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Haunted by Displacement: Cultural Alienation and the Search for Belonging in Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*

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Abstract

Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2006) represents cultural alienation and the search for belonging, with particular reference to how displacement affects both individual and collective identity. With the detailed depiction of the American tourists and their travels to Burma, the novel highlights the resistant response to Western fictions imposed on non-Western cultures. The apparition storyteller, Bibi Chen, serves as both a spectator and an uprooted subject, outlining the disengagement experienced by diasporic people who possess different social circles without completely having a place to any. The visitors, in spite of the fact that advantaged, ended up typical of social pariahs who stay dazzled by the complexities of the arrive they navigate. The paper analyses the voices of the displaced diasporic identities in a multicultural space and the intricate nature of cultural complexities in identity formation in a globalized, yet fragmented world.

Keywords: Displacement, Belonging, Cultural Alienation, Amy Tan, Saving Fish from Drowning, Postcolonial Literary Theory

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Introduction

Saving Fish from Drowning (2006) by Amy Tan is a deep exploration of a wider geopolitical space, including American and Burmese culture. The interaction of both cultures opens a possibility of examining displacement, identity, and man's inner need for belonging. The story, narrated in the voice of the ghost of Bibi Chen, an art patron and socialite with a Chinese American background, employs a unique technique, a combination of satire, mysticism, and cultural review. The narration includes cultural milieus of several countries. Bibi's disembodied character creates distance that enables her to use a voice that is simultaneously separated and visceral in its connection to events (Korkmaz 33). Injured, she is situated between worlds in a condition nothing less than abstractly liminal, a condition reflective of the cultural alienation of so many of the characters in the novel, including herself, who strive to find their place within the overlapping frameworks of nationality, ethnicity, and history. By means of posthumous narration by Bibi, Tan not only questions the personal effects of cultural dislocation but also interrogates the bigger issues of Western imperialism and the tourist gaze.

The present research explores the picture of *Saving Fish from Drowning* within the framework of the postcolonial literary theory, examining the way that Tan criticizes the Western construction of non-Western identities. "The fictional anthropology of American travelers negotiating an unknown and politically-hypersensitive Burmese terrain is a metaphor for the cultural myopia and demand that has too often coloured Western involvement with the Orient" (Vizan 90). By placing her characters in a place where their assumptions and identities come loose, Tan reveals the precariousness of belonging when it is built on surface-level, or externally constructed, ideas of culture. Bibi's spectral narration is a critique and also a player of this game, allowing the reader to see an expressive paradox of not really being an insider or outsider (Sasmito 78). Utilizing postcolonial concepts of mimicry, "othering", and cultural hegemony, this study does not focus so much on the actual term "displacement" as it does on Tan's application of the term as a physical, psychological, and ideological space. Finally, the novel problematizes established understandings of identity and sense of belonging, only to propose an alternative view on the nature of selfhood, which is fluid and contentious and is continuously negotiated.

In the context of Chinese American identity representation, the reviewed works reveal that several scholars engage the intersecting tensions of culture, displacement, and belonging. (Ma) reading of the female characters' experiences with landscapes presents those experiences as a symptom of cultural alienation, a central theme in Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*. (Lina) expands Tan's role as a central figure in the amplification of female Chinese American voices, cementing her role as a force in literary diaspora scholarship. (Hume) places Tan's work in the context of the American Dream, specifically its nightmarish quality, and the disillusionment of immigrants.

Though the reviewed works contribute valuable insights into the study of cultural alienation and belonging in Amy Tan's writing, several drawbacks emerge when examining their applicability and scope. For instance, (Ma) limits her analysis to the physical landscapes

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within Tan's novels, neglecting the broader social and psychological landscapes of cultural dislocation. Similarly, (Lina) study emphasizes Tan's role within female Chinese American literature but provides limited engagement with Tan's portrayal of male characters or her broader thematic concerns. (Hume) contextualization of Tan within the American Dream framework fails to fully explore the intersectionality of race, gender, and class that complicates Tan's critique of the American experience. These gaps underscore the need for a more holistic, intersectional examination of Tan's treatment of identity and alienation.

Postcolonial literary theory offers a strong critical tool to examine literature that comes out of or deals with the colonial pasts. It interrogates the way in which power, identity, language, and history are negotiated in cultural texts and especially in cultural texts produced from or about formerly colonized peoples. Postcolonial theory cannot be limited to historical colonialism, but is also sarcastic about the continual cultural and economic control that is responsible for shaping the global relationships of the powers.

In the case of *Saving Fish from Drowning*, the postcolonial theory helps to explore how Amy Tan uses the narrative shape and thematic material to challenge Western imperialism and cultural hegemony. The image of American tourists in Burma in the novel portrays a contemporary rendition of the colonial sentiments, where ignorance and cultural hierarchy create the skewed experiences between cultures. The theory allows one to put these interactions in a broader historical and ideological context instead of personal misadventures per se. The application of this lens, however, makes the novel a forum for challenging dominant stories and examining the psychological effects of cultural displacement of both Western and non-Western characters.

Cultural alienation is an emotional and psychological alienation that persons suffer from when they are alienated from their cultural identity or their identity is not affirmed in the dominant culture. It expresses itself in terms of confusion, loneliness, and the feeling of unbelonging. This detachment manifests itself throughout the diasporic fiction, such as Tan's works, when the characters find themselves stuck between cultural expectations and private realities. The cultural uprooting is frequently exacerbated by dislocation, geographical, and indeed spiritual, and is manifested in the way Tan's people attempt to find themselves in alien situations.

Othering is a process of defining individuals or groups with respect to an aspired norm, which most often leads to their marginalization or dehumanization. This concept is essential for the grasp of how the characters of Tan, particularly the Burmese villagers, and if not, the tourists themselves, are put into roles that exemplify Western biases and ideas (Masson 4). Liminality is considered a threshold position in which main characters find themselves in between identities, locations, or states. In a literal as well as symbolic way, the ghost narrator Bibi Chen represents liminality in between life and death, East and West, belonging and being on the outside. Together, these ideas help to render our understanding of how Tan creates a world consisting of historical inequalities and fickle identities all the deeper.

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Bibi Chen is a non-traditional narrator in *Saving Fish from Drowning* with a voice that has a life outside the confines of life and death. As a ghost, she has the power of seeing the events unfold without interfering with them, resulting in a detached, omnipotent point of view. This kind of narrative choice helps Amy Tan to explore difficult themes of helplessness, misapprehension, and cultural dislocation. The storyteller, Bibi, is saturated with irony and reflection, and can see how alive she is to Western and Eastern ideologies. Her part makes the reader doubt the boundaries of authority, perspective, and truth in telling. That she is dead and telling this story is an underlining of the separation between voice and agency, highlighting silenced histories and unresolved identities.

The spectral narrator, also conducted by Tan through the use of Bibi, also provides a criticism of the cultural tourism industry. From her aloof standpoint, Bibi observes the superficiality and cultural cluelessness of the American tourists without being able to do anything. This is a limit that gives a tragic quality to her character and reveals the overall theme of miscommunications between cultures. Bibi's ghostly voice takes up the task of satirizing Western presuppositions and, at the same time, lamenting the lost opportunities of understanding the richer culture. Her input is necessary in the establishment of the text as a critique as well as a reflection of the result of cultural blindness and spiritual exile.

Bibi Chen's voice performs in a liminal area in which dichotomies are annihilated. She is neither completely in the world of the living nor is she completely out of it. This setting, however, provides her with the degree of objectivity in her comments but also emphasizes her isolation. She cannot control the events, and she cannot lead the living, and her helplessness reflects the overall topic of cultural alienation. As a narrator, she is in between several identities: she is Chinese by ethnicity, American by culture, and lost between substance and citrus. This divided stance ramps up belonging and estrangement exploration in the narrative. Though resigned, her observations are insightful, particularly as she watches past cultural blunders recur.

It also enables her to become a symbolic peace-maker between warring worlds. She witnesses the misadventures of the Western tourists in Burma and uses a complex cultural history to articulate her interpretations. By the same token, she is excluded from the Burmese setting, failing to be part of the country she looks after. This double alienation strengthens the perception that her voice is in limbo. It is out of this ambiguity that the narrative derives richness that makes the reader imagine how knowledge and identity operate within contexts of displacement and loss as opposed to certainty or belonging.

The ghostly presence of Bibi Chen is used as a strong metaphor for dislocation- physical and emotional. Her inability to interact with the living world highlights a more existential demission. She watches and does not take part while watching in a sense of emotional inaction that is frequent in cultural alienation. This metaphor applies to the tourists as well, since they are also emotionally and culturally drifted even if they are physically in a foreign country. They cannot interact meaningfully with the environment, and their cultural superiority phantoms out the realities of the world around them. The failures are found in Bibi's ghostly narrative as it

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presents her own disembodiment as an embodiment of rootlessness that goes beyond her literal death.

Bibi's condition as a ghost also represents the silence of particular voices in major discourses. Her views were never taken notice of or considered in the Western art world, given that she was a woman of Chinese origin. Through death, her voice becomes clear and unbroken, but powerless in forming events. This tension indicates how the marginalized identities gain visibility only after they are silenced. By this metaphor of the ghost, therefore, the theme of emotional exile is being deepened, as the journey of Bibi is not presented as a resolution but as an awkwardly protracted invocation of fraught loss, misrecognition, and indigestible cross-cultural identity.

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Amy Tan employs a group of American tourists as a narrative device to challenge the Western look. Each character represents one of the types of cultural illiteracy, being a caricature of Westerners' attitude to the "exotic East". The trip within Burma gets more to the manner of fulfilling the expectations and prejudices. The tourists are more interested in verifying what they are already convinced about rather than experiencing something unknown with humbleness or respect. As observed by Bibi Chen at the beginning of the narrative, "They see what they want to see. They believe what they please to believe. That is their blessing and their curse" (Tan 33). This quote summarizes the primary criticism of the Western habit of viewing foreign cultures through a self-centered framework and of the presumption made in the novel.

These characters are representatives of a more generalized discourse of the West, which tends to reduce other cultures to crude and consumable forms of representation. Even if it is done in some confused way through fascination, spiritual misappropriation, and oozing humanitarianism, the tourists practice the kind of cultural imperialism without knowing it. They consider their journey as a way of self-discovery while being oblivious to the lives and agency of people around them. The way in which Tan describes these characters is an incisively satirical but also instructive image of how much of the tourist gaze is embedded nowadays in modern global encounters.

The involvement of the tourists in Burma is surrounded by misunderstanding and shallowness. They pass from holy places, markets, and villages, being blind to the cultural and historical value of what they observe. Rather than asking questions or listening, they assign meaning to the people and places they visit. This behavior exposes one kind of cultural consumption that de-complexifies complexity to become aesthetic or spiritual novelty. Bibi Chen interjects this pattern when she says, "They wanted something ancient and wise to tell them their lives had meaning" (Tan 152). This line emphasizes the transactional aspect of their interest in Burmese culture – it has a purpose of fulfilling their emotional or spiritual needs and not otherwise.

The misunderstanding of cultural symbols and ways by the group causes tension and finally results in serious consequences. Their inability to communicate with the locals and the assumption about politics and religion indicate a major cultural gap. A mere sightseeing tour

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turns into a dangerous misadventure just because the tourists think that they know a place with which they never bothered to familiarize themselves. Tan employs this arc of the narrative to drive home the point that misinterpretation is not something benign. It may become an ethical violation, glorify negative stereotypes, and increase the divide between cultures, rather than one that narrows this divide.

Tan conveys a clear evaluation of social pomposity by uncovering how the tourists' worldview is centered on themselves. They carry with them a certain conviction that their values, rationale, and translations are generally substantial. Indeed, when confronted with new traditions or convictions, their intuitive is to analyze, name, and judge instead of to watch or learn. Bibi Chen comments on this energetically with gnawing clarity: "Americans are taught that the world could be an organization on which they can play saint, which all others ought to be thankful for their performance" (Tan 214). This cites outlines how Tan positions Western benevolence and interest as frequently bound with self-importance and obliviousness.

The novel uncovered the hurt in this worldview, especially when it diminishes whole societies to ethical or otherworldly backdrops for personal self-growth. The visitors expect their privileged gifts to give them the capacity to explore or indeed "spare" a world they don't understand. Their behavior leads to clashes with neighborhood communities and eventually reflects a broader design of chronicled misrecognition. Tan's evaluation is unpretentious but firm. She does not, as it were, point to the tourists' disappointments but challenges the peruser to address their claim suspicions, almost travel, contrast, and compassion. The novel becomes a reflection in which the so-called Western subject must stand up to their failure to really see "the other" as rising to complex and majestic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Saving Fish from Drowning* investigates topics of social distance, uprooting, and the liquid nature of character, all through the focal point of postcolonial theory. Through the character of Bibi Chen and the encounters of the American visitors, Amy Tan evaluates the often-superficial engagement with remote societies and uncovers the profound, enthusiastic results of separation. The novel highlights that social belonging cannot be limited to characters with fixed identities or national categories. By utilizing an uncanny storyteller, Tan offers an effective representation of the liminal state between having a place and distance, viably outlining how character can be divided and changed in reaction to authentic and individual changes. The novel studies Western presumptions of social predominance and uncovers the disorienting impacts of these demeanors on both the self and the "other." The tourists' travel through Burma demonstrates not solely a physical uprooting but also a fragmentation of the self, where the boundaries between the self and the other are kept up through obliviousness and preference. At the same time, Tan reflects the inward battles of diasporic characters who find themselves caught between two universes, incapable of completely claiming a place in either.

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