

Cultural Displacement and The Quest for Identity in the works of Amy Tan and Teju Cole

Mrs.S.Jayanthi M.A,(Eng) M.A.(JMC) M.Phil (Ph.D)

Asst Prof, Dept of English, Meenakshi College for Women (Aut),Chennai-24.

(Research Scholar Part time Bharathi Women's College Chennai)

Abstract: Diasporic writing has emerged into a distinct literary genre today. They are affected by the thought of homelessness. Their writings are dominated by a quest, a quest for identity, a quest for inner self and a search for a home. Since human beings have different set of mind, it is the cause for understanding and misunderstanding between individuals. It is no surprise that man and woman are always in a state of dissonance. Cognitive can be defined as the mental processes of perception, memory, judgment and reasoning. Dissonance means disagreement and incongruity. Dissonance and Consonance refer to relationships which exist between pairs in beliefs and hopes. When a person fails to comprehend a thing or a situation, he faces this mental problem. This paper aims to reveal in what degree the Dissonance is faced by the characters after their cultural displacement. and the quest of identity faced by the protagonist as revealed by the diasporic writers in their writing. In various situations we find their mental conflicts, which makes their live and partly live her life. This paper focuses on the construction of Cultural Displacement and the Quest for Identity in Amy Tan's novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and Teja Cole's *Every Day's for the Thief*. In analysing the construction of identity,

KeyWords - Diaspora, Quest, Dissonance, Consonance, Cultural Displacement , Identity.

1.INTRODUCTION

“Before I fell asleep, I decided this was fate. Now whatever happened, that was my New Destiny”

(AMY TAN -TBD 281).

Most writers in the early part of twentieth century suffer from a kind of displacement. They feel that they are away from their homeland and they are forced in another place where they feel unattached and alienated. They experience a kind of mental tension which they let it out by their writing. Thus their writing creates new thoughts and new perspectives on life. The diaspora writers are not free from problems. They are affected by the thought of homelessness. Their writings are dominated by a quest, a quest for identity, a quest for inner self and a search for a home. Robin Cohen explains diasporas as the communities of people living in one country who acknowledges that “the old country” always has come claim on their loyalty and emotions (207).

Diasporic writing has emerged into a distinct literary genre today. The word ‘diaspora’, derived from the Greek word diaspeiro, means scattering of people. Though initially limited to the dispersal of Jews from their homeland, in this increasing era of globalization, it is applied to the numerous ethnic and racial groups living in an alien land. The immigrants who left their home countries for various reasons, voluntary and non-voluntary, had to construct afresh a sense of community, culture and nationality in a country where they were a minority.

2.HISTORY OF EVOLUTION REFLECTING THE CONSONANCE AND DISSONANCE

The mind of the diasporic people is always found to exist with conflicts leading to cognitive dissonance. This could be well understood with respect to physically identical twins, there is no record, in the history of evolution, of two individuals having identical psyches. Since human beings have different set of mind, it is the cause for understanding and misunderstanding between individuals. It is no surprise that man and woman are always in a state of dissonance. The study of Cognitive Dissonance was first advocated by Leon Festinger in 1957. According to Festinger, “It is a subject of a new theory based on experiments showing that the grass is not greener on the other side of the fence and that grapes are sourest when they aren't in easy reach”.(2)

It is of the fact that one looks for consonance in one's beliefs and attitudes in all situations when the inner and outer world cognitions do not match. Cognitive can be defined as the mental processes of perception, memory, judgment and reasoning. Dissonance means disagreement and incongruity. Dissonance and Consonance refer to relationships which exist between pairs of elements, like reality and fantasy, choice and availability, necessity and desire. Cognitive Dissonance is a kind of disappointment that arises from an unnecessary expectation. It is a misunderstanding that arises

due to conflicting beliefs and hopes. When a person fails to comprehend a thing or a situation, he faces this mental problem. This paper aims to reveal in what degree the Dissonance is faced by the characters after their cultural displacement, and the quest of identity faced by the protagonist as revealed by the diasporic writers in their writing. In various situations we find their mental conflicts, which makes their live and partly live her life.

Dissonance may be caused due to logical inconsistency. When a person believes that he may not raise from bed due to severe headache and still he hopes that he can reach office on time he is in a state of uncertainty and his thinking process is not logical. He suffers from a state of mental dissonance. Cognitive Dissonance may arise due to cultural mores. When a person spills food all over the breakfast table knowing pretty well it is an uncultured act, his behaviour leads him into a state of violation. It is simply because the culture and social behaviour dictates the etiquette and when he is not following it, he enters into a conflict, between the individual will and the environment. His past experiences contradict with the present situation and he is state of confusion and disbelief. More precisely Festinger explains that: Cognitive Dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented towards dissonance. They have a fear of regret. They are very cautious that hasty decisions lead to repentance. Here the conflict is either to accept or deny.

Thus, their writings deal with their own experiences of geographical dislocation, displacement, cultural ambivalence, social and political alienation and absence of centrality. On the one hand they express a longing for their home land through memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories, on the other hand they give voice to their reaction to the alien land where they have come as immigrants. It is followed by a phase of loss and rejection in a hostile and unfamiliar society. Then gradually the sense of loss begins to fade away and there follows an intense struggle of creating a space for themselves in the adopted country. Finally after all these phases, the immigrant moves towards a process of reconciliation, assimilation and affirmation of a new culture. This process can be summed up as a moving away from the centre of the immigrant's home culture to the periphery of the alien culture and again moving from the periphery of the alien culture to a different centre representing multi-culture.

This paper focuses on the construction of Cultural Displacement and the Quest for Identity in Amy Tan's novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and Teja Cole's *Every Day's for the Thief*. In analysing the construction of identity, Homi Bhabha's "hybridity" and "Third Space" are utilized. The integration of the two cultures creates a new hybrid one and thus, the unique ethnic identity of the Chinese Americans is constructed. 'Hybridity' is defined by Bhabha in his essay *Signs Taken for Wonders* as: A problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other "denied" knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its roles of recognition (Bhabha 114). In this definition, Bhabha refers to hybridity as a colonial representation. Robert Young says that for Bhabha, Hybridity is the moment in which the discourse of colonial authority loses its univocal grip on meaning and finds itself open to the language of the other, enabling the critic to trace complex movements of disarming alterity in the Colonial text (Young 22).

3. WRITERS PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURAL DISCRIMINATION AND THEIR QUEST FOR IDENTITY

This aspect is well noted in Amy Tan, who is one of the most eminent among all the Chinese American writers. With her bestseller works, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) she not only enjoys compliments from the critics but also gains great popularity among common readers and her name becomes a household word throughout the United States.

The work of novelist, essayist, and photographer Teju Cole is a genre-defying exploration of race, governance, migration, justice, culture, music, and privilege. His work is with uncertainty and a commitment to defend the freedom and autonomy of others. City life is the recurrent theme in Cole's work. He draws the reader's attention to the unpredictability and potential of the urban environment. He is intrigued by the "continuities" between cities—what makes them similar, regardless of size, median income, or hemisphere—as well what makes each one unique. He describes these peculiarities as zones of interest and once you give up insisting on stereotypes, you really seem to see all things in a different perspective.

As Chinese American writer in the United States, Amy Tan puts her works apparently in such a colonial text. The Chinese heritage in Tan's works is Tan's language against the "univocal grip". Bhabha develops his notion of hybridity to include forms of counter-authority, a 'Third Space' which effects: The 'hybrid' moment of political change. Here the transformational value of change lies in the reticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the one, nor the other, but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both (Bhabha. 28). Amy Tan actually created a 'Third Space' by constructing the ethnic identity. The new identity is Chinese-American instead of being only Chinese or only American. In almost all the novels the new identity of both culture is presented.

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, this new identity is achieved only through the reconciliation of mother and daughter. Mother, LuLing represents the Chinese culture and the daughter, Ruth represents the American culture. The reconciliation is possible only when Ruth will realise and accept her Chinese heritage. Then only the integration of the two cultures will take place. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, from the beginning, the relationship between LuLing and Ruth is tense and

problematic. LuLing is bridge between Ruth and her Chinese heritage. The conflict between Ruth and her mother is the conflict between Ruth and her Chinese heritage. The conflict arises because of Ruth's assimilation with the American culture.

As Ruth is born and brought up in the society where multiple forms of racism existed, it was difficult for her to deny herself from being a colonial subject. As she went to American school, she was being taught to believe in American superiority and her own inferiority. As a result Ruth tried her best to become 'Americanized' by shedding off her Chinese heritage. When she finds her mother cannot assimilate into the American culture, she feel ashamed and humiliated, and thus keep a distance and alienation from her mother. Her muteness suggests the misunderstanding between her mother and herself. She even recalls the moments, when she tries hard to prove herself as an American and her mother will embarrass her by proving herself as too Chinese.

Her mother couldn't even say Ruth's name right. It used to mortify Ruth when she shouted for her up and down the block. 'Lootie! Lootie!' Why had her mother chosen a name with sounds she couldn't pronounce? (TBD 45). Again, when Ruth finds her mother read her diary, she writes in her diary: You talk about killing yourself, so why don't you ever do it. Precious Auntie wants you to, and so do I (TBD 141). The very next day, she finds her mother with broken bones as she jumps out of the window. Being guilt stricken, Ruth crossed out the hateful words. At the same time she wants her mother should also sometimes say "sorry". Unfortunately, her mother never read these words, and since they never spoke of the incident, forgiveness continued to elude them.

In spite of these intense conflicts between the mother and daughter, Tan is quite optimistic about the daughter's reconnection with her mother as well as her Chinese heritage. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the mother-daughter conflict develops into a satisfying reconciliation. It is a drawn out process in which first and foremost mother should break the externally imposed and self-imposed silence about their past, and to speak in order to be heard by her daughter. She must break her silence and the prejudices that her assimilated daughter hold against her. This is the Identity Crisis and Reconciliation for the mother-daughter. It is very important for the daughter because her identity as a Chinese American is possible only when she can reconnect to her mother and the mother line of which she is a part.

Ruth comes to know about her mother by reading her mother's manuscript, which she in fact, denied to read for a long time. It is only during her muteness that she got a stack of papers and remembered her mother's giving it to her. As the manuscript was written in Chinese, she took the help of a translator Mr. Tang. From the manuscript, she comes to know about her grandmother Precious Auntie and her mother LuLing. She came to know that LuLing was raised by her nursemaid Precious Auntie, who was actually her mother. LuLing never respected her and always treated her as a maid. But Precious Auntie committed suicide in order to protect her daughter from getting married to Chang's son, who in reality killed Precious Auntie's father and husband. After Precious Auntie's death, when LuLing came to about the tragic life of Precious Auntie and that she was her mother, she was engulfed by guilt and shame. In the same way these emotions echoed in Ruth when she read her mother's revelations and finally understands why LuLing thought herself cursed.

Now, she can see her mother as an individual with depth and not merely through her shallow understanding of Chinese culture. She is now even able to understand her Chinese heritage as well as her mother and grandmother. She realize that the culture and tradition are in her bones and that make up her character. While discovering her heritage, Ruth discovers her own identity too. At the end, she has found her own voice inflected with the personal and social histories of her mother and grandmother, and now she is ready to write the stories of herself, her mother and her grandmother.

Cole's fluidity between forms of expression can be credited, at least in part, to a background that has elements of multiplicity and movement, trial and error, switchbacks and reboots. Born in 1975 in Kalamazoo, Michigan to Nigerian parents, his life began with two passports, cultures, and languages. At four months old, Cole moved with his family to Lagos, Nigeria, where he lived until he returned to Michigan to pursue studies in art and art history at Kalamazoo College. Later he would go on to study African art history at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and art history at Columbia University in New York.

In *Every Day Is for the Thief*, a novella that follows a young Nigerian returning to Lagos after years in the US, An essayistic novel about Nigerian identity, *Every Day is for the Thief* surveys the social and cultural life of the West African nation. The book follows a young Nigerian writer as he returns to his homeland after coming of age abroad, but neither plot nor character is the author's main focus; Cole instead prioritizes sketching an empathetic portrait of Nigeria over the course of twenty-seven fast-moving chapters. In each chapter, or essay, the narrator, a clear stand-in for the author, describes his daily routine in Lagos, considers how the city has changed since his childhood, and recounts different facets of the country's history.

Teju Cole's greatest achievement in this novel is a pitch perfect mastery of passionate interaction and cool, almost professorial, detachment. Cole's connection to his homeland is one of love and trepidation; his Nigeria, as specified through Lagos, is a nation brimming with untapped potential, superseded only by the nation's lachrymose history and corrupt modern leadership. Cole shows us perfect reasoning for the hopeful dread he creates.

Absurdity, irrationality, and inconsistency reign in Nigerian-American Teju Cole's 2007 novel *Every Day is For the Thief*. The reader follows a young Nigerian man who had emigrated to the United States, sick of the lack of opportunities

and the chaos that plague his hometown of Lagos. He comes back for the first time to visit family and analyzes how the city has (and has not) changed in past fifteen years. In a direct writing style, Cole explores insecurity, religious escapism, corruption, and brain drain: phenomena familiar to every residents of cities across the developing world. He analyzes a confused, shifting, and divided city full of competing narratives through the lens of his own uncertainty and liminality.

Every Day is for the Thief is a personal story and a subjective narrative. The protagonist is a cipher for Cole himself. The narrator's memory is irreversibly conditioned by his years spent in the U.S. and his status as a young male emigrant. He can scarcely believe that it was once his daily life. This tension and confusion of the narration and the blurred photographs interspersed throughout reflect Cole's uncertain and liminal identity in his own home country. The narrator, in a unique combined position of emigrant and returnee both an insider's and an outsider's perspective is well established.

When the narrator encounters a young woman reading a work of literary fiction. He desperately wants to talk with her, to make a connection, however tenuous, but she reaches her stop before the narrator can approach her. This scene recognizes that in a sprawling megacity like Lagos, the sense of rootlessness and anonymity can be overwhelming. Cole also explores social atomization through a short aside on the ubiquitous, corrupt pentecostal preachers promising money, love, and power. (EFT 51-52)

4. CONCLUSION

Humans search for belonging, and deep religious beliefs can create a shared group identity, even if the members know that the leaders are embezzling church funds. It also shows how desperation and isolation can lead to violence and irrationality. Lacking jobs, family connections, and education, the only way that these young men can survive is by demanding ransoms and stealing goods. Area boys are often migrants, but unlike the narrator and his story of upward mobility, their move has further impoverished them. They justify their anger and hunger with violent visions of revenge.

While the novel is found to be unorganised, it reflects the experience of the narrator living in Lagos. For Cole, Lagos is a "city of Scheherazades," a land where the best storytellers, the best narrative shapers are the most spectacularly rewarded. (EFT 27) Cole's voice is just one of millions of possible. Cole waxes lyrical on the promise of a performing arts school and the sadness of the Nigerian National Museum and complains that the battles over history that Western readers are so tired of seeing in the news every day are never fought in Nigeria, a country with no "public consciousness" of history (EFT 79) At the same time though, there are endless public debates over the present, over what is true, and over the future of the country.

Cole identifies several pathologies that have plagued Lagos because of the constant battle of narrations. Trust is rare and saving face is everything. When a man attempts to mug the narrator's uncle, he responds to empty threats with more empty threats. Instead of appealing to his reason or running away, the uncle refuses to lose face and confronts his attacker, claiming that he is a powerful man who can ruin the mugger's life. Lies pile on top of lies, and the uncle still does not understand exactly what transpired. Escalation does not always end well, though, in Cole's Lagos. Senseless violence is everywhere. A young thief was caught and burned alive by a mob of angry passers-by. The fear of thieves and lack of trust both in each other and in the authorities to handle petty theft overwhelmed all rationality. The narrator also witnesses two men beat each other after getting into a car accident. The passionless ritual violence seems fitting for a society where trust is dead and where men and women tell themselves that reputation is everything.

Cole's Lagos is a city of social, economic, and psychological stress. Lagos is a closed city deeply stratified by social class. The rich and aspirational section themselves off from the masses in stuffy closed rooms behind tall walls topped with broken glass. To maintain their distance and perceived superiority, the narrator tell stories of senseless violence and slums to justify their seclusion. They tell themselves that they need insulation from the outside so that they can succeed. But these walls and security, physical signs of fear, signal violence and attract trouble, just as the Chekhov's gun rusting on his family's wall sets the narrator on edge. Stressful isolation also encourages aspirational young people, like the narrator's childhood friend who is training to be a doctor, to leave Nigeria. If the understanding of your country or city that your family and friends constantly reinforce is one of danger, seclusion, and separation, who would want to stay? The constant thrumming of generators during the night and lack of peace and quiet further encourages ambitious young people, like the narrator and his friend, to dream of a mythical Western world.

Both the writers Teju Cole and Amy Tan explore the liminality of their place and constantly cross their new thresholds. By their subjectivity we could understand that it is another voice of the diasporic settlers. It is a dedication to clear analysis that without losing the culture the settlers can see the complexity in it and gain their identity which will give them the satisfaction of life.

Note-TBD The Bonesetter's Daughter, EFT-Everyday is for the Thief



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bhabha, Homi K. *Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.
- Cole, Teju. *Every day is For Thief*, Random House Trade paperbacks, ISBN:9780812985856, ISBN-10:0812985850 ,2015 Pg 192
- Ed. Bloom Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views, Asian -American Writers*. Bloom's Literary Criticism, New York, 2009
- https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/97872982?ref=nav_mybooks
- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/mar/03/fiction.features>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/25/every-day-is-for-the-thief-teju-cole-review>
- Leiwei Li, David. *Imagining The Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*. Stanford University Press, United States of America: 1998
- Leon, Festinger, *A theory of cognitive dissonance*, Stanford University Press Stanford, California 1962.
- Lokos, William. *Chinese Ancestor Worship: A Practice and Ritual Oriented Approach to Understanding Chinese Culture*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle:2010. Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Amy Tan: A Literary Companion*. London: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2004 .Print
- Tan, Amy. *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. New York: G P. Putnam's Sons, 2001.
- Tan, Amy. *A Critical Companion*, London: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Young, Robert. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London & New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Martin, Payne. *Narrative Therapy*. Sage, Norwich:2006
- Okri, Ben. *The Mystery Feast: Thoughts on Story Telling*. Clairview Books Ltd, Great Britain:2015.