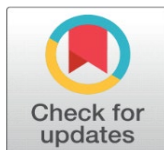
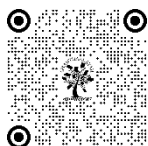


THE TASTE OF BELONGING: IDENTITY IN AMY TAN'S *FISH CHEEKS*

P. Vasanthi ¹, Dr. R. Ajith ²

¹ Ph.D Research Scholar (Full Time), PG & Research Department of English, V. O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundarnar University, Tirunelveli

² Assistant Professor PG & Research Department of English, V.O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundarnar University, Tirunelveli



DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.2775

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Fish Cheeks is a poignant short story by Amy Tan that delves into themes of cultural identity and self-acceptance. Set in the 1970s, the narrative revolves around a young Chinese-American girl who experiences a moment of profound embarrassment and self-consciousness during a Christmas dinner with her American crush and his family. The story's central conflict emerges as she struggles with her cultural heritage and the desire to fit in with her peers. Through vivid descriptions and a deeply personal perspective, Tan explores the complexities of navigating between two cultures and the eventual realization that embracing one's background is crucial to self-acceptance. The story's blend of humour and introspection highlights the universal struggle of reconciling personal identity with societal expectations.

Keywords: Identity, Cultural Identity, Social Pressure, Chinese-American Immigrants, Self-Consciousness, Culture Struggle, Self-Acceptance

1. INTRODUCTION

Amy Tan's short story *Fish Cheeks* (1987), originally featured in *Seventeen* magazine and later included in *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings* (2003), explores the experiences of a teenage Chinese American girl. In the story, Amy harbours feelings for an American boy named Robert but feels embarrassed about her Chinese heritage. Her excitement at the prospect of her family hosting Robert for Christmas dinner quickly turns to anxiety when she discovers that her mother is preparing a traditional Chinese meal. *Fish Cheeks* is rich in symbolic elements that can be analyzed through Roland Barthes' theory of signs. Barthes (1972) argues that myth functions as a type of speech and a mode of signification, characterized more by its form than its content. He explains that myth is defined not by the subject matter of its message but by how it conveys that message. Additionally, Barthes suggests that myth serves as a means of domination.

In the story, Amy's mother uses various myths to help her daughter appreciate Chinese culture and traditions. Although Amy's parents, who immigrated to America as young adults, still hold onto their Chinese heritage, Amy grows up in America and faces a persistent cultural and generational divide with them. As she becomes more immersed in American society, she finds herself increasingly detached from her Chinese roots. Amy embodies the Chinese-American

youth who identify more with American values and ideals. In contrast, Amy's mother symbolizes the deep-rooted Chinese heritage and aims to impart this legacy to a daughter who is largely unfamiliar with her cultural background.

It often creates tension between the mother and daughter, reflecting the broader clash between Chinese and American cultures. Critic Elaine H. Kim (1990) notes that mothers in such narratives embody not just traditional Chinese conservatism but also a 'fierce love' that drives them to seek both their daughters' freedom and selfhood and their own. In *Fish Cheeks*, Amy's embarrassment about her Chinese background and her identification as an American highlight the generational and cultural conflicts at play. The story vividly illustrates the clash between tradition and modernity. Amy feels anxious about how her relatives will behave and wishes she could "disappear" (Tan 2003). She reflects, "When I found that my parents had invited the minister's family over for Christmas dinner, I cried. What would Robert think of our shabby Chinese Christmas?" (Tan 2003).

Amy is aware that Americans have their way of celebrating Christmas Eve. She is anxious that Robert might judge her family negatively and fears he will be put off by their customs. Her negative perception of her parents' culture only deepens her discomfort with her Chinese heritage. This situation underscores how individuals from different racial and cultural backgrounds may engage in celebrations that are not part of their traditions, leading to a clash of cultural identities. Zhou (2009) notes that "most children of immigrants live in two-parent, nuclear families, with a small number in extended or transnational families." Preissle (2009) argues that "Asian children have moved quickly towards Americanization. Mono-cultural ideology and non-linguistic practice in bicultural families and communities can cause intergenerational conflicts as well as marginalization." From start to finish, the story depicts a struggle for cultural dominance due to differing traditions. Chinese culture and American culture vie for prominence, with each asserting itself depending on the characters and the situation. This conflict highlights the contrast between distinct cultural traditions and customs.

Although it might seem unusual, food significantly influences identity formation. It is deeply intertwined with emotions, memories, and cultural expression globally. The aroma of a dish can trigger nostalgic memories or make individuals feel at home in an unfamiliar environment. In her story, Tan explores how food contributes to shaping identity. She discusses with Dorothy Wang (1989), a *Newsweek* interviewer, the experiences of newly arrived Chinese Americans "end up deliberately choosing the American things - hot dogs and apple pie and ignoring the Chinese offerings." Tan observes that Amy, who is drawn to American culture, is taken aback when she sees her mother "creating a strange menu" (Tan 2003). Instead of the expected roasted turkey and sweet potatoes, Amy encounters "tofu," "fungus," and "squid" (Tan 2003) in the kitchen.

Amy's mother uses traditional Chinese recipes to help her daughter grasp the cultural significance of preparing authentic dishes. However, Amy feels embarrassed that Robert, a boy she admires, witnesses how out of place her family seems and how distinctly Chinese their home life is. She feels a sense of shame about her Asian heritage. From a semiotic perspective, dishes like "tofu" and "fungus" symbolize Chinese customs and traditions, whereas serving turkey during Christmas represents American traditions. During dinner, Amy feels increasingly uncomfortable as her relatives enthusiastically lick their fingers. "Their chopsticks and reached across the table, dipping them into the dozen or so plates of food" (Tan 2003). Amy notices the discomfort on her guest's face, which plunges her into even greater despair and leaves her silent. She can hardly believe her eyes as her relatives reach across one another to grab plates of food, while Robert's family waits politely for their turn. She feels deeply embarrassed by her family and describes her relatives as: "noisy and lacked proper American manners" (Tan 2003). Her sense of shame is further heightened when her father, in an attempt to be accommodating, offers her the delicate fish cheek, calling out, "Amy, your favourites" (Tan 2003). Amy is mortified when, at the end of the meal, her father explains, "It's a Chinese custom to show that you are satisfied" (Tan 2003).

Her family exemplifies a traditional Chinese household where parents take joy in serving their children's favourite dishes. However, for someone from a Caucasian background, the gesture of offering fish cheeks on Christmas Day typically associated with turkey and cranberry sauce loses its warm sentiment. Amy's father attempts to communicate with her, but she struggles to understand his intentions. Overwhelmed by her negative feelings towards her cultural food, Amy wishes she could vanish. As Diane Johnson (1977) notes, "Chinese people began coming to California before the gold rush, but still, the names, the food, the shape of the parapets, remain Chinese."

In her poem *When I Was Growing Up*, Chinese-American writer Nelli Wong expresses a deep sense of envy towards those with fair skin and a strong desire to assimilate into Western culture. She conveys her disdain for her heritage and Chinese features, reflecting a longing to adopt American styles. Wong writes, "When I was growing up, I hungered for

American styles, coded: white, and even to me, a child born of Chinese parents, being Chinese was feeling foreign, was limiting, was un-American” (Wong 1991). Amy perceives American society as celebrating white skin and associating it with higher social status. She harbours a deep infatuation with an American boy and even prays for a “blond-haired boy, Robert” (Tan 2003). On a mythic level, features such as “blond-haired” and a “slim nose” symbolize the highest status and respect in American culture. Amy’s fixation on these traits reveals her disdain for her Chinese features and highlights her desire to adopt American physical attributes. This also underscores a broader cultural code, where Amy, as a Chinese teenager, feels a strong pull towards American features and a corresponding aversion to her heritage. The emphasis on these privileged attributes reflects a societal divide based on race and skin colour.

As Eco (1976) observes, “A rule can be the sign for its deduced results just as much as a specific case can be the sign for its deduced rule.” He suggests that the meaning of signs or signals is shaped by the objects they represent. In Tan’s story, this concept of sign is used to illustrate how Chinese Americans adhere to cultural rules, such as when choosing dresses for their children, which reflect deeper cultural meanings and customs. When Amy’s mother gives her a skirt on Christmas Eve, it not only symbolizes her influence over her daughter but also indicates her awareness of Amy’s internal struggles and the broader cultural dynamics at play. Amy’s mother advises her, “Inside you must always be Chinese. You must be proud that you are different. Your only shame is to feel shame” (Tan 2003). Through this statement, she ironically emphasizes the importance of embracing Chinese culture and traditions, despite their American upbringing. By giving Amy an American miniskirt as a gift, her mother is subtly reminding her that her familial and ethnic identity cannot be altered. The skirt serves as a symbol representing both her mother’s affection and her disapproval of Amy’s desire to adopt American cultural norms. This interaction illustrates how one culture can influence and shape another, affecting a person’s beliefs and behaviour. Cultural practices and traditions play a crucial role in defining an individual’s identity within a society. However, conflicts between cultures can also lead to deeper self-awareness and a clearer understanding of one’s own identity.

As a teenager, Amy struggles to understand her mother’s intentions, but she later gains insight into the significance of the Chinese dishes served on Christmas Eve: “I was able to fully appreciate her lesson and the true purpose behind our particular menu. For Christmas Eve that year, she had chosen all my favourite foods” (Tan 2003). She realizes that the dishes her mother prepared were indeed her favourites. Throughout her life, Amy resists her parents’ traditions and feels embarrassed by them. According to Snodgrass (2004), “her shame emerges from Robert’s dismay at the ethnic milieu.” As a result, Amy faces ongoing challenges in reconciling her identity.

By the end of *Fish Cheeks*, Amy reaches a deeper understanding of her identity. Despite her parents’ understated approach to their customs and heritage, Amy pieces together her experiences as she matures. She comes to see that her identity has been shaped by her resistance and misunderstandings, which ultimately lead to a more nuanced view of herself and her world. Her internal conflict between embracing her Chinese heritage and fitting into American culture, along with her embarrassment about her parents’ traditions, significantly influences who she becomes. Tan effectively highlights the vulnerability of a young Chinese-American teenager navigating these cultural challenges and ultimately coming to accept her roots. *Fish Cheeks* thus delves into the journey of a Chinese-American girl who learns to reconcile her identity through reflections on a pivotal event from her past.

All these influences, whether related to food or navigating between two national identities, shape the characters in significant ways. Their identities are moulded by the customs and traditions they embrace or reject, as well as the experiences they endure. *Fish Cheeks* poignantly captures the essence of the immigrant experience and the challenges of leaving one’s homeland to adapt to a new life. Tan vividly portrays the complex journey of Chinese immigrants as they strive to integrate and bridge the gap between the traditional values of China and the individualistic culture of America. Through her narrative, Amy Tan advocates for immigrants to take pride in their identities, regardless of the cultural and traditional differences they encounter.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R 1972, *Mythologies*, Trans. Annette Lavers, Hilal and Wang, New York.
- Eco, U 1976, *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Johnson, D 1977, *Ghosts*. The New York Review of Books, vol. 24, no 1, pp.19-20.
- Kim, E H 1990, *Such Opposite Creatures: Men and Women in Asian American Literature*. Michigan Quarterly Review, vol. 29, no.1, pp. 86-93.
- Preissle, J 2009, Educating Immigrant in the 21st Century: *What Educators Need To Know*. Corwin Press, California.
- Snodgrass, ME 2004, Amy Tan: *A Literary Companion*. McFarland and Company, Jefferson.
- Tan, Amy. *Fish Cheeks*. Penguin Books, 2003.
- Wang, D 1989, *A Game of Show Not Tell*. Newsweek 17 April, vol. 113, no. 16, p. 69.
- Wong, N 1999, *When I was Growing Up*, in Women Images and Realities, Mayfield, California, pp.118-119.
- Zhou, M 2009, *Conflict, Coping, and Recollection: Intergenerational Relations in Chinese Immigrant Families in America*. in N. Foner, Ed, Across Generations: Immigrants Families in America, pp.21-46, New York University Press, New York.