REVIEW OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN AMY TAN AND KAFKA: A SEARCH FOR WHAT IS NON-AMERICAN IN AMY TAN VS. WHAT IS NON-GERMAN IN FRANZ KAFKA

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Abstract

This study aims to provide an analysis of cultural identity in both Amy Tan's narrative on Chinese-American identity in settings she established in her novels and in Franz Kafka's literary works in light of reflections from Prague settings under the influence of German culture. Amy and Kafka were two unique examples of cultural identity reflections in the literary writing field. Franz Kafka lived a life under the influence of European complex social setting that changed several times with wars, social upheavals, political developments. On the other hand, Amy Tan lived a life of migration between China and America after two World Wars in a newly emerging modern life in America. While Amy Tan was unique in her approach to cultural contradictions between American and Chinese cultures both dominant in her novels, Franz Kafka reflected the effects of dominant German culture on Jewish nationals of his social circle in his novels. Both authors successfully reflected their dominant culture's clashes with their cultural roots in their settings, characters and narrative through various techniques and methods. In this study, Amy Tan and Franz Kafka's use of setting and metanarrative style in their novels was examined in a comparative way to reveal information about cultural experiences from many aspects such as social, historical, psychological and literary perspectives.

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INTRODUCTION
Cultural Identity
Several literary studies have examined the cultural identity so far in the field literature, and will continue to do so because cultural identity is a significant aspect for an individual, a society and a culture, thus this type of identity easily influences a writer's approach to literary works. Cultural identity is the feeling of belonging to and self-identification with a group or culture, or feeling of an individual dominantly influenced by belonging to a sub-group or sub-culture. Cultural identity can only be felt directly when individuals face or experience other cultures due to the differences of unshared and shared cultural identities (Ayan, 2009, p. 1). As for ethnic groups, for instance, these people tend to have two cultures; the one born into and the one they have; therefore, their cultural identity is generally revealed by clashing these two different cultures, then by establishing their self-identity. As Neill stated, personal identity is sometimes only realized with regard to cultural context:

> Culture is the context which we need to situate the self, for it is only by virtue of the interpretations, orientations and values provided by culture that we can formulate our identities, say 'who we are' and 'where we are coming from' (Neill, 2004, p. 2).

The term, cultural identity, draws attention to the fact that "collective cultural identities imply a much greater sense of meaning in the formulation of identities because identity is importantly marked out by difference" (Neill, 2004, p. 3). What Neill tries to imply here is demonstrating of apparent limits of identity and emergence of immigration effects. By this way, cultural self-definition processes a continuous interaction and connection between distinct cultures. Besides, it is not possible to find a balance in these relations, since both cultures are obliged to entangle and exist simultaneously; thus there emerge many inequalities in terms of social, political, economic aspects in a society with different cultural layers. It is always possible to find out or observe dominant culture, or a dominant cultural practice.

Another brief definition of cultural identity was provided by Ennaji as follows:

> Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity or upbringing (Ennaji, 2005)

As specified by Ennaji, cultural identity is both an individualistic aspect and characteristics of a certain group among members of society. Writers are naturally the one who can create literary settings in which their cultural identities play a role in narrating any story. In this writing process, while writers tend to follow certain patterns of the society they live in, they also have some distinct sub-cultural identities, especially if they belong to a certain part of the society, religion, or belief system.

In this study, two writers from two different periods were examined in terms of their dominant culture in which they lived and wrote their works in and in terms of their cultural identity, which they reflected in their characters, novels, stories, and literary works in an indirect manner. The first of these two writers, Amy Tan, has been identified as a Chinese-American and who successfully used cultural identity elements of her Chinese background in her novels. The second writer, Franz Kafka, lived in the Middle Europe before and during the First World War under the influence of German culture, and he was a Jewish writer writing and studying in German language but reflected his Jewish cultural identity as historical developments and changes in the Middle Europe urged him to question his approach to his social environment.

Amy Tan: Analysis of Cultural Identity in a Chinese-American Writer

Amy Tan was a Chinese-American writer born in Oakland in 1952. Tan was raised in Fresno, Oakland, Berkeley, and in the suburbs of San Francisco Bay Area. Her father was from Beijing and educated there, then he immigrated to America in 1947, became a Baptist minister. Tan's mother immigrated to the U.S. in 1949 shortly after communist control in China, her mother left behind three children from her previous marriage. Amy Tan's father and older brother died when she was fourteen, then following such catastrophe, Amy, her mother, and her younger brother moved to Europe. These memories also affected Tan's narration style and settings of her novels. Amy Tan's real-life experiences were reflected on her narrative style and characters. The author made use of mother-daughter relations and Chinese-American identity elements in her novels by means of various techniques such as flashbacks, metanarrative and ghosts.

Since Amy Tan had a Chinese background but grown in America, she examined the subjects of ethnic identity, the paradoxical nature of ethnic-American identity, hyphenated identity, biracial identity and cultural identity in her novels (Ayan, 2009). While Amy Tan's novels employed a setting of immigrants, her main objective was universal and familiar, such as "the human struggle to establish a distinct identity, the search for roots and family connections, tensions between generations, the position of women in a patriarchal culture and the necessity of past and present connection so that cultural identity could be defined" (Ayan, 2009).

Amy Tan, however, is considered as one of the leading figures of migration fiction. Her cultural background was successfully narrated and depicted in her characters, setting and stories. Most of migrant narratives involve a nostalgic autobiographical representation of people's past, in form of sharing memories (Lotfi, Heravi, & Sokhanvar, 2013). Gabriele Rosenthal defines such past-derived narration style as follows:

"narratives of experienced events refer both to the current life and to the past experience. Just as past is constituted out of present and the anticipated future, so present arises out of past and the future. In this way biographical narratives provide information on the narrator's present as well as about his/her past and perspectives for the future" (Rosenthal, 2006, p. 11).

Such presentation gave the power of cultural identity easily felt in Amy Tan's novels. The homeland, China, was repeatedly shown as an imaginary homeland replete with recurrent, often negative, stereotypes in Amy Tan's novels. This approach had parallelism to Edward Said's classic formulation of orientalism, "particularly when these writers deploy haunting memories and remarkable experiences of the ancestral homeland" (Maxey, 2005). This kind of settings also reflected Amy Tan's real-life history; her real homeland experiences were narrated in her novels. Amy Tan, in her novels, created a harmony of historical Chinese setting and modern American family culture in a metanarrative method using various techniques such as ghost stories and interpersonal relations.

In American Literature, the cultural identity narrative started with the second generation American born writers, because these people were those who "stood betwixt the cultures and traditions" of their forefathers and of the land of their birth (Chun, 2002, p. 56). In this way, these writers and members of society felt obliged to establish their cultural identities by facing their Chinese culture, which they had never observed but heard of, and their American culture, which they had a sense of belonging to but could not be totally become part of, through the memory bridge that helped them move between the past and present places. Thus, "some of the second generation positioned themselves to serve as ambassadors to both their parents and their dominant culture" (Ayan, 2009, p. 2). In other

words, the Chinese-American second generation writers had a role of "explaining the American ways" to their parents and "interpreting the Chinese culture and civilization" to the white Americans (Chun, 2002, p. 56). In a sense, the second generation of American-born Chinese people served as a bridge between the Eastern and the Western cultures. Accordingly, Amy Tan was one of the most well-known writers of this movement. Ho indicated this fact his book as follows: "In coming to recognize the power of the dominant culture's influence in the shaping of their personal and collective identity, many Asian Americans began to feel that they had no self-defined identity" (Ho, 1999, p. 86). As Ho emphasized, these writers with a new sense of cultural identity claims thought that they were identified as Chinese-Americans because they were "physically Chinese but psychologically American" (Ayan, 2009, p. 2).

A clear example of cultural identity can be observed in Amy Tan's unique book, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, in which Amy Tan made use of two parallel settings between California and China in terms of setting. In terms of narrative, however, the story told by Kwan, the protagonist of the novel, occurred both in China in the mid-1800s and the main story was narrated in American setting. This novel was composed of various contrasts; "the story of two sisters, two cultures, two lives, two centuries linked by loyalties and betrayals, love and loss, life and death" (Huntley, 1998, p. 113). Thanks to Amy Tan's clever presentation of cultural clashes, ghost stories from past, sincere mother-daughter relations and love-marriage relations, the author discussed the issue of cultural identity in her novel in the most realistic manner, also in a *magical realism* sense (Roland, 1999, p. 2).

Franz Kafka: Analysis of Cultural Identity in a Jewish Writer

Born on July 3, 1883, Franz Kafka was a German-speaking novelist and short-story writer. Kafka is widely regarded as one of the prominent figures of 20th-century literature. Kafka's literary works, fusing elements of realism and the fantastic (Spindler, 1993), usually depicted isolated protagonists experiencing strange or surrealistic difficulties and incomprehensible socio-bureaucratic powers. Kafka's works were mainly analyzed in their way of exploring themes of alienation, existential anxiety, guilt, and absurdity. Among his best-known works, *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle* can be given. The term *Kafkaesque* has entered the English language to describe situations like those found in his writing referring to complex and unsolvable social and cultural turmoil in any novel setting.

Franz Kafka was born in 1883 into a middle-class Ashkenazi Jewish family in Prague. The city was the capital of the Kingdom of Bohemia during that time, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; at present, it is the capital of the Czech Republic. Kafka was educated to become a lawyer. After finishing his education, Kafka was employed full-time by an insurance company. This kind of profession led him to relegate writing to his spare time. During his career, Kafka wrote many letters to his family members and close friends, including his father, with whom he had a tense and formal relationship. Kafka became engaged to several women but never married. Kafka died of tuberculosis in 1924 at the age of 40.

Only a few of Kafka's works were actually published during his lifetime. These published works included the story collections, *Contemplation*, and *A Country Doctor*, and individual stories, *Die Verwandlung* (Eng. *Metamorphosis*). These works were published in literary journals but received little attention. When Kafka got very sick, namely after learning about his tuberculosis, he wrote his will and instructed his executor and friend, Max Brod, to destroy his unfinished works, including his novels such as *Der Process* (*The Trial*), *Das Schloss and Der Verschollene* (translated as both *Amerika* and *The Man Who Disappeared*). However, his friend, Brod did not want to destroy these manuscripts. Then, these novels were

also published. Kafka's works attracted attention, and these unique works influenced a vast range of writers, critics, artists, and philosophers during the 20th and 21st centuries.

One of the most well-known modernist writers, Franz Kafka was raised in the German-occupied Prague, then he moved to Germany for his education. However, Kafka reflected his own cultural identity as a German-language Jewish writer in his works successfully. Kafka's personal life is important for a proper understanding of his fictions. In fact, some studies concluded that "Kafka's personal life offers a key to the meaning of his often-enigmatic fiction" (Thiher, 2018, p. 1). To fully understand Kafka's works, critics require knowledge of the contexts in which Kafka detailed his fiction. It is also true that these contexts were at once personal and historical.

This study aims to discover what was remnant in Kafka in terms of cultural identity, which was not dominant as a German culture, but was hidden and reflected as Jewish culture. In this sense, it is of great significance that Kafka was born in Prague setting, the city was called the Kingdom of Bohemia during that time. Kafka was a citizen of the Hapsburg Empire, but he died as a member of the new Republic of Czechoslovakia. In such turbulent historical developments, Kafka lived a life of Judeo-Christian culture, which was influenced from Enlightenment ideals but also with a nearly medieval attachment to cultural traditions. Thiher, in his book, *Understanding Kafka*, described Prague cultural and historical setting of that time as follows:

> Prague, the capital of Bohemia, was also a city in which Judaism and Christianity nestled side by side, sometimes in peace, often in enmity. For Jews had been in Prague since the tenth century, and at times the Jews of Prague made up the second largest Jewish settlement in Europe, after Thessaloniki. But Jews were not the only group to know persecution. For Prague was a city in which German became, in the seventeenth century, the official language only after the Catholic Hapsburgs had eliminated the Protestant rebels who sought independence. Historical monuments to these events are everywhere in Prague, a city replete with memories of pogroms as well as Protestant heads on lamp poles. Memory of Jewish tradition was long there, for, as Kafka knew well, the ghetto area demolished during his youth had— and still has—the oldest synagogue in Europe. (Thiher, 2018, p. 1)

These developments and historical changes in Kafka's life urged him to reflect some aspects of his culture and identity in his works. Mainly, Kafka reflected a harsh bureaucracy in his stories and novels, leading to a term called *Kafkaesque*. This unique literary term refers to any complex structure in which a protagonist is stuck and strives to eliminate a problem he faces, but cannot accomplish.

Regarding Jewish identity and cultural background, readers and critics cannot ignore what the Jews lived in Prague and in Czech lands all through those years in the beginning of the 20th century. When the Empire granted Jews official liberation, it led to increasing anti-Semitism by nationalist-oriented ethnic Germans as well as among Czechs. Historical experiences and changes in social structure of the middle Europe during that period had a very direct effect on Kafka. For Kafka, it was nearly impossible to ignore a Jewish identify when he observed what bothered the Jews by an often-hostile society. Kafka saw that he had no choice but to be Jewish because he existed as such in the eyes of all around him, Jew and non-Jew alike.

In his works, Kafka offered glimpses of Prague history, in which he experienced various identity crises, such as Jewish, German, Czech, gender, aesthetic, and political crises. From these complex structures born the ideal depiction of modern Kafkaesque world filled with a cultural identity crisis. Kafka used to write literary manuscripts during his student days, but it is now impossible to detect how he reacted to the young Kafka's developing identity.

Kafka began to maintain his manuscripts after his employment as a lawyer in an insurance company. His longtime influential friend, Brod, preserved some of Kafka's unpublished manuscripts from the time. After Kafka's death, Brod saved those novel manuscripts and presented them to the modern literary work. Kafka began publishing his works in journals, and then, in 1913, *Betrachtung* (*Contemplation*) was revealed, a book containing a collection of Kafka's early manuscripts and prose poems.

Thanks to various sources for Kafka's uncomplete writing collections, either published or unpublished, it is possible to notice that there was an intellectual development in Franz Kafka's life in the form of looking for or trying an uncertain manner for his literary voice (Thiher, 2018, p. 15). Kafka had a vague cultural identity in the beginning. Later on, Kafka's cultural identity as a Jewish writer began to emerge with each literary story, he began to write a realistic depiction of his inner identity crisis, finally to conclude an imagination of Jewish ideal in Palestine.

After Kafka learned that he was very sick, he began to stay within the boundaries of his psychology and with limited social interaction. During this difficult period, Kafka even formulated powerful and apparent fantasies about leaving Prague, and maybe moving to Palestine. The reason for such inclination was outbreaks of anti-Semitic attacks in Prague in the fall of 1920. This kind of attack on Jewish culture in Prague also affected Kafka's worldview, and his fantasies towards a better life can be observed in his work, *Amerika*, in which he told about a trip America that he desired or imagined. In his sense, it can be suggested that Kafka lived a live and ever-changing social environment which, in turn, led him to create an alternative universe in his cultural identity in the form of imaginary trips or ideal life in Palestine.

The fact that Kafka wrote his will, demanding from his closest friend, Brod, that his latest novel manuscripts be never published after his death. Even such a demand from Kafka can be interpreted as Kafka's dissatisfaction from life and the cultural turmoil he had experienced in Prague and Germany all through his life. It is also ironic that his non-complete works were published and collected together after his death in Palestine; his latest wishes to build a life in Palestine were never realized, but his works achieved his ideal of reaching Palestine.

In Kafka's history and literary development, it is possible to observe that Kafka's cultural identity remained powerful in his literary development and in what made Kafka special as one of the most popular literary figures of the 20th century.

CONCLUSION

In this study, cultural elements in Amy Tan and Franz Kafka's works were examined in relation to their cultural identity depictions in their narrative. In this sense, while Kafka dealt with cultural identity crisis and its reflections in his literary living in the beginning of the 20th century and in the middle of the same century, both Franz Kafka and Amy Tan wrote under the influence of their dominant modern cultures; the one under the influence of German Empire, and the other under the influence of American, respectively. However, both writers formulated their novels in their unique social and historical environment in a way to reveal or leave traces of their cultural identities. Both writers used several cultural and social aspects to reveal their dominant cultural realities together with their personal cultural ideals.

Kafka, on the one hand, did not leave out his Jewish identity, and in his search for a cultural identity, he created a *Kafkaesque* environment of turmoil, bureaucratic difficulties, loss of faith in social equality and hatred for a minority, then Kafka dreamed about leaving Europe to Palestine and employed this desire in his novel, *Amerika*; Tan, on the other hand, did not ignore her Chinese background in her novels but she created a metanarrative style in which her cultural heritage came to surface through many cultural elements such as ancient Chinese characters, *Yin Ghosts* (Tan, 1995) from her Chinese cultural background as in her novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses*. In this sense, while Kafka revealed his cultural identity in her novels through the use of futuristic dreams and catastrophic European historical events, Tan employed a historical approach to her cultural background with reference to her Chinese roots in her novels.

Amy Tan employs a metanarrative style by means of secondary plot from the perspective of a Chinese immigrant, thus making use of identity crisis, superstitions, and surrealist elements throughout her novel. Not only does the juxtaposition of such diverse elements provide complex narration style in the Hundred Secret Senses, but also do they provide an ideal setting for resolving Chinese-American identity and cultural clashes. Ghosts, in this sense, function of mediators in dualities of American and Chinese born characters, their characteristics, life choices and relations.

Consequently, it is possible to suggest, from what was observed in this study from Amy Tan and Franz Kafka's literary characteristics concerning their cultural background, that cultural identity is one of the indispensable elements in writers' approaches to events in their real lives, in their societies and their narratives. What is hidden in writers' psychology and social history can easily influence their way of writing, the settings in their novels and characters that writers create to represent what they feel and observe in terms of social, cultural and historical realities in their course of life.

Review of Cultural Identity in Amy Tan
and Kafka: A Search for What is non-
American in Amy Tan vs. What is non-
German in Franz Kafka

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