

Chinese American Identity in the Novels of Amy Tan

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Article Info

Article history:
Received 2026-04-21
Accepted 2026-06-08
Published 2026-06-30

Keywords:
Chinese Americans,
Biculturalism,
Ethnicity, Identity,
Literature

Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of ethnicity and identity in the works of Chinese American author Amy Tan. Her first two novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, are discussed from the perspective of ethnic, multicultural, and cultural studies. Tan's works provide detailed and sincere insight into the lives of first- and second-generation Chinese immigrants in the United States. Tan's novels provide a lot of information on ethnicity and identity, as well as on the Chinese American community in general. This work aims to show that immigrants do not necessarily lose their ethnic identity while living in the United States. Moreover, they frequently strive to preserve their original culture, sometimes adapting it to their new environment. They want to retain their own cultural and ethnic heritage as well as their personal identity, while assimilating into the new country and new circumstances. By employing comparative and contrastive analysis of selected Tan novels, this paper will show how Tan, in a unique way, negotiated the relationship between ethnicity and identity in her novels. Tan's rendering of ethnic identity has not been addressed in this way previously, and this study contributes to a more thorough understanding of Tan's work.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.46923/ijbhes.v8i1.681>

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1. Introduction

The ever-increasing size and variety of the Chinese American population, as well as its importance in American culture and society, have stimulated interest in a wide range of literature dealing with the Chinese American experience. The significance of ethnicity in creating one's identity might be one of the crucial aspects of the American national character. What makes it even more interesting is comparing ethnicities that are considerably dissimilar and frequently experience numerous cultural differences, which generate even greater misunderstandings and challenges. The widespread understanding of the role that ethnicity and identity formation have played in the United States has encouraged research that aims to explain the roots, developments, and consequences of perceptions of the arrival and presence of the Chinese minority in the United States.

The strongest criticism of Tan's works appeared after the publication of her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. One of the biggest critics of Tan's work was Frank Chin, who accused Amy Tan of providing a distorted picture of Chinese culture and history. Tan's story about the swan, a symbol of Chinese culture, came under attack from Frank Chin and other editors of the anthology of Asian American literature titled *Aiiieeeee!*, who claimed that her story about the swan and a mother who dreams of her daughter being born in America is not Chinese, but a white racist. Together with other editors of the anthology, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wang, Chin also accused Amy Tan and other Chinese American authors, such as Maxine Hong Kingston and David Hwang, who used traditional Chinese stories in their work of faking the best-known works of Asian literature. Although

some critics have responded to Chin's accusations, this discussion is not over and deserves additional attention, which this paper aims to provide.

This paper is also informed by various ethnic theorists, including Frank Chin, Elaine H. Kim, and Amy Ling, as well as sociologists and historians Werner Sollors, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. It appears that America's melting pot no longer exists. The forced assimilation gave way to multiculturalism, and instead of melting the constituent ethnicities into a bland mass, we prefer to see them as a "salad bowl," where all the parts are visibly present and equally contribute to the unique product of American multicultural society. It seems that America was most willing to accept the immigrants of European descent, while other ethnicities were not treated equally. Even among immigrants of European descent, there were significant differences in reception and the opportunities offered. The most favorable ones were the white Protestant immigrants of English descent (WASPs), followed by other English-speaking immigrants, notably Scottish, Welsh, and Irish, and other Central European or Scandinavian immigrants. They were followed by South and East European immigrants, although all others than WASPs were frequently discriminated against by the dominating ethnicity. Much worse off were the immigrants from other continents, especially those whose race and/or physical features made them look distinctly different from the dominant community. This is the category where immigrants of Chinese descent belong. Their being significantly different contributed to their mistreatment and low social status in America.

The list of discriminatory measures brought against Chinese in the United States included their temporary acceptance to America, i.e., a short-term labor after which they were returned to China, prevention of immigration of female Chinese immigrants, and allowing the Chinese to work only in those fields that were usually more physically demanding and less paid, such as mining and railroad construction. However, with the easing of repressive measures against the Chinese in the States, this Asian community was finally able to develop itself into one of the more prosperous ethnic groups in the States due to their hard work and diligence. Nevertheless, their physical features make them highly recognizable in the United States, further contributing to their distinction in their country of residence. The unique experiences of Chinese Americans in America are a frequent theme in the works of many Chinese American authors. Their attempt to describe their life experiences from different ethnic perspectives is often driven by a desire to protect and preserve their ethnic heritage, while also explaining and understanding their personal identity, shaped by both their ethnicity and the mainstream culture. That is why Tan's representation of ethnic identity in the form of yin-yang best explains the myriad Chinese ethnic identities in the United States.

2. Literature Review

A The correlation between ethnicity and identity is one of the most powerful issues in Chinese American literature and deserves a more detailed insight and consideration. Many issues regarding the American ethnic literature have been deemed problematic. The very term ethnic caused commotion as it carried different, frequently negative, and discriminatory undertones. Furthermore, the writing by various ethnic members was not considered literature, but rather an account of the life of "ethnics" that possesses little, if any, literary value. It was only after the civil rights struggles of the 1960s that the massive shift in perception and attitude towards the diversity of American literature occurred. The outcome of a new liberation was an abundance of "new" literature that introduced new vocabulary, customs, and cultural differences. What also followed was a more liberal identity politics, allowing not only recognition within any given social, ethnic, or racial group, but also the possibility of being a member of two or more of these groups. Nowadays, it is relatively easy to identify with several groups while also retaining one's own separate identity and distinction. This relation between ethnicity and identity seems to be one of the main features of the new multiculturalism in America.

This work aims to demonstrate that immigrants do not necessarily lose their ethnic identity when living in the United States; rather, they often preserve their original customs and beliefs, sometimes adapting them to their new environment. They want to retain their own cultural and ethnic heritage as well as their personal identity, while assimilating into the new environments and standards of living. American ethnic literature is full of examples of people who cling to their ethnic culture while at the same time creating their identity in a new homeland. This occurrence is not new. Detailed accounts of the lives of “ethnics” in the New World have been subjects of scientific discussion in the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Chicago school of sociology and its German predecessors were the first to recognize the circumstances of existence in which newly arrived “ethnics” lived in America. Their efforts to describe ethnicity as a means of cultural expression and identification prove that they were already aware of the myriad issues that usually follow similar discussions, such as melting pot and pluralism, racial issues, assimilation, identity, migration, transnationalism, generation gap, religion, to name just a few. Sociologists and anthropologists were able to describe the new group affiliations and general patterns of behavior characteristic of all ethnic groups in America, such as life in ethnic communities, changes in ethnic identity, and attempts to preserve their cultural heritage. Scholars were not the only ones who were ready to recognize the phenomenon of “unmeltable ethnics.”

Amy Tan has been one of the most prominent Chinese American authors ever since her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, appeared in 1989. Even before that, her articles depicting various Chinese American issues drew the attention of literary critics and the general audience in America. Together with Maxine Hong Kingston, who has been her role model in a way (Huntley, 1998), Amy Tan is unmistakably recognized as the leading Chinese American novelist and one of the most prominent “ethnic” authors in the United States whose novels have become instant best sellers and received unreserved recognition, both in America and abroad. The two novels by Amy Tan analyzed in this paper, Tan (1989, 1992), demonstrate the importance of ethnicity and the struggle to come to terms with one’s own identity in a multicultural society such as the United States. Both novels deal with broad aspects of ethnicity and identity, seeking to describe and understand the complexity of the existence of the first and second generations of Chinese Americans. Her writing is filled with experiences drawn from her personal life and those of her relatives, friends, and acquaintances from different Chinese American communities in the San Francisco area. In her novels, Amy Tan explores the themes of cultural translation, mother-daughter relationships, storytelling, duality of immigrant identity, and sexism in Chinese culture. Although it is unwise to claim that her work represents every Chinese American, many Chinese Americans can easily identify with the issues Amy Tan explores in her novels.

However, some critics believe her representation has not been entirely accurate. Writer Frank Chin, who is also a member of the Asian American community, has criticized Amy Tan for distorting the historical facts and conforming to the stereotypes about the Chinese in America. Tan frequently answers to these accusations by saying that she writes first and foremost as an artist (Huntley, 1998). In her work, she addresses issues that are universally applicable to all ethnic groups in America, although her first aim is to portray the Chinese American experience. Her work provides detailed and sincere insight into the lives of the first and second generations of Chinese Americans, frequently drawn from her personal experience. The aim of this paper is also to research Amy Tan’s Chinese American artistic expression of ethnic identity. The analysis of her novels provides a wealth of information not only on ethnicity and identity but also on the Chinese American community in general. Therefore, her novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* deserve further research.

Her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, is written as a series of personal narratives about eight Chinese American women, i.e., four mothers and four daughters, who tell the stories of their lives and introduce us to a myriad of relations between mothers and daughters, as well as among other members of this bicultural society. In other words, *The Joy Luck Club* is a narrative where different storytellers

depict their versions of the American experience. The novel is divided into four sections, each containing four stories. A short fable precedes every section and introduces the guiding idea. The Joy Luck Club was not planned as a novel but as a collection of short stories that Tan's agent, Sandra Dijkstra, agreed to sell to a publisher. This explains its episodic structure since the novel expands through connections between stories, displaying episode by episode, being told by one of the seven women, i.e., three mothers and four daughters. One of the mothers, Suyuan Woo, has died, and her daughter tells both Suyuan's and her stories. The center of congregation is the Joy Luck Club, a women's club that Suyuan Woo started in China four decades earlier. Originally intended to be a meeting place where women could spend time and encourage one another during World War II, the Joy Luck Club was moved to America when Suyuan immigrated there. The role of the club changed in the new environment, evolving into an investment or business enterprise that enabled Suyuan and other women to invest their money in shares and bonds. However, investing money was not its primary role; it was meant to serve as a place of gathering, a place for preserving China's values and traditions, and a place where the second generation of Chinese Americans would learn more about their ancestors' culture. Therefore, the Joy Luck Club is a piece of China in the United States, a cultural ghetto where old values and traditions are kept and cherished. At the same time, it is a place where two cultures meet, merge, and sometimes clash. The club can be understood as a mediation between the two worlds, although it is essentially an ethnic club that values Chinese customs and rituals. It is, at the same time, an embodiment of descent relations, since all of its members are of Chinese origin (Sollors, 1986). Profoundly Chinese yet set in an American environment, the club represents a piece of Chinese culture. Three mothers, the original members of the club, and their four daughters are the main protagonists of events that unfold both at the social club and at their homes.

The novel revolves around several basic themes and explores them from different points of view: the mother-daughter relationship, the search for identity, the ethnic gap, the generational gap, biculturalism, assimilation, and the American dream. All themes are closely related to the issues of ethnicity and explore conditions that are "peculiar to a race or nation" and are seen "as nonstandard, or, in America, as non fully American" (Sollors, 1986). Each of the themes also addresses the issue of identity; its creation, involvement and change. This is why we can view the themes as a conflict between ethnicity and identity, or between descent and consent, which, according to Sollors, is a crucial issue in American society (6). Undoubtedly, the central theme of the novel is the mother-daughter relationship through which all other major themes, such as the ethnic and generational gaps, biculturalism, assimilation, the search for identity, and the American dream, can be addressed. The mothers of The Joy Luck Club have never assimilated, as they have never been able to acquire fluency in English or adjust to American values, attitudes, and ways of thinking. They adhere to their Chinese customs and rituals, doing their best not to forget Chinese values, ceremonies, and mores. Such portrayal of mothers as typical examples of first-generation immigrants closely aligns with Glazer and Moynihan's theory of the unsustainability of the melting pot (12), according to which immigrants still preserve much of their original culture. Indeed, mothers cling to the club's original customs, always dressed in Chinese attire, beginning their regular meetings with a game of mahjong, which is usually followed by various traditional Chinese dishes.

The four English-speaking daughters represent a different set of values. Being American by birth, education, and attitude, they reflect not only generational gaps and mother-daughter conflicts but also multicultural confusion concerning issues of the self. The mothers try hard to instill in their daughters Chinese ways of thinking, values, and traditions. However, it turns out to be an impossible mission, since the daughters strongly oppose their mothers' attitudes, considering them strange and old-fashioned. This results in their conflict, alienation, and eventual lack of communication. The gap between the two parties is not bridged until the daughters manage to comprehend their mothers' views

and reconcile their Chinese heritage with their American upbringing. The Joy Luck Club may therefore seem to resemble a battlefield where an invisible yet fierce cultural and generational struggle takes place. The table, which has until recently been reserved only for the mothers, becomes another place of conflict as Jing-mei takes her mother's place at the mahjong table. Mahjong is presented here as a game in which everyone both wins and loses (Fickle, 2014). This replacement is an inevitable and predictable generational shift as mothers age, start dying, and their daughters take over. However, this generational gap is also an ethnic gap, as daughters do not seem to share their mothers' ideals, values, customs, and traditions. Raised and educated in the United States, they do not share their mother's set of values and ideals.

Biculturalism is another prominent theme in the novel. It includes living on, as well as crossing, national, ethnic, and generational boundaries. Both mothers and daughters seem caught between the two worlds. While mothers mediate between their homeland and their adopted country, daughters feel trapped between their Chinese ethnicity and their American education. Both generations meet in the "borderland" that is represented by their immigrant families. Nonetheless, this meeting is troublesome, as the first-generation family members remain rooted in their ancestral culture. In contrast, the second-generation family members feel they do not belong to that culture. For second-generation family members, mainstream culture can be as unwelcoming as the ancestral culture, since their Asian features mean they cannot blend into anonymity in American society. In other words, although they are American by birth and education, they are marginalized by their Otherness, by their Orientalism, i.e., by their difference. In their case, the melting pot "never happened" and represents a "myth" Gleason (1979) since the mainstream population still fails to recognize Asian Americans as representatives of American society.

The initial fable "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" depicts the kind of life the mothers led in China and, at the same time, reveals their dreams for their daughters.

In America, I will have a daughter just like me. But over there, nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there, nobody will look down on her because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there, she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning because I will give her this swan – a creature that became more than what was hoped for (17).

Nevertheless, as daughters became adults, mothers realized that they had failed to achieve their goal of combining the "best ingredients" of China and America in what was supposed to be their version of a melting pot. Their daughters are much more American than Chinese since they have adopted American values, attitudes, and ways of thinking. Tan's story about the swan, a symbol of Chinese culture, came under attack from the editors of *The Big Aiiieeeee!* anthology who claimed that her story about the swan and a mother who dreams of her daughter being born in America "is not Chinese but white racist. Any Chinese intelligence does not inform it" (Chin & Frank, 1989). Moreover, Chin accused Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston and David Hwang who used Chinese traditional stories in their work of "fak[ing] the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature" (Chin & Frank, 1989).

Also, to legitimize their faking, Chin claims that they have to fake all of Asian American history and literature, and argue that the immigrants who settled and established Chinese America lost touch with Chinese culture, and that a faulty memory combined with new experience produced new versions of these traditional stories (Chin & Frank, 1989). By openly attacking Tan as a "traitor" of the Chinese tradition, Chin started a discussion in the Chinese American literary circles of what represents an authentic representation and where the limits of such representation are. In her essay "Sugar Sisterhood," Sau-ling Synthia Wong revises Chin's view and justifies the usage of Chinese traditional

stories and other “Chinese” cultural signs and labels them “‘markers of authenticity,’ whose function is to create an ‘Oriental effect’ by signaling a reassuring affinity between the given work and American preconceptions of what the Orient is/should be” (187). The discussion of authenticity has preoccupied the Chinese American community ever since. There seems to be no agreement on what constitutes “authentic” Chinese culture, and there might be more than one answer to that question, given the size and diversity of Chinese civilization. However, whatever the reason for Tan’s (re)writing traditional stories, it appears that the artistic articulations are an integral part of one’s writing. Tan’s interpretation of traditional Chinese stories is therefore a valuable contribution to her version of the Chinese experience in America, and her readership, both “mainstream” and Chinese, has recognized her writing as trustworthy and authentic.

Another important theme in the novel is the question of identity. For one of the Chinese American mothers, Suyuan Woo, there are only two sorts of identity that her daughter can choose from: Chinese, which she prefers because it is obedient, and American, the disobedient and thus intolerable one. Suyuan does not seem to understand that there are not only two possible solutions in defining one’s identity. Instinctively rejecting her daughter’s “foreign” identity, she hopes to be able to influence her daughter’s way of reasoning. “Only two kinds of daughters,” she shouted in Chinese. Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house an obedient daughter!” (142). However, the quest for identity is not as simple as that. According to Stanley and Derald Sue, Chinese Americans are products of various interplaying forces, including traditional Chinese values, Western influences, and racism. In their essay “Chinese-American personality and mental health,” they define three basic types the “traditionalist,” the “marginal man,” and the “Asian American” (Sue & Sue, 1971). The traditionalist is the person who obeys parental expectations, which is the kind of identity mothers envisioned for their daughters. However, the daughters seem to be embodiments of “marginal people,” i.e., individuals who discard ancestral culture to embrace Western ways. Tan does not seem to include the third version of the Sues’ classification, the “Asian American” type who rebels against both cultures in search of a new self.

Chin and Chan also addressed the discussion of the Asian American identity in their anthology of Asian American writers Aiiieeeee! and rejected the simplified classifications of Chinese identities split up into either American or Chinese denouncing “ [t]his myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the dual personality,” claiming that “[n]either Asian culture nor American culture was equipped to define [them] except in the most superficial terms” (viii). Beyond creating a new ethnic space, their classification also distinguishes between “Asian American” and “Americanized Asian.” Tan’s representation of first-generation mothers and second generation daughters falls into the aforementioned two groups. However, even this sort of division does not depict well enough all the possible identity variations within the specter of both the “Asian American” and the “Americanized Asian.” What Chin and Chan seem to forget is that ethnic identity and experience can be fluid and that cultures change. Unlike them, Tan manages to explain the complexities and instability of one’s identity. Although initially unaware of the changes they have undergone in the United States, the mothers of *The Joy Luck Club* become increasingly aware that their way of thinking, values, and identity are unstable and undergoing constant change. Lindo Jong voices her yearlong dilemmas concerning the decisions she has made and wonders about what part of her triggered her choice: “I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other. [...] So now I think, what did I lose? What did I get back in return?” (266).

Furthermore, Chin and Chan’s belief that the native-born are deprived of Asian culture is inappropriate, as we cannot completely isolate either the Chinese or the American part of this experience. The same rule applies to both “Asian American” and “Americanized Asian.” However, Amy Tan offers another solution to the question of how to define one’s identity. By using multiple

narratives, Tan revises conventions of self-representation to depict a complex and multivocal, yet interdependent identity that presents the bicultural or multicultural American heritage of characters and communities that are depicted. Amy Tan shows in her novel that neither American nor Chinese culture has an exclusive influence on the formation of one's identity. By doing so, she stresses the balance between isolation and assimilation. As the novel demonstrates, both mothers and daughters are affected by both cultures. None of them is an exclusive member of only one civilization. Therefore, they are neither completely isolated nor completely assimilated.

Tan's novel can be viewed as an identity narrative: it explores the boundaries of identity and voices these findings through many characters who depict their own points of view. Tan obviously constructs a multi-voiced narrative without taking sides or favoring any of her characters, which adds to her credibility and popularity. In her attempt to provide a realistic, well-balanced, and impartial picture, she presents several characters and their particular expressions of identity. Tan is exploring her identity and the identities of her characters, depicting both the segments and the whole of Chinese American identity. By doing so, she avoids an "either/or" choice while relying on a "yin-yang" presentation of Chinese American identity. Moreover, using multivocal narrative strategies in *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan manages to unify all the relevant perspectives into a unique, yet multifaceted Chinese American identity.

Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, consists of two plots: a frame story set in the United States and dealing primarily with Pearl and her mother Winnie; and a central, focal narrative about Winnie's life as Jiang Weili in China before and during World War II, thus immediately before she emigrated to the United States. The major themes include the intricate mother-daughter relationship, the position of women in China, the construction of identity, and storytelling.

The introductory part of the novel focuses on the second-generation Chinese American daughter, Pearl, who is a typical example of someone who has given up her Chinese heritage and embraced American culture. Pearl has a strained relationship with her mother, marked by misunderstandings and a lack of communication. It seems that their relationship has always been like that since the novel opens with Pearl's confession: "Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument" (11). Both of them hide secrets from one another. While her mother conceals the unpleasant details of her life in China, Pearl has hidden the fact that she has multiple sclerosis. Her not telling her mother about the disease is not only a result of her wish to protect her mother from shock, but also a result of yearlong severed relationship. The troublesome mother-daughter relation is typical of all Tan's novels and usually presents one of the central themes. *The Kitchen God's Wife* is no exception. Caught between two very different cultures, mothers work hard to instill their daughters with Chinese values and traditions, and therefore use storytelling to explain Chinese ways and their specific culture. Storytelling is an integral part of their communication. Like all of Tan's novels, *The Kitchen God's Wife* is a novel about storytelling and proves that storytelling is the foundation of Chinese American communities. Storytelling is, among other things, a way to bridge the generational and cultural gap between mother and daughter. Within the microcultural formation of the family, the only means available to Winnie to ensure ethnic continuity is to recall the past and tell stories about what happened before she arrived in the United States. In her opinion, Pearl has no memory of the past, so she doesn't know who she is, cannot hold herself together, and cannot fight for her life. In other words, Pearl lacks her mother's survival mentality, which is typical of all first-generation mothers in Tan's novels. They have experienced two sorts of extreme situations: one is famine, war, forced marriage, and broken family in China, and the other is cultural alienation, disintegration of the old family structure, which leads to a conflict between mother and daughter in America. To survive drastic changes in their lives, these women need to maintain a psychological continuity, a coherent picture of the world, and a continuity of self. Such a need requires the assuring structure of a life-story narrative. Storytelling is, for them, a socializing, ego-forming expression of anxieties, hopes, and survival

instincts. On a more personal, familial level, mothers fear losing their connection with their daughters and that their experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and desires will have no future successors. Eventually, Pearl comes to realize the value and reason for her mother's survival mentality and begins to open up to the rich, multiple meanings in her mother's stories rather than mere dead echoes of past experiences and events. Pearl becomes less resistant to identifying with her mother. The shift from resistance to acquiescence simultaneously signifies the growth of a mature individual.

However, as Jiao states „Maternal empowerment depends on mutuality; this is manifested by The Kitchen God's Wife, which is especially true for women who mother against the grain, against the multitudes of marginalization and pathologization“ (Jiao, 2019).

It might be true that through her mother's memory and storytelling, Pearl will gain insight into Chinese rules, roles, values, and heritage and establish better communication with her mother. Still, the question is whether she will have access to her mother's mental habits, strength to overcome problems, and to acquire her mother's survivor's mentality. Will the knowledge of Chinese ways and traditions equip her with the will to survive?

Whatever the answer, we can predict that mother's recollection and narration of the past are related to a current sense of ethnic identity. We do not have only images of ourselves in memory; we also have stories of the past that both shape and convey our sense of self. Our sense of what has happened to us is grounded not in actual experiences but in meaningful ones, and the meanings of our past experiences are constructs produced in much the same way as narratives are.

Finally, Chinese Americans are still not regarded as possible representatives of the United States' national imagery and symbolism. Although the law undoubtedly ensures the legal terms of citizenship, it cannot change the cultural conditions of Asian American abjection. The law also cannot change the historical consequences and prejudices created by the years of racial discrimination. Unmistakably different from the standard look of the nation and alien to its cultural origin, Asian Americans hold the position of formal nationals and cultural aliens.

3. Method

Defining the term ethnicity may prove to be a difficult task, given the number of contexts in which the word can be used to denote different concepts, as well as the historical changes that have influenced its original meanings and usage. As late as the 1970s, ethnicity was still regarded as a new and quite confusing word whose origin was even more uncertain. The coauthors of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, traced the origin of the term. They concluded in their *Ethnicity* collection from 1975 that “[e]thnicity seems to be a new term. In the sense in which we use it the character or quality of an ethnic group –it does not appear in the 1933 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. Still, it appears in the 1972 Supplement, where the earliest recorded usage is David Riesman's in 1953. (1)” (Sollors, 1986).

“As a term, ethnicity is a product of a long-standing feature of English sociolinguistics—the tendency to look to Greek, Latin, French, or more generally, Romance models, when a new word is needed to fancify a plain idea or expression” (Hutchinson&Smith19). The word “ethnicity” stems from the Greek term *ethos*, which is translated into French as *ethnie*, with the derived adjective *ethnique*. In English, the adjectival form is *ethnic*, but there is no direct translation for the Greek noun *ethnos*. Therefore, a suffix was added to the adjective *ethnic* to form the noun *ethnicity*. The Greek adjective *ethnikos*, from which the noun *ethnos* stems and from which the English “ethnic” and “ethnicity” stem, meant “gentile” and “heathen,” and “is very nearly synonymous with barbaros, with all its moral, social and linguistic content—the barbarians were those who spoke unintelligible languages, and wanted for civilization, who were beyond the bounds of meaning, order and decency” (ibid 20).

We should not be surprised then that many people refuse to be described as “ethnic” as the attribute may carry various negative connotations. The Greek noun *ethnos* was used both to denote people in general and “others.”

This is why the term retained its ability to define different people contrastively and, what is equally important, frequently negatively. The term “ethnic,” along with its numerous derived forms, has long been used in English in its biblical sense of “gentile,” denoting “pagan” or “non-Christian” characteristics of a person or a group. Over time, the meaning of this word changed from non-Israelite to non-Christian or “heathen”. Although in the mid-nineteenth century the word “ethnic” was given another meaning, “peculiar to a race or nation,” the English language “has retained the pagan memory of ‘ethnic’, often secularized in the sense of ethnic as other, as nonstandard, or, in America, as non fully American” (Sollors, 1986).

Therefore, the word “ethnicity” still keeps its double role: describing inclusive peoplehood which is shared by all Americans and denoting otherness which separates ethnics from mainstream culture, i.e., WASPs. The opposition of ethnic and American may also be interpreted as a distinction between heathens and chosen people, which again makes “ethnicity” a non-desired feature.

To make things even more complex, this discussion would be incomplete without addressing the concept of race within the notion of ethnicity. Although humans were earlier classified into four main races, we realize today that, with so much interbreeding within the human population, we cannot speak of fixed boundaries between races, and we are also aware of numerous variations within a single racial group that can be as significant as the variation between two different racial groups.

Since the term race has dubious descriptive value, I propose integrating it into the study of ethnicity or ethnic relations that follow later in the text. Many scholars have tackled this issue, with different outcomes. While some readily regard race as an integral part of ethnicity, others stress a need to differentiate between race and ethnicity. It is my intention not to treat the issue of race separately, but as an additional distinguishing factor within the discussion of ethnicity. People with different physical appearances may find it difficult to avoid their ethnic identity if they wish to. Such people tend more often to be discriminated against due to their ethnic origin, since their physique is something they cannot break away from. It is something that clearly distinguishes them from the mainstream and dominant culture of the society in which they live.

The dichotomy between non-ethnic Americans and ethnic “others” seems to remain equally confusing, although people are today more ready to express their ethnicity than they have ever been before, and although we frequently hear the phrase “ethnics all” used as a battle cry for diversity in the United States.

4. Result and Discussion

The novels of Amy Tan depict Chinese Americans as both part of and apart from the two separate worlds, neither completely assimilated nor completely isolated. Such a portrayal of Chinese Americans evidently opposes the melting pot theory, as Tan proves that a complete assimilation of immigrants can never happen. Both first- and second-generation Chinese Americans experience similar challenges in life in the United States since they are trapped between their Chinese heritage and the American society they live in. They present a unique in-between condition that can be viewed in different ways. While some critics consider this duality a “feeling of being between worlds, totally at home nowhere” Ling (1990), I consider it neither exclusively negative nor positive, but rather a unique experience that can enrich any community where people from different ethnic backgrounds live. In rendering American ethnic communities and their experiences, one might find Amy Ling’s opinion essential in depicting their stance:

The very condition [of the between-world] itself carries both negative and positive charges. On the one hand, being between worlds can be interpreted to mean occupying the space or gulf between two banks; one is thus in a state of suspension, accepted by neither side and therefore truly belonging nowhere. [...] On the other hand, viewed from a different perspective, being between worlds may be considered to have footholds on both banks and therefore to belong to two worlds at once. One does not have less; one has more [...], the person between worlds is in the indispensable position of being a bridge (Ling, 1990).

Nowadays, we also understand that the between-world condition is neither universal nor fixed, as individuals can be affected by it in different ways, contributing to their diverse identity formation.

Moreover, identity is what you make of it. This is particularly true of American identity, as it has always been defined in relation to other countries, cultures, beliefs, and sets of values. The issue of Chinese American identity is complex and diverse, and there seems to be no single answer to what constitutes it. What we are certain of is the fact that Chinese American authors have been tired of being referred to as the Others or Orientals by the prevailing WASP culture. Therefore, they began writing to describe their sentiments and position within the American community. As multiculturalism started gaining momentum in the 1960s and the '70s, the WASP cultural supremacy was challenged by other voices such as Asian American, African American, Latino American, and Native American, to mention just a few of the most prominent emerging groups. Particularly interesting is Chinese American women's writing, since Chinese women were doubly marginalized in the United States. They were marginalized as women by their own culture, and they were marginalized as "inassimilable" immigrants by the dominant American culture. Amy Tan, in particular, has drawn critical attention as one of the most prominent Chinese American authors since her first novel appeared in 1989. Her novels explore the unique position of first- and second-generation Chinese Americans, their "borderland" experience, and their search for identity. The search for identity is indeed a widespread phenomenon in American multicultural literature, and it seems to preoccupy writers of all ethnic origins equally. Amy Tan's search for identity reveals complex cultural, historical, and sociological circumstances that have shaped the unique position of Chinese Americans. Although Tan writes about Chinese immigrants in California's ethnic neighborhoods, she has earned praise and an international readership for the familiar themes she explores in her novels. The themes, topics, and motifs that Tan explores in her work are universal and include mother-daughter relationships, search for identity and self-discovery, understanding one's ethnicity, acculturation, the quest for the American Dream, disintegration of family relationships, separation, and loss to name the most prominent ones only. That is why Tan has managed to strike a chord with readers of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities.

Nevertheless, Tan's writing has been criticized by some of her fellow writers, most notably by Chinese American author and critic Frank Chin and by a group of authors who edited the anthologies *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!* of Asian American writers. When Chin accused Tan of faking all of Asian American history and literature, he also proclaimed that her writing is a contribution to the stereotype (*The Big Aiiieeeee!* 3). Failing to recognize that Tan's writing represents the sentiments of numerous Chinese Americans, Chin has denied her right to individual artistic expression as well as her representation of Chinese Americans. The question of representation is another crucial issue in Chinese American literature. As in other ethnic literatures in the USA, the central discussions include the following questions: Who is qualified to speak about and for Chinese Americans? What is the appropriate language of ethnic artistic representation? How should a minority writer published in a mainstream press negotiate her double audience, and to whom does she owe allegiance?

5. Conclusion

Amy Tan claims to write first and foremost as an artist, and although she addresses universal issues in her novels, her primary aim is to depict the Chinese American experience. Tan's Chinese American

artistic expressions of ethnic identity are unique and set her apart from other Chinese American authors, as she demonstrates the complexity of individual identity and the diversity of perspectives within the Chinese American community. By using multiple narratives, Tan depicts a complex, multivocal, yet interdependent identity that presents the bicultural or multicultural American heritage of the characters and communities she portrays in her novels. Thus, she stresses the balance between isolation and assimilation, as her characters are affected by both cultures and are not exclusive members of either civilization. Because of that, her characters are neither completely isolated nor completely assimilated. Tan's novels explore the boundaries of identity and voice the findings through various characters who illustrate their point of view. She is exploring her characters' identities, explaining both the segments and the whole of Chinese American identity. By doing so, she avoids an "either/or" choice, at the same time as she relies on a "yin-yang presentation" of Chinese American identity.

The most important message of the yin-yang is that balance must be maintained between the opposing forces and between the two cultures, Chinese and American. Furthermore, by employing multivocal narrative strategies in her novels, Amy Tan manages to unify all the relevant perspectives into a unique yet multifaceted Chinese American identity, which distinguishes her from other Chinese American authors. Particularly interesting for this thesis was the position of Chinese American female writing, as Chinese women were doubly marginalized in the United States. As a member of a second-generation immigrant family to the United States, Tan tried to speak for her ethnic group. Still, at the same time, she also tried to understand the position of first-generation immigrants like her mother. The conflicts and misunderstandings between the two immigrant generations were the most important elements of her novels and a lasting inspiration for her.

In her works, Tan has sought to depict the full range of ethnic identities from seemingly Americanized to stubbornly Chinese. Her description of Chinese-American identities through the yin-yang concept has permeated her entire opus and, in a way, has become her trademark. However, there appears to be no conclusion to this ever-changing issue of Chinese American identity as immigration has constantly changed the picture of American society, relentlessly creating and re-creating a new ethnic and identity picture, and it will continue to do so in the future. This situation is particularly interesting not only for sociologists but also for psychologists and literary critics, as we can expect that with every subsequent wave of immigrants, there will be a new understanding of American (ethnic) identity, with new representations in American literature.

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