She is bolder,

more rebellious, strategic, influential and philosophical, and she fights for rights of an Other openly. She struggles to articulate the concerns of those in the marginal, to find outlet to express cultural differences, and to require mutual respect and recognition. Kwan fights back by treating the West “like ghosts” and preserving her difference,

Chinese traditional womanhood is often bestowed with two remarkable features as the subordination and reticence in the view of the Orientalists. They assume that the Oriental is backward, silent and unable to express himself. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the marginal Other Kwan’s exotic but rebellious telling is her best and special way to protest against Orientalism. Amy Tan has her marginalized protagonist Kwan utter her clipped, immigrant voice about female experience, combined with something exotic, rebellious and even “unrealistic” to be against the dominant western discourse. She is created as a powerful, eloquent, memorable spokeswoman to penetrate the “Iron Curtain of Language” of American Orientalism with her special weapon. More specifically, she explores the authority provided by ghosts and spirits to articulate the concerns of the marginal group. Kwan, the protagonist of this novel, is a prominent and memorable creation. Her exotic and rebellious voice about the past recitation of stories and dreams in the realm of mystery could be considered strategies to subvert Orientalism and to survive in the American mainstream society.

3.2 *The Inversion of the Guider and the Guided*

The most important thing in *The Hundred Secret Senses* is that the relationship between Kwan and her half-sister Olivia proves to be the guider and the guided. From the Orientalist perspective, the Orient is the seen, the observed and is passive, the Occident is the seer, the observer, and is active. The roles of Kwan, the Orient, and Olivia, the Occident, however, seem reversed in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Kwan’s function as Olivia’s chief advisor or mentor to help Olivia to seek an integrated self is displacement of the image of the guider, mentor, even Wise Old Man, because she “uses personal knowledge of people and the world to help tell stories and offer guidance that, in a mystical way, may impress upon his audience a sense of who they are and who they might become thereby acting as a mentor.” (“Wise Old Man”) Kwan is depicted as this kind of character, represented as a kind and wise, older father-type figure. And he or she usually represents “knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help, which make his ‘spiritual’ character sufficiently plain....” (Jung, 1999, p. 217)

In Olivia’s childhood memories, Kwan is 12 years older than Olivia and plays the role of a maternal sister. It is Kwan’s tenderness, kindness, and love that nurture young Olivia and make up for what she missed from her real mother. Because of father’s early death and mother’s “divided attention” to children, Olivia gradually has become skeptical about everything as an adult, she still could not give up her skeptical attitude towards her life, or more specifically her love and marriage, and it is this attitude that nearly ruins her marriage and happiness but for Kwan’s guidance. Kwan has been ceaselessly telling Olivia stories every night in the hope that Olivia could remember her previous lifetime as Miss Banner. Gradually, Olivia changes her attitude from antipathy to self-integration, finishing her process of spiritual integration through Kwan’s dream-like narratives. Especially, Kwan helps Olivia to further her romance with Simon.

The climax of the story lies in Olivia and Simon’s trip to Guilin, China, suggested by Kwan, a journey towards Olivia’s true self and returned marriage happiness. When Olivia is in the midst of an emotional and psychological crisis that she would break up with her husband Simon, Kwan exerts her powers of persuasion to arrange a journey for Olivia and Simon to go to China, a journey in search of reconciliation in their marriage and brings the spiritual regeneration out of Olivia. Eventually, she has finished her role as a spiritual guide in Olivia’s life and disappears mysteriously into the caves of Changmian. Kwan finally fulfills her mission of being a kind of spirit-guide to Olivia, reminding her of her cultural roots. All the instinctive rejection Olivia has had towards Kwan and the alienation between the two sisters is dissolved and replaced by reconciliation and respect.

4. Conclusion

By creating a sharp contrast of a framework of a basic opposition of Chinese versus American, past versus present, Yin versus Yang, barbarism versus civilization, margin versus center, etc. this story is full of tension and these binary oppositions needs resolving. Amy Tan gives this novel a most profound and humanistic ending: the kinship between Kwan and Olivia return from separation to integration, the love between Olivia and Simon return from crisis to vitality, and the culture between east and west grow from conflict to multiplicity.

Such a story ending makes us rethink about whether it is appropriate to regard Amy Tan as Orientalist, the same as other western writers who emphasize the Occidental centralism. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, She has her protagonist Kwan from China have such stereotypical images as being superstitious, abnormal, submissive and uncivilized, but meanwhile she subverts this stereotype by endowing her with a rebellious voice, respectable

courage to fight for her difference in America, and acting as an active guidance for the lost Westerners. She depicts the West as having superiority and dominance over the East. However, the symbolic image of East Kwan acts as the active spirit-guide for Olivia, the representative of West, reminding her of her cultural roots and achieving her separated selves. Writing about China and Chinese tradition in the American dominant culture, Amy Tan faces psychological dilemma and a difficult writing situation. She is nurtured in the American Orientalism and suffers from the pressure from the white-dominated American society, and has to obey the editorial taboos—do not speak for the Chinese. (Wang, 2007, p. 3) She has to get the light to penetrate the black curtain and the might to resist the “deathly embrace” of American Orientalism in order to establish Chinese Americans’ identity.

Amy Tan is frequently criticized for creating negative, exotic Chinese images to cater for Western readers’ reading anticipation and win her popularity. Looking through the veil of Orientalism, however, we see Amy Tan’s novels are imbued with superb artistic techniques to subvert and transcend it, and her purpose may not only to win a stature in the American literary field by yielding to Oriental writing under the powerful cultural hegemony but to show her great concern and wish that harmonious co-existence of American and Chinese cultures should be established.

Considering the hybridization of Chinese Americans, we’ll never simply label Chinese American Literature “Orientalism” or writer “Orientalist.” In the process of Chinese American literary development, Chinese American writers have been revealing the deeply-rooted prejudice from the West to the East, subvert the Oriental stereotypes in Westerners’ eyes, and express their best wishes to transcend the binary opposition and advocates the coexistence of plurality. And with the development of multicultural society, different cultures and beliefs co-exist and co-benefit harmoniously, and “Orientalism” will finally turn to be a historical relic as time passes by. It is believed that the Chinese American Literature, an exotic flower in the garden of ethnic literature, must burst into bloom with its own fragrance in the future, because it adapts to today’s tendency of diversity under the multi-cultural background and the conception of living harmoniously in the world.

Acknowledgements

This Study is supported by the Shanxi Normal University Social Science Fund (No. YS1415) and Shanxi Overseas Returnee Research Fund (No.2013-069).

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