

Food Pornographies in Amy Tan's Fiction

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Abstract

Ethnicity and literary aesthetics come together in a unique manner in the deployment of food semantics, imagery, motifs and food pornography. Asian American literature is rich repository of the foot prints of ethnicity. Amy Tan belongs to this era. Where she contributes Chinese American alimentary images in several permutations. Food preferences connote individual characteristics as well as community as well as collective tastes. Many writers concentrate on food habits and its sociological importance reveal how the Chinese food is also a way of expressing feelings and attitudes. This paper focuses on food pornographies of Amy Tan's work.

Keywords: Food semantics, ethnicity, imagery, motif, Food pronography, Chinese food.

Amy Tan is a second generation Asian immigrant born to early Chinese immigrant. She is considered as an Asian American writer with Chinese, American concept. Her literary techniques are sometimes common to mainstream literature and sometimes individualistic in style. She has reclaimed her legitimacy in the cultural and literary scene.

She has beautifully expressed the food habits and its qualities through her novels *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*. This technique is used to bring out the different versions of the "Self".

Amy Tan's novels employ alimentary motif, food imagery and food semantics as literary devices of ethnic narratives. San-Ling Cynthia Wong in her book *From Necessity to Extravagancy*

identifies two sets of alimentary motifs common in Asian American literature: 'big-eating' to the point of quasi – cannibalistic which is typically associated with the immigrant.

There is a third motif, food pronography where immigrants make a living by exploiting the exotic aspects of one's ethnic food ways. In cultural terms it translates to reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one's otherness in or to gain a foothold in a white dominated social system. Quasi – cannibalistic images abound the fiction of Tan. For instance "blood of the chicken being used to cook chicken broth" (HSS, 239).

The second generation protagonists in Tan's novels, are in Wong's terms, fellow children of necessity. Images of grim eating (JLC 32), unsentimental killing for food, such as Jing Mei's birthday crab dinner (201) and oppressive parental expectations recur in the chapters Rules of the Game and Two Kinds in *Joy Luck Club*. This motive of quasi cannibalistic sacrifice pertaining to the immigrant parents vis-a-vis American born children configuration is seen in the trauma which the child Buncake undergoes each time her foster mother prepares frogs for a meal.

Tan describes this in *The Hundred Secret Senses*:

While Du Yun peeled those frogs one, after another, Buncake kept her fist wedged hard between her teeth, like a sandbag stopping a leak in a river bank. So no scream came out. And when Du Yun saw the anguish on Buncake's face, she would croon in a mother's sweet voice: "Baby-ah, wait a little longer. Ma will feed you soon" (225-226).

Image of grim eating such as Cleo spitting jellyfish offered by her Chinese grandmother because to her it tasted "like rubber bands" (KGW, 32). She exchanges it for fragrant beef which she claimed tasted like McDonald's hamburger. "Winnie's mouth is shut tight. She looks away" (KGW,33). Wong attributes the motif of sacrificial eating as being the outcome of the long history of racism and stereotyping experienced by Chinese American.

Food pornography's is another survival strategy without demand. Frank Chin describes this as a way of exploiting the exotic aspect of one's food ways to gain acceptance in racist America. Food pornographers take pride in their difference from the mainstream. They depict this in their fiction through elaborate, vivid details about culinary expertise and the pleasure derived in eating ethnic food. Amy Tan displays food pornography in her fiction. Numerous examples can be quoted to prove this. One such example is taken from *The Hundred Secret senses*:

Kwan sets the wok on top and Du Lili passes out bowls, chopsticks, and cups of tea. Following her lead, (Olivia, Simon, Kwan) squat around. improvised dinner table... Du Lili plucks a chickens foot from the stew and plops it in ..bowl... (Olivia) ease (her) teeth on the edge of the thigh and take a puppy nip... chew let it roll on to (her) tongue.... The meat is amazingly flavourful, velvety! ... eat more... sip the broth, so clean-tasting yet buttery rich (240).

The concept of food pornography has a basis in Asian American history, especially Chinese American History. Early Chinese immigrants, who were driven from the mines and made scapegoat by white workers, took to working as cooks, laundrymen, houseboys, in short, by serving. In need of food, but barred from formal employment, they could get food only by preparing food for others. Many of them eventually opened restaurants. The primary clientele changed later from fellow Chinese to whites, apparently during the decades of the Exclusion period. Thus the presentation of “ethnic cuisine” preferably in a “exotic” setting provided most Asian immigrant groups with a low cost entry into business ownership.

Today many Chinese immigrants run successful hotels and restaurants. Another reason for the variety of Chinese cuisine is attributed to the country’s socio-economic conditions in the past. It has been said that China’s poverty was responsible for the inventiveness of its cuisine: droughts and famines have compelled the Chinese to make judicious use of every possible kind of edible vegetable and insect. The same “unusual food, can assume multiple meanings both within the Chinese Tradition and in the Chinese American setting.

In *Joy Luck Club* there is an episode in which food pronography is turned in its head to signal its antithesis: resistance to eroticization. We have an instance of this in the following episode. As a child Waverly Jong used to roam the streets of China town, where she had to suffer endless camera – touting tourists. Once after a particularly obnoxious Caucasian man had poses her and her playmates with a roasted duck: “its head dangling from a juice covered rope”. (139).

Waverly took her revenge by recommending an authentic Chinese restaurant. When the intrigued tourist asked what it served, Waverly shouted, “guts and duck’s feet with octopus’ gizzards!” and runs away shrieking with laughter (JLC,91). Waverly’s list though ‘pronographic’ in appearance and also colored by the child’s natural glee at the chance to insult adults, represents in fact an act of ethnic counter aggression. It mixes factual description; “guts”, “duck’s feet”, with deliberate exaggeration to convey the speaker’s spite at the cultural voyeur.

Tan describes particular food eaten for specific occasion by the Chinese. For instance “sun dried oysters were eaten for wealth, a fast- cooked shrimp for laughter and happiness, ‘fasts’ the black hair fungus that soaked up good fortune” (KGW,248). The banquet prepared by the hostess who is hosting the Joy Luck Club meeting prepares special food for the occasion: “long rice noodles for a long life; boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, good luck oranges for a plentiful sweet life. (JLC 23).

Food imagery when used by Tan lends richness and color to the narrative style. As for example: “rice fields cooked hard as porridge crust” (HSS,22), Chicken blood congealed to the “color and consistency of strawberry gelatin” (HSS,239). Thus food pornography gives a new way to focuses as a part of culture and traditional values.

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