

Jamie Arrambide
Block B
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**Lost in Translation:
Amy Tan's Struggles as an American Writer**

My mother, who taught me the permutations of fate, was hope's most stubborn defender. If fate was the minute hand on a clock, mindlessly moving forward, she could find a way to force it to go back. She did it often. She, who adamantly believed I would grow up to be a doctor, would later brag to anyone who listened, "I always knew she be writer one day." And in so saying, fate was changed and hope was fulfilled. And here I am, a writer, just as she predicted. (*Opposite of Fate* 3)

When we were given the assignment to read three books by an American Author, I had no idea whom I was going to choose. There are so many great writers out there: John Steinbeck, Mark Twain, Louisa May Alcott, Jack London. But, whom to choose? I read more than anyone I know, and having to choose just *one* person to concentrate on was going to be really hard for me. After much deliberation, I decided to do someone totally new, someone whom I had never read anything by: Amy Tan. Of course I had heard of her, but I never read anything by her. I knew we would be a good match the second I opened my first book by her, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. I was interested from the start, and by the time I was nearing the end, I could not wait to read another book by her. Then the next one. Then her autobiography. I developed not only perfect images of the people and places in her books, but also a relationship with each character, whether I hated or loved them. I think that creating a real character is rare, especially when you get someone to feel an emotional connection, and I think that Amy Tan does it beautifully. After reading her autobiography, I liked her as a person too, which contributed to the list of reasons why I am so glad that I picked her.

Amy Tan does something that I have rarely seen other authors do: she switches narrators throughout the book. She goes back and forth between the perspective of the Mother and Daughter in each of her books. By giving both the Mother and the Daughter a voice, Amy Tan got the chance to find her own voice, and regain understanding with her own difficult mother. By giving the Mothers a voice, she helps us gain insight on the cultural differences between China and America. Using the Chinese tradition of storytelling, Tan guides her readers on a journey of love, loss, hope, and fate, while making us actually connect with each of the characters.

In her autobiography, *The Opposite of Fate: Memoirs of a Writing Life*, Tan reflects on what motivates her to write:

The stories I write concern the various beliefs I have held and lost and found at various times of my life. And having now written several books, I realize those beliefs most often have to do with hope: hope and expectation, hope and disappointment, loss and hope, fate and hope, death and hope, luck and hope. They sprang from the questions I had as a child: How did that happen? What's going to happen? How do I make things happen? (111)

Furthermore, she stresses her desire to be an American writer, and what it took to be one:

I hear that my books and essays are now on the required reading lists for courses in ethnic studies, Asian-American literature, Asian-American history, women's literature, feminist studies, feminist writers of color, and so forth. I am proud to be on these lists. What writer wouldn't want her work to be read? But there's a small nagging question that whispers into my ear once in awhile: "What about American literature?" . . . I have this attitude that American literature, if such a classification exists, should be more democratic than the color of your skin or whether rice or potatoes are served at your fictional dinner table. And so I ask myself, and sometimes others: Who decides what is American fiction? Why is it that works of fiction by minority writers are read mainly for the study of class,

gender, and race? Why is it so hard to break out of this literary ghetto? (306–07)

And I noticed that too. When someone is African-American, she cannot just write an American novel; it has to be considered something that is showing us new culture and viewpoints and racism. If a white woman were to write about the relationships between mothers and daughters, she would just be considered a writer, maybe a little corny and emotional, but a writer just the same. But, due to the fact that Amy Tan is Asian, she is considered someone who writes about Asia primarily. She cannot be an “American writer” because she is of ethnic background. But I see her as a storyteller, and a master storyteller at that.

Part of what makes Amy Tan such a great storyteller is that she writes things in a way that makes you believe what is happening in the story could have happened in real life, and a lot of it did. She is able to capture what an immigrant Chinese woman sounds like because her mother spoke broken English to her. The Mothers in each of the books were very similar: argumentative, unhappy, suicidal, proud, and superstitious. But the most striking similarity is the way that they talk. The Daughters always have to translate for them because the Mothers do not speak very good English and often get into trouble:

But the way Ruth saw it, LuLing got into fights mainly because of her poor English. She didn’t understand others, or they didn’t understand her. Ruth used to feel that she was the one who suffered because of that. The irony was, her mother was actually *proud* she had taught herself English, the choppy talk she had acquired in China and Hong Kong. And since immigrating to the United States, she had not improved either her pronunciation or her vocabulary. (*Bonesetter* 46)

All her life, Amy Tan had to translate what her mother was saying. Since she was from China, her mother, Daisy, spoke in very broken English with a heavy accent. People did not take her seriously, so often over the phone Tan would pretend to be her mother. Daisy would yell in her fractured English to say a teacher, or telemarketer, and Tan would speak to the person over the phone using grammatically correct English. If someone heard her mother speak, they immediately thought she was dumb, and, in her mother's mind, would try to cheat her. People in restaurants would not treat her with the same respect or ignore her. So Tan would translate for her, not just to make her mother happy, but because she was ashamed that her mother did not speak perfect English, that she always made a scene, and that no one could understand her:

My Mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money." And then I said in perfect English on the phone, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago but it hasn't arrived." (*Fate* 247)

A scene very similar to this happens in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. The Daughter, Ruth, had to translate for her mother, LuLing. This was particularly embarrassing for Ruth because she had to write a letter to her principal telling him how bad Ruth was:

"Lootie give me so much trouble," LuLing dictated, as if Ruth were invisible, "maybe I send her go Taiwan school for bad children. What you think?" Ruth revised that to: "Perhaps Ruth might attend a finishing school in Taiwan where she can learn the manners and customs of a young lady. What's your opinion?" (*Bonesetter* 47)

Tan believed that because her mother's speech was imperfect, her thoughts were imperfect. But, she realized later in her life, just because her mother's mouth could not form the words did not mean that what she had to say was unworthy of being listened to. And when Tan started writing fiction, she used her mother's English in a way that helps

you really hear what the Mothers are saying. And that is when I realized that Tan was able to write in a mother's point of view because she had to translate for her mother all her life, and now she was finally giving her mother a chance to have her own voice be heard.

In her autobiography, she wrote about the differences in English that she used. When talking to her mother, she used a different kind of English than when she was talking to a friend or teacher. Although many people could not understand her mother's broken English, to Tan her mother's way of speaking was "vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery" (*Fate* 271). Eventually she would realize that her mother's English "helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world" (273).

Translating from one language to another is one of the hardest things to do. Most of the time you cannot directly translate one meaning into another language. Chinese is one of the hardest languages to translate due to the fact that slightly changing the pronunciation of the word can completely change the meaning. English must seem like a very bland language compared to Chinese, and Tan had to translate a lot for her mother. A lot of the experiences she had during her life also translated into her books.

Many believe that Tan writes mini-autobiographies, due to similar themes and storylines that most of her books share, which have to do with Chinese immigrant mothers, and the trials they have with their American daughters. They usually have many problems due to the cultural and traditional differences between China and America. One of her books, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, is roughly based on her mother's life. Tan talks about the issue of her not-really-autobiographies in her actual autobiography, *The Opposite of Fate*:

The problem is, I'd never be able to borrow from a stranger's life to create my stories. That's my reason for writing the story in the first place, if not to masochistically examine my own life's confusion, my own hopes and unanswered prayers? The metaphors, the sensory truths, the questions must be my own progeny—conceived, nurtured, and fussed over by me. (109)

It is true that she takes events from her life and puts them into her stories, but they should not be called autobiographies, just an outlet for her emotions. She recalls the way she felt during certain times in her life and is able to mold it into a story about something else.

Tan has recognized the power that storytelling has, not only to change her painful memories, but to create new and intriguing stories as well.

Tan once said that when she writes about things from her memory, she does not just write what happened, but also how she felt emotionally. Then, she can change the memory in her story to how she wishes it had turned out:

I write because often I can't express myself in any other way, and I think I'll implode if I don't find the words. I can't paraphrase or give succinct morals about love and hope, pain and loss. I have to use a mental longhand, ponder and work it out in the form of a story that is revised again and again, twenty times, a hundred times until it feels true. . . . Writing to me is an act of faith, a hope that I will discover what I mean by truth. . . . Fiction is an intimate companion and confidant for life. (*Fate* 322)

Amy Tan did not always have the best relationship with her mother, especially when growing up. The culture gap between China and America is huge, so having a mother who was born and raised in China made it difficult for Amy Tan when she was growing up. "I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness" (*Joy Luck Club* 241). Her mother, Daisy, was unstable, always threatening to commit suicide, and even attempted to do it on numerous occasions. Daisy even held a meat cleaver to Tan's throat until Tan begged her

to let her live. They often argued, and Tan considered her to be overprotective and unwilling to let her do the things she wanted. Yet, somehow, Tan and her mother were able to forgive each other. What I find so unbelievable is that Tan was somehow able to write in the perspective of a mother. After going through all those things together, Tan and her mother were able to create an unshakable bond that is only shared when you experience both great love and great pain. Only after Tan was able to recognize this was she able to step into the shoes of her mother, and create more stories of mothers and daughters, and the things they go through on their path to understanding.

Throughout all of Tan's works, the various narrators meditate on their inability to translate concepts and sentiments from one culture to another. The Mothers and Daughters cannot understand each other. The incomplete cultural understanding of both the Mothers and the Daughters is due to their incomplete knowledge of language. Additionally, the barriers that exist between the Mothers and the Daughters are often due to their inability to communicate with one another. Although the daughters know some Chinese words and the mothers speak some English, communication often becomes lost in the translation of words, whose intended meaning and accepted meaning are, in fact, quite separate, leading to subtle misunderstandings:

"*Gu*" as in "gorge." It's a different *gu*. It sounds the same as the bone *gu*, but it's written a different way. The third-tone *gu* can mean many things: "old," "gorge," "bone," also "thigh," "blind," "grain," "merchant," lots of things. And the way "bone" is written can also stand for "character." ... Ruth once thought that Chinese was limited in its sounds and thus confusing. It seemed to her now that its multiple meanings made it very rich. (*Bonesetter* 304)

Storytelling has been a part of Chinese tradition for longer than anyone can say. For centuries, China's peasants have listened with rapt attention to the village storytellers.

Tan is able to expertly use storytelling in each of her books, in more than one way. She helps the reader imagine what Chinese culture was like back in the 1940s and earlier. She also uses storytelling to create the understanding between the Mother and Daughter. The Mother will tell her Daughter her story of how she came to America. By telling their Daughters about their family histories, the Mothers ensure that their lives are remembered and understood by later generations, so that the characters in the story never die away completely. In telling their stories to their daughters, the Mothers try to instill them with respect for their Chinese ancestors and past. You hear the Mother's side of the story, and you start to understand why she treats her daughter the way she does. It is not that she is displeased with her daughter, but out of unconditional love that she treats her daughter the way she does. She is critical not because her daughter shames her, but because she wants her daughter to have the opportunities she never had, to be treated like an equal and not have to be ruled over by a man.

Storytelling is not just important to Amy Tan's books, but to the characters in her books. It is only through storytelling that her characters are able to gain insight into the complicated lives of their families. *New York Times* book reviewer Nancy Willard notes that "for Tan, the true keeper of memory is language, and so the novel is layered with stories that have been written down—by mothers for their daughters, passing along secrets that cannot be said out loud but must not be forgotten" (D8). The Daughters see what the Mothers had to go through so that the Daughters could have better lives in America. And trust me, none of them were easy. One had to go through a marriage to a man who raped her almost every night, and refused to take their child to the hospital when it was a baby and dying. Another one, whose husband was in the army, had to go on alone to America when he died. Through these stories, the Daughters see that their Mothers went through

seemingly unending struggle and pain to give their daughters something that they never had: freedom and respect.

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the main character's Mother was raised by her nursemaid, whom she called Precious Auntie. Precious Auntie could not speak because of a terrible accident, but she was able to use sign language to tell stories to the young girl. No one else but she could understand Precious Auntie, and she had to translate everything. Every morning, the young girl would ask her Precious Auntie what happened to her, and each morning she would come up with a new story, like this one:

I was a fire-eater, she said with her hands and eyes.
Hundreds of people came to see me in the market square.
Into the burning pot of my mouth I dropped raw pork,
added chilies and bean paste, stirred this up, then offered
the morsels to people to taste. If they said "Delicious!" I
opened my mouth as a purse to catch their copper coins.
One day, however, I ate the fire, and the fire came back,
and it ate me. After that, I decided not to be a cook-pot
anymore, so I became your nursemaid instead. (*Bonesetter* 3)

The symbolism used in this passage, is the fact that no one was able to understand Tan's mother, and she had to translate everything. In the book, no one could understand Precious Auntie because she could not speak, and she needed someone to translate for her. Many people could not understand Tan's mother, as if she was speaking sign language even when she was speaking English.

Hearing the stories told by the Mothers is a real culture shock. You realize that not everywhere is like America; in fact, most places are not. A lot of people in China do not have running water or electricity, even now, and women still do not get very much respect. You are introduced to a time when men had more than one wife if they could afford to do so. The man rules, and the woman cooks, cleans, and takes care of the children. Here in America, you see woman lawyers and doctors and businesswomen. The

stories were not only shocking, but also interesting and intriguing. It was interesting to learn about what other cultures are like, and it opened my eyes to see how different life is outside of the United States. It was fascinating to learn about all the superstitions of the Chinese: the good luck charms, the certain gods you pay homage to, angry ghosts of angry ancestors wanting to get their revenge.

So, ultimately, if Amy Tan had not grown up with a difficult, Chinese, mother, she would not have been the writer she is today. She writes about the experiences she had growing up, and is able to express her feelings, hopes and regrets on paper in her stories. And once she writes about her feelings, she is able to get into the body of her mother and hear her explanations, and realize that sometimes things just get lost in translation. Due to differences in culture and tradition, Tan mistook her mother's distance to mean *you're-not-good-enough*, but it was really because she loved her and wanted for her daughter to have a better life. Amy Tan was able to use true stories, not just from her life but also from her mother's, to inspire her to create well-written, original, and intriguing stories that plunge deeply into the complexity of relationships.

The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai for a foolish sum. This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched his neck in hopes of becoming a goose, and now look!—it is too beautiful to eat.

Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan—a creature that became more than what was hoped for."

But when she arrived in the new country, the immigration officials pulled her swan away from her, leaving the woman fluttering her arms and with only one swan feather for a memory. And then she had to fill out so many forms she forgot why she had come and what she had left behind.

Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now, the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, "This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions." And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English. (*Joy* 3–4)

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