
RE-NARRATION OF HISTORY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF MAXINE HONG KINGSTON AND AMY TAN

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Abstract: Postmodernist criticism involves itself mainly in the decentralizing and subverting process. It challenges “fixation” of any kind. The two Chinese writers under study quite obviously interrogate and challenge their “fixation” in American main stream history as a worst racial and ethnic group. The novels of Kingston and Tan have postmodern characteristics. They are metafictional in every sense of the term. It is exactly against this low-grade image “fixity” the two novelists wage a war, recreate and re-narrate old stories of their people and present them as upholders of a unique ancient culture and heritage.

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Abstract: Postmodernist criticism involves itself mainly in the decentralizing and subverting process. It challenges “fixation” of any kind. The two Chinese American writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan are quite obviously interrogate and challenge their “fixation” in American mainstream history as the worst racial and ethnic group. Both historical records and website readings have debunked the early Chinese as prostitutes, brothel-runners and drug-sellers. This racial “Categorisation,” and derogatory condemnation are always targetted at the Chinese by the dominant group at the centre. Michael Geyer, a well-known postmodernist avers: “Identity politics is quite approximately characterized as a struggle over representation, as resistance against denigration of group images” (521). The question of Chinese and Chinese American national identity is both historical and political in the most direct sense of the words. Generally when “Other” races do not get appropriate representation, they do write as “Others” as “different” in the fashion of postmodernist and postcolonial literary writers. Laura Mulvey has perceptively observed: “The question of national identity is political and it brings the political together with the cultural and ideological issues immediately and inevitably” (10). The novels under study give the clear understanding that the two novelists struggle to get a clear-cut American national identity for their people by projecting their distinct deep-rooted cultural values, resisting at the same time the dominant economic, political and racial authority at the centre. Caldeira substantiates this view in more clear terms. He says:

The protagonist of a historiographic metafiction is anything but a type. It is the ex-centric, the marginalized, the peripheral. Historiographic metafiction exposes a post-modern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference. Types here are undermined. The question of positioning the protagonist in a socio-cultural set-up is impossible because here there is no sense of the cultural universality. He is a particular and specific individual at once private and public. Moreover, in a historiographic metafiction, accuracy of truth is irrelevant because there are multiple truth. (98)

The novels of Kingston and Tan have postmodern characteristics. They are metafictional in every sense of the term. The characters are types – cultural stereotypes. They carry almost fixed ideas and images. They are at the peripheral as marginalized minorities. Their main endeavour as depicted in the novels is a singular one. They need recognition in the American multicultural pluralistic society. The Chinese find

their positioning in the alien country very difficult because of their biological and physiological differences with the mainstream whites who always refuse to relate with them on account of their superior cultural habits. Therefore, there is no point in questioning the veracity of the cultural stories of the Chinese one finds in the novels. There can be any number of truths in the multicultural society, as many as the number of minority communities in the land. While the historical stories many a time present historical personages (such as Ah Goong in Kingston's *China Men*, for instance), the metafictional reflexivity of postmodern novels seems to ask the question: how does one know the past for sure? Linda Hutcheon says: "Post-modernism deliberately confuses the notion that history's problem is verification, while fiction's is veracity" (112).

In historical documents, books and records, the author presents in a chronological order and in a linear manner, the facts and truths he has carefully collected relating to past events, episodes and incidents. He is totally objective. He never intrudes and presents his own observations. Nor does he distort historical truths and prove himself to be a fake historian. The novelist, on the other hand, does not bother about chronology, logic; off and on, he interferes, adds bits and pieces, meanders, avoids neat construction, exaggerates or minimizes, introduces many voices and foregrounds or leaves hints at the end to suggest his inability to come to any conclusion.

This is true of Kingston's histories/stories and Tan's fictional narratives. One may find in their novels, the histories/stories of the Chinese, their families, their superstitious beliefs and authorial comments. One can also hear communal, political, historical mythological, literary, and symbolic voices. All these at the end unify themselves to present a Chinese collective identity in the American marginalized predicament. This does not mean that the novels are mere hotch-potch of nonsense. The novelists tell their stories using mainly postmodernist technique of "pastiche." They try to give their stories much veracity and truthfulness. But the truth in the stories is historically not verifiable.

Moreover, it is not at all possible for the novelist who writes the history of his people to capture all the moments of the past. Some of the moments elude him; he too evades some, and chooses only those which serve his purpose. However, he sees to it that the readers do not miss the essential history in his works. This is exactly what Kingston and Tan have done in their novels. For instance, towards the end of the novel *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator (Kingston) says: "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (WW 206). Kingston, quite understandably, is not able to remember and recall to her mind all the details of the story her mother told her, even recently. The reason for not giving all the details is very obvious. Kingston has the desire to complete the story with her own talk story – a legendary story. One more instance is suffice. It is found in Tan's novel *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Towards the end of the novel one finds Olivia at the ruins of the Ghost Mountain frantically digging the ground and taking out a buried jar full of age-old eggs. She says: "I pulled out a blackened egg, then another and another. I hugged them against my chest, where they crumbled, all these relics of our past disintegrating into gray chalk. But I was beyond worry. I knew I had already tasted what was left" (355). The meaning is very clear. The buried jar is the long-past history of the Chinese people and the age-darkened eggs are the hitherto unearthed and unexplored moments of their past life. To Olivia, the narrator, both the jar and the eggs are very dear. That is why she holds them against her chest. But they crumble. They are the relics of her past and they disintegrate into gray chalk. But she does not worry, as she has already tasted what was left to write.

Kingston and Tan try to dismantle and explode the power structure of modernism and write the history of their people adopting quite a good number of new postmodernist radical and reactionary techniques. Hence, in their works one finds the dissolution of the grand narratives of modernism, the replenishment of ruptural breaks and the transgression of old established boundaries. One could even say that they join hands in heralding a new, more democratic beginning marking a watershed in postmodernist literary criticism. They also knew that the whites have always treated their people, the Chinese, with great contempt and disdain and segregated them as low-born, uncultured uncouths. History says that seeing the indecent and immoral behaviour of the early Chinese immigrants, the American whites dubbed

China as a mother of prostitutes and her people as uncultured and undesirable aliens filled with all kinds of abominations.

According to Huntley, the first Chinese woman to emigrate to California was Marie Seise, a servant. She came in 1848, as a household staff of the Charles V. Gillespie family (Yung 14). True, some the early Chinese women in the States were working as servants in white American houses; others thrived as sex-workers. Huntley observes:

Sketchy records reveal that the majority of Chinese prostitutes were, in fact, little more than slaves or indentured servants who had been kidnapped from remote villages in rural China and sold to brokers and brothel owners. They were then shipped like human cargo to the camps and temporary villages that were established close to mining operations and railroad construction sites. Controlled by the *tongs*, powerful secret Chinese organizations, the white slave traffic flourished in the predominantly male Asian communities in the United States. (Maxine Hong Kingston 42-43)

It is exactly against this low-grade image “fixity” the two novelists wage a war, recreate and re-narrate old stories of their people and present them as upholders of a unique ancient culture and heritage. As such, in none of their works one finds any sex-worker or an immoral Chinese woman or Chinese American woman. They are presented as hard working men and women very much worried about their future generations. The early Chinese women or the first generation Chinese women portrayed in the novels are found to be very good people fully engaged in educating their daughters and putting them on the right track. None of them lead a wayward or wanton life. Some of the daughters marry non-Chinese men, but these men are very good gentlemen showing no sign of any difference. The two writers focus their attention mainly on their folks who guide and protect their American born daughters. The two novelists give a different “fixity” to their characters making them true and sincere upholders of their ancestral cultural values.

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