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Spivak's Strategic Essentialism Reading on Amy Tan's "The Red Candle"

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the struggle of a Chinese-American woman in "The Red Candle", one of the vignettes in Amy Tan's novel The Joy Luck Club (1989). The main character namely Lindo Jong, is confined with patriarchy and tradition and is forced to marry her fiancée at her teenage. Fascinatingly, Lindo can free herself from the arranged marriage and her oppressive new family by a clever scheme. Spivak's strategic essentialism is then applied to scrutinize this particular issue. Indeed, by strategic essentialism, Lindo still upholds her value as a Chinese woman and her respect to her filial piety, also, she can obtain her own independence as a woman.

Keywords*: Chinese-American woman, patriarchy, tradition, strategic essentialism*

INTRODUCTION

Amy Tan was born on February 19, 1952, in Oakland, California. Her significant works include The Joy Luck Club (1989) and The Kitchen God's Wife (1991). Currently, she lives in San Francisco and New York.

Based on Ling as mentioned in Lauter (1994: 2925), Amy's parents are of Chinese mainland descent. His father is a Baptist minister and an electrical engineer father; her mother is a nurse and member of The Joy Luck Club. Amy's family emigrated from China in 1949 leaving behind three young daughters and giving birth to three children in the US. The intended separation from the family in China which was thought of as 'temporary' indeed became one that lasted for four decades through political exigencies. There was not any contact with her Chinese family. In the late 1980s, the three daughters were finally found. She spent her childhood in Northern California. While Amy was still in teens, her father and older brother both died from brain tumors. This incident hurts her mother so much. As a result, in 1966, she moved with her mother and younger brother to live in Europe, where she attended high school in Montreux, Switzerland for two years. She returned to the United States for college, attending Linfield College in Oregon, and San Jose City College. From San Jose State University, she earned a B.A. and M.A. in English and linguistics.

After graduation in 1974, Amy married classmate and tax attorney Lou DeMattei. Subsequently, she took a variety of jobs. She worked as a language development consultant and as a corporate freelance writer. In 1985, she wrote the story "Rules of the Game" for a writing workshop. This story became the early foundation of her first novel entitled The Joy Luck Club.

Talking about her significant work, it should be started by discussing The Joy Luck Club. The book appeared in 1989, and it met critical and public success. It

remained in the New York Times' bestseller nine times. It received the Los Angeles Times Book Award and was translated into 25 languages. There are three major themes depicted in this novel. First, it is about the Chinese American Women. This book continued to give voice to the previously silent Chinese American women. Second, it problematizes the mother and daughter's relationship. It depicts the bondage between Chinese American mothers and daughters. Third, it narrates about diaspora. The conflict of Chinese-American mother-daughter also illustrates the issue of first-generation immigrant parents and second-generation American children. Next, Amy's second book is entitled The Kitchen God's Wife. The book was published in 1991. It was much awaited and equally well received. Amy's mother heavily influenced her to write this story. It focuses on the complexities of mothers and daughters.

To return to The Joy Luck Club, it comprises of stories of eight women, i.e. the four original members of The Joy Luck Club and their four daughters, all born in the States. The mothers started to gather weekly, despite the death and devastation they faced, to create their own moment of joy around the mah-jong table in China. The novel then reveals the heroic and tragic lives of the four older mothers whereby one mother finally dies. It also contains the tale-tell of the continuities and discontinuities of the mothers' lives and characters in their daughters' lives. In particular, this paper would discuss 'The Red Candle', one of the excerpts in The Joy

Luck Club. Below is the plot summary. Young Lindo Jong (2 years old) was visited by two ladies, who turned to be the old village matchmaker and Huang Taitai, the mother of the boy Lindo forced to marry. The old matchmaker bragged about Lindo's suitability for the boy. Huang Taitai first looked down at her, but then Huang smiled and accepted Lindo. The boy whom Lindo marrying is named Tyan-yu (meaning: leftovers of the father's spirit), a very spoiled boy. His family always watches over him and makes a decision upon him. Lindo was certain she was unhappy with that. Moreover, Lindo's family began treating her as if she belonged to Huang's family already.

INTRINSIC READING OF 'THE RED CANDLE'

Lindo never met Tyan-yu until she was nine. In their first encounter at the red-egg ceremony, Lindo didn't have an instant love for her future husband the way people see on TV today. Yet, her life changed when she was 12. The summer heavy rain came. The Fen river ran through the neighborhood. This terrible flood forced her family to move to Shanghai. Her father then explained that Lindo was old enough to move and live with Huangs. Lindo's family granted Huangs furniture and bedding as dowry and gave Lindo a golden necklace to be a lucky charm. Lindo must promise to obey her new family and must not disgrace her own family.

In Huang's huge house, Lindo realized Huang was of a much better position than her family. Lindo wasn't welcomed well. Instead, Huang ushered her to go to the kitchen, a place for cooks and servants. Lindo knew her standing. Lindo was forced to learn to be an obedient wife. She learned to cook so well until she knows the meat is too salty before even tasting it. She could sew the small stitches as if the embroidery has been painted on. She was made to serve Tyan-yu and Huang only. Huangs almost washed their thinking into her skin. Tyan-yu is God and Huang is her real mom whom she must please and obey without questions (Lauter, 1994: 2930).

After a while, I didn't think it was a terrible life, no, not really. What was happier than seeing everybody gobble down the shiny mushrooms and bamboo shoots I had helped to prepare that day? How much happier could I be after seeing Tyan-yu eat

a whole bowl of noodles without once complaining about its taste or looks? Can you see how the Huangs almost washed their thinking into my skin? I came to think of Tyan-yu as a god, someone whose opinions were worth much more than my own life. I came to think of Huang Taitai as my real mother, someone I wanted to please, someone I should follow without question.

When she turned 16 in the lunar year, Huang wanted a grandson by the spring. Lindo was forced to marry soon. On the wedding day, Lindo was perplexed. She really didn't want to marry Tyan-yu. The situation got worse as the Japanese invaded China several days before her wedding. Lindo reflected upon herself whether all the events she went through changed her as a person. She then figured out that she was more valuable than she thought. She is strong, pure, and has genuine thoughts none could take. Lindo attended the wedding bravely and she was made officially Tyan-yu's wife with the symbol of the red candle. The red candle was the marriage bond that sealed her forever with Tyan-yu and his family, with no excuse (Lauter,1994: 2931).

I asked myself, What is true about a person? Would I change in the same way the river changes the color but still be the same person? And then I saw the curtains blowing wildly, and outside rain was falling harder, causing everyone to scurry and shout. I smiled. And then I realized it was the first time I could see the power in the wind… I wiped my eyes and looked in the mirror. I was surprised at what I was… what I saw was even more valuable. I was strong. I was pure. I had genuine thoughts that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind.

Lindo stayed up all night crying about her marriage. Luckily, she was sleeping outside, as Tyan-yu rejected to sleep with her. Outside, looking at the red candle, she hoped that it blew out. It was not, though.

Within the marriage, Lindo suited herself to the role of the obedient wife. She served Tyan-yu the fresh young chicken tonic soup called tounau. But it wasn't enough to make Huang happy. One day, while working on embroidery, Huang suddenly slapped and cursed Lindo for she refused to sleep with Tyan-yu. Lindo then agreed to sleep on Tyan-yu's bed. She took off her gown but no response from Tyan-yu. She learned to understand Tyan-yu was impotent and couldn't perform. Lindo tried to care for Tyan-yu as his big sister. She helped him rubbed his back and they still slept together. Months passed, Huang again complained. Tyan-yu eventually lied saying he planted seeds for Lindo but Lindo was not pregnant yet. Lindo then was locked in the room, forbidden to do anything and forced to drink herbals to concentrate on having babies. Only one servant girl served her.

Huang examines Lindo's fertility through the old matchmaker. They found out that Lindo had too much metal because of gold jewelry given by Huang. Lindo then returned the jewelry to happily reclaimed Huang. Lindo felt freer and more independent. She also thought that it was the right time for her to escape the marriage without breaking her promise to her family. One morning of the Festival of Pure Brightness, Lindo woke up Tyan-yu and entire house with her wailing. She told Huang she got a nightmare and a strong warning from the ancestor that her marriage is cursed when the red candle blew out. There are three signs of this. First, Tyan-yu's back has a black spot. Second, her teeth began falling. Third, Tyan-yu's real wife is the servant having imperial blood. Huang believed in Lindo. Finally, Lindo can leave the family, move to the US, remarry, have 3 children and buy herself 24-carat jewelry to remember that she is a worthy woman. She retells this story to her daughter: 'How nice it is to be that girl

again, to take off my scarf, to see what is underneath and feel the lightness come back to my body!' (Lauter, 1994: 2936).

OVERVIEW OF SPIVAK'S STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

Feminism is the framework used to analyze this text. Before the discussion about Spivak's strategic essentialism, it is better to start with how feminism become one of the prominent lenses in scrutinizing the gender-based discrimination, especially patriarchal domination toward women. The reason this framework is employed is that this article centralizes the issue of gender discrimination in one of the Ami Tan's short stories in her book The Joy Luck Club. This framework later becomes the critical lens to uncover the form of the discrimination and discursive way out which is performed by the characters to release the discrimination. This part will expose the short overview of feminism and Spivak strategic essentialism as the theory chosen among other feminist theories.

The earliest milestone of Feminism was the First Wave which took place in 1880 to the early of the 20th Century. This wave managed to uphold the right of most women in industrialized countries to vote. The spirit of feminism glorified by this wave is the importance of the individual and individual autonomy which are protected by guaranteed rights, economic justice and equality of opportunity. However, this Liberal feminist outlook is limited in various ways so it is criticized due to its vague attitude including in explaining the separation of public versus private sphere and no challenge towards capitalism (Madsen, 2000).

The Second Wave of feminism occurred thereafter with the aspiration of enabling women participation in sexual equality and abortion. Though it addresses a serious matter concerning women's equality and sexuality, the Second Wave of Feminism was criticized for it only caters to the needs and experiences of middle-class white women in the United States and marginalizes the voices of women of color and events they undergo. Becky Thompson has called the Second Wave as the 'hegemonic feminism' whereby: 'Hegemonic feminism deemphasizes or ignores a class and race analysis generally sees equality with men as the goal of feminism and has individual rights-bases, rather than the justice-based vision of social change' (Madsen, 2000).

Finally, the Third Wave of Feminism emerged in the 1980s. In essence, the Third Wave of Feminism is the response to the failure of First and Second Waves. The Third Wave focuses on the effort to fighting for each woman's group peculiarities and the cultural, social, religious, racial and sexual diversity as part of the reality of around the world. Some prominent figures of this wave include Gloria Anzaldúa, Chandra Mohanty, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Gayatri Spivak, Rey Chow, Rosario Castellanos, and Cheryl Johnson-Odim. Within the Third Wave Feminism movement, there are two arguments the critics would like to stand up for. First, they reject earlier feminist approaches which assumed that women shared a common identity based on a communal experience of oppression. Second, they oppose the assumption that white middle-class women should be considered the norm of the discourse and practice of feminism. Instead, they support differences in the social positions of non-white women which produce very different problems and responses, even in relation to the same broad issues.

The success of the Third Wave mainly lies in its encouragement of New Feminism. At that time, there was a strong attempt in embracing the idea of a global 'sisterhood' to accommodate the articulation of many voices to creating inclusive feminism. One of the successful variants of the Third Wave feminism is the Feminism of Color. According to Madsen (2000), Feminism of

Color scrutinizes the relation between race and feminism. They bring up how colored feminist such as Alice Walker criticizes the middle-class white woman's version of feminism as it cannot contain the multiple issues of colored women who experience double oppressions; firstly, as the second class society of disenfranchised sex, and secondly, as minority race. Hence, Feminists of color advocates the right of the colored women around the world which are inhibited by "double consciousness", referring to the opposing experience of being one 'self' (a biologically born and structurally gendered woman) versus the cultural image imposed by the racism of being 'other'. Feminist of Color points to the emergence of Black Feminism, Chicana/ Hispana Feminism, Native Feminism, and Asian Feminism as distinct theoretical perspectives upon the oppression of women by virtue of their racialized sexuality.

The Third Wave concept of feminism, especially Gayatri Spivak's concept of feminism is the theory employed in scrutinizing the oppression experienced by the female character in Amy Tan's "The Red Candle". Her theory is chosen based on the local belief/culture in the story is seen as a main oppressive agent toward women. Strategic essentialism is a solution that Gayatri C. Spivak offers to overcome the issue of false representation of the oppressed voice, the colonized people especially colonized women. Reading through Sati, the Indian tradition in which the widowed woman is burned alive with the pyre of her dead husband, Spivak scrutinizes the issue of woman's voice in her writing "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

The answer to the question can the subaltern speak is "No, they cannot". Sati proves that woman is having double oppression, both from patriarchal culture and the British colonizer. In developing the concept, in her essay, one prominent theory she employs is Said's Orientalism. Regarding this theory, Spivak highlights the colonizer-colonized relationship which is mystified by political interests (Said, 1979). Even though the British Empire seems to overthrow the Sati culture, highlighting their concern of humanism and underlining their position to support women, it is obvious that the colonizer does that for their own good in the colonized land. They aim to gain sympathy from the local women. Women here are being used, are exploited and marginalized. Colonizer seems to speak for the women, but women never speak in this real situation. The representation is manipulated (Spivak, 1988). The colonizer-colonized binary and the male-female binary seems to be detrimental for women.

Strategic essentialism later becomes Spivak's way to occupy her desire to speak up for the subaltern voice. Spivak suggests the scholar to use the criticism to vividly criticize and to speak for the subaltern people. Use any method and criticism that can sharpen the subaltern voice to be heard and later become the public concern which resulted in the voice is heard (Spivak, 1988). Spivak herself in scrutinizing the Sati using the marxist, feminist, postcolonial and deconstruction to show that the women in India cannot speak for their own and their voice is never really theirs.

To contextualize Spivak's theory in reading Chinese woman oppression in China, it is important to highlight the relation between feminist theory and strategic essentialism. Although Spivak's elaboration on her concept is located in India, how she read Sati issue to uphold her concern to give a voice for the Indian woman. Her focus is on giving a voice to the subaltern using the existed theories to scrutinize the oppressions from patriarchal culture, colonizer's domination, and the tied social class. In "The Red Candle", the focuses of the analysis are to uncover the oppression from patriarchal society and to expose the way out that the woman character used in voicing her will. The communalities that

they share are that both these situations embody the oppressive patriarchal family and both the situations consolidate various means in voicing their will. In Spivak's case, she uses marxist, feminist, postcolonial and deconstruction to give a voice for the subaltern and in the "The Red Candle", the woman character builds the scenario to manage her way out of the oppressive patriarchal family.

STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM READING ON "THE RED CANDLE"

In The Red Candle, the story is narrated from the first-person point of view. Since the narrator is Linda Jong, it is presumed that it is her own story. In order to expose the strategic essentialism in the story, there are two steps needed before the show the strategic essentialism happened in the story. Those two steps are observing the subaltern subject (and the experiences) and identifying the oppressor

The Red Candle exposes the strict Chinese culture regarding faith and marriage. The character "I" is obviously oppressed by the patriarchal materialistic family. The character "I" is the subaltern subject of her family/ their promise/ her Chinese tradition. She cannot choose the situation that she wants to live in or she is having no opportunity to decide the turns in her life, she had the choices made for her. The proofs are when she had herself engaged with Tyan Yu in the age of 3, she is told to leave the family when the family is facing the disaster to the Tyan Yu's family since she has been considered theirs, she is accused as a bad wife (not serve her husband) by Tyan Yu even though the reality is that Tyan Yu is the one who drives her away from their room, she is accused as a barren woman by Tyan Yu even though the one that is barren is Tyan Yu. She had all her voices represented by others and those voices are not the truth and those are not her actual voices.

Revisiting Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak", in the context Linda Jong's The Red Candle the answer to that question is yes the subaltern can speak, through strategic essentialism. The character 'I' manages herself to escape from the oppressive family without broken her family promise to Tyan Yu's family. The character 'I' does not use the rebellious way to facilitate her will/voice. She gets involved with the culture to facilitate her voice. She uses the culture which previously oppresses her. Seeing the opportunity that Tyan Yu is barren, she made up a story of ancestor revealing that she is not Tyan Yu's true soul mate by indicating three strong shreds of evidence. Finally, she is released, she is given a way out of the family with enough money to start a new life in America. In America, she is properly valued by others and by herself. She has two children and regularly buys herself a 24-carat gold. In this sense, her voice finally can be heard, meaning to say that she liberates herself from the false representation of herself. She stops people to speak on her behalf, she stops the culture to oppress her, and she manages herself to start a life that appreciates herself as a woman. In these three senses, she performs the strategic essentialism to liberate herself as a woman from gendered discrimination.

Post-colonial reading of this story is that why it has to be America, the ideal land that she imagines to have a better life. It is like having the colonial discourse embedded in her mind that the self/West is a better place than the other/West. It is observable that the journey to the west is a representative of an unconscious colonized entity. The colonial discourse can be traced in her free will/ desire/ voice to go to the west, America. This is not only proven by her final destination to start a new life, but her references on telling the story also indicate that consciously or unconsciously she considers the western people are superior to the eastern people/culture. The references are first when she is using the American TV movie

to show how women should be proposed and the second one is when she compares the Chinese traditional marriage to Catholic marriage. Those references are such an acknowledgment of the superior western to the eastern people and culture.

CONCLUSION

"The Red Candle" is one of the short stories in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club centralizing the issue of a woman who manages herself free from the oppressive patriarchal family. Using Spivak's Strategic Essentialism, this article tries to uncover the form of oppression and the discursive way out that is performed by the character. It is observable in the story that, the form of oppression within the story is in the form of a false representation of the woman's voice, in this case, the woman's character.

By neglecting her voice, her family, culture, and husband perform as the agent who interprets what the woman character is meant to say. She experienced the oppression because she is a woman. The representation as a woman locates her in marginal position in her patriarchal culture. Through Spivak's strategic essentialism, the way out that is performed by the woman character is analyzed. The way the character manages her way out of the oppressive patriarchal culture using the patriarchal tradition indicates her success in employing strategic essentialism. The success is proven by how she stops people who speak on her behalf (avoiding the false interpretation of what she wants/means to say), liberates herself from the oppressive patriarchal Chinese culture, and builds a new life that appreciates herself as a woman. Account in "The Red Candle" is one of the examples that the subaltern can also speak; and that the strategic essentialism by Spivak is performable. This is the form of resistance and struggle of a woman against the patriarchal culture that is proven doable.

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