



Generational Differences and the Diaspora in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Helie Lee's *Still Life with Rice*

Dr. C. Isaac Jebastine
Professor and Head
Department of English
Bharathidasan University
Tiruchirappalli – 620 024

Sweta Ravindran
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Bharathidasan University
Tiruchirappalli – 620 024

Abstract

This article examines the generational differences in the light of the diasporic experiences of the characters in Amy Tan's novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, and Helie Lee's work, *Still Life with Rice*. It deals with the inter-generational conflicts that arise owing to the first-generation immigrants' obsession with their native traditions and the second-generation immigrants' attraction towards the Western culture, especially the strained and uneasy relationships between the mothers and the daughters, that is, Winnie and Pearl in *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Dukwah and Helie Lee in *Still Life with Rice*. Against the backdrop of diasporic experiences, the storytelling and memory narration techniques employed by the novelists to reinforce the theme taken for study is also analysed.

Keywords:

Homeland, Host land, Culture, tradition, Inter-generational conflict, Linguistic estrangement

When an individual or a group of people emigrates from his/her or their homeland respectively to another country, they are subject to various new experiences. The immigrants experience the problem of cultural differences that result in cultural conflict. The immigrants find it difficult to assimilate into the host culture and they consider the cultures and traditions of their homeland superior to that of the host country. While the first-generation immigrants try to stick to the culture of their past, the second and the third-generation immigrants are fascinated by the host culture, and as a result, the strong influence of their homeland prevents them from assimilating the culture of the host country completely.





In diasporic writings, the cultural encounters play a significant role as a diasporic writer is caught between the two contrasting cultures. Diasporic writers try to create a new platform for themselves through their works, that is, they try to bring together the two contrasting cultures, and the peoples involved. Their writings are influenced by both the cultures of the host country and the native country. Conflict between tradition and modernity, the East and the West, belief and rationality, and displacement, dislocation, and alienation are a few of many a theme dealt with by the diasporic writers. These writers mostly write about their own experiences and as a result the problems that the characters face are the problems faced by the writers themselves.

The Chinese-American diaspora and the Korean-American diaspora fall under *Asian-American Diaspora*. The Chinese and the Koreans emigrated to other countries in order to escape from the harsh realities that prevailed in their native lands. The period between 1910 and 1945 witnessed many a Chinese and Korean migration. During this period many were forced to leave their homeland owing to the implausibility of peaceful life in their land. The Koreans migrated to the United States, China, and Japan and the Chinese migrated mostly to the United States during this period.

Hongyong and Dukpil migrate to China in order to escape from the clutches of the tyrannical Japanese rule. The desire for freedom from the Japanese rulers has been expressed by Hongyong in Helie Lee's novel *Still Life with Rice*: "A breeze of freedom blew here in China, unlike in our country. Everyday life was not severely affected by the empire of Japan" (111). The Japanese rule restricted the Koreans from following their traditions and culture, and it forced them to follow the Japanese way of life. In order to follow their traditions and culture, they migrate to China where they are free from the Japanese tyranny. In the novel, *Still Life with Rice*, the following words of Hongyong and Dukwah emphasise the viewpoint stated above:

"You Korean, you always be Korean. Our people so good." Grandmother rubs her moist eyes. "Then why did you bring us to America if you didn't want us to be American?"... "Your father and me give up everything, our home, our life, to





bring you kids to America, not to be American people, but so you can be Korean. Here, there is no Cold War, no hunger, no losses.” (13)

Amy Tan, a Chinese-American writer, and Helie Lee, a Korean-American writer, in their works delineate the diasporic experiences in the alien lands. Helie Lee's work, *Still Life with Rice* (1996), is in the first-person narration and it is about Helie Lee's grandmother Hongyong's life and, therefore, it can be considered a semi-autobiographical novel. Conner observes: “While focusing on the remarkable life of her grandmother, Hongyong Baek, Helie Lee's *Still Life with Rice* provides memorable images of Japanese and Soviet occupation and civil war. Written with sensitivity and detail, the book is not only a tribute to her grandmother's will to survive, but to the courage of the Korean people” (71).

The novels of Amy Tan have autobiographical elements. The mother figures and the daughter figures that figure in all the novels might represent Amy Tan and her mother. *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) is the second novel of Amy Tan. According to Huntly,

The novel is fictional autobiography, a woman's narrative of her life and experiences. Significantly, Amy Tan has said on a number of occasions that *The Kitchen God's Wife* is her mother's story, and indeed, the outlines of the novels and many of the specific details in the text are congruent with the story of Daisy Tan's life. (83)

Both the novels portray the journey undertaken by each of the two brave women from their war-ravaged homeland to a politically safe country.

The novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, opens with the narration of Pearl Louie Brandt, Winnie's daughter. The very first paragraph of the novel reveals the tension that prevails between Winnie and Pearl. Pearl says “Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument” (11). The reason for the friction between them is Pearl's abandonment of the Chinese culture and her embracement of the American identity.





The novel, *Still Life with Rice*, also begins with an argument between Helie Lee on the one side and her mother Dukwah and grandmother Hongyong on the other side. Helie Lee argues:

“I don’t need a husband to have babies, Mother.”

“Yah, you killing me.” Mother clutches her heart.

“Soon you be too old, fall off tree. No man want rotten fruit for wife.”

Grandmother clucks her tongue in disappointment. (11)

The mother and the grandmother are not able to accept their daughter’s/ grand-daughter’s American way of life. And the daughters consider their culture old and outdated. Helie Lee says, “To me, my parents and grandmother were from Mars—out of sight and out of touch—too Korean for my good (12). Helie Lee, in one of the interviews, speaks about her days of youth as a Korean-American: “From tanning my skin to bleaching my hair, to scotch-taping my eyelids, to forgetting Korean. It was deliberate in every way. [It was] because I just wanted to fit in. And for me, fitting in meant letting go of the past” (Chimes 12). The relationship between the mother and the daughter is strained, and uneasy, and it widens with the passage of time. This breach further widens greatly through the cultural and linguistic estrangement. The second-generation immigrants want to fit into the culture of the host country. As to the first-generation immigrants, they are keen on safeguarding their culture of their homeland.

Language plays an important role when it describes the relationship between the first-generation Korean/ Chinese migrants and the second-generation migrants. The mothers speak broken English and fluent Chinese/ Korean while the daughters speak fluent English and little Chinese/ Korean. Amy Tan in her non-fiction titled *The Opposite of Fate* speaks about the ill effects of the limitation of language:

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother’s “limited” English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly, her thoughts were imperfect. (Tan 274)

Throughout the two novels taken for study the characters are torn between their native identity and acquired identity. Preserving the culture and tradition of their home country is





one of the most important duties of the Korean and the Chinese migrants. In the novel, *Still Life with Rice*, a Korean migrant living in China says, “we Koreans can do anything and will do anything to preserve our culture and language. Not even the revolution destroyed our community” (25). The Chinese-Americans in the novel of Amy Tan try and follow the Chinese tradition even while living in America. In the novel, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, at the funeral of Grand Auntie which takes place in the United States, the Chinese rituals are performed.

The conflict between the Eastern and the Western ideals, especially the cultures is a predominant theme in the novels *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *Still Life with Rice*. Both the novels have many an instance of storytelling and memory narrative. The dispute that prevails between the mothers and the daughters continues till the mothers narrate their past to the daughters. These narratives change the perspectives and perceptions of the daughters towards their mothers and their native land. Lotfi observes: “in the course of recalling memory, a collective identity is constructed, as well as the individual identity” (1913).

In the novels the traumatic experiences of the past are the main source of the conflict. It is only with the narration of the traumatic past comes an understanding that resolves the conflict between the mothers and the daughters. The narration reveals the brutality of war and the sufferings of the women characters at the hands of their patriarchal figures. The migration helps them to escape from these atrocities though they experience a sense of loss. The speaking out of the repressed past of the mothers helps them to some extent fill the generational gap between the mothers and the daughters.

Winnie and Helie Lee believe that they suffer from the loss of roots and it can only be cured by going back to their native land. In the novel, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Winnie is convinced that Pearl’s disease is due to her identity as half-Chinese and half-American and in order to find a solution she plans for her a trip to China. Likewise, in the novel *Still Life with Rice*, the narrator returns to her birthplace, Seoul, in search of her identity to resolve the conflict. Helie Lee says:

The more I attempt to figure out these two women, the more confused I become as to who I am and where I belong. So I do something risky: I return to my birthplace. With no preset itinerary or companion for moral support. (14)





The Chinatowns and the Korea towns lay emphasis on the importance of communal identity in the lives of the Chinese and the Koreans. Though Dukwah and Hongyong in *Still Life with Rice* and Winnie and Helen in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, live in the United States, Dukwah and Hongyong live like Koreans and the way of life of Winnie and Helen are that of the Chinese. They live in a place surrounded by their country people, so that they can live a life they lived in their homeland, thus resisting assimilation. Till the end they live shunning the Western culture and traditions.

Hongyong's migration to China is similar to that of Winnie's migration to the United States. Both Winnie Louie and Hongyong desire to return to their homeland, throughout their stay in the host country. Although the return seems impossible, the strong desire lures them to go for at least a visit to their homeland.

These two novelists, apart from dealing with the major themes such as cultural dislocation and identity crisis, also deal with themes like the consequences of war, marital relationships, friendship, and loyalty. The main focus of these novelists is on the women characters' predicaments in their war-ravaged countries, and their longing to move to a politically safe country. The story narrative technique employed by the novelists help cement the gap between the mothers and the daughters, Winnie and Pearl in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, and Dukwah and Helie Lee in *Still Life with Rice*. And the story narration results in strengthening the emotional bond between the mothers and the daughters and also in the acceptance of the Chinese/ Korean identities by the daughters, thereby reducing the generational differences of the diaspora.

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