



BEYOND STRUCTURE: MIRROR IMAGE THEORY AS METAPHOR FOR HEALING IN AMY TAN'S *THE BONESETTER'S DAUGHTER*

S. Keerthana

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Govt. Arts College,
C. Mutlur, Chidambaram.

Dr. G. Vishnupriya

Associate Professor, Department of English, Govt. Arts College, C. Mutlur, Chidambaram.

Abstract

Through the lens of mirror image theory, this article reads Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) to consider how reflection is conceived as a metaphor for healing in intergenerational trauma and diasporic identity. Tan employs mirror figuratively, not just as a structural device, but as transfigurative tool for the narrative building, character and symbolic development. In examining the divided text, concurrent but independent mother-daughter narratives, and repeated motifs of bones, ghosts and translation within it, this essay argues that healing is realized through the term mirror recognition—the imaginative awareness of an ancestral trauma which crosses cultural and generational barriers. Through such a perspective, Tan's novel demonstrates that the process of reflection helps to bring together past and present, East and West, so that cultural unity comes into being.

Keywords: Amy Tan; Mirror Image Theory; Mother–Daughter Relationship; Chinese American Literature; Cultural Reflection

Introduction

Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* provides a powerful reflection on the role of identity, trauma and cultural memory in the Chinese American experience. The dual stories of the novel – the life of Ruth Young in 80's San Francisco and that of her mother LuLing Liu Young in China at the time of World War II - mirrors perfectly what defines mirror image theory. The title itself hints at generational mirroring: LuLing and her father, Bonesetter Gu; Ruth and LuLing. And as Ruth succeeds in processing her mother's tale by translating LuLing's manuscript, the novel turns rumination into a way toward reconciliation. Tan's mirror imagery works beyond the confines of narrative structure in order to become a metaphor for healing and integration of identity.

The theory of mirror image, originating from Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage", claims that one is born only when we gaze at our own images on a reflective surface (Inegbedion & Uzoukwu, 2018). On the literary level, this model demonstrates how significance is constructed in texts by means of doubling, parallelism and repetition. The one messianic figure, Abbab (an anagram of baba'), only returns to Israel after he is at last and in full his mirror image incarnate ("for nothing can appear until it arrives—that's Agnon"), as opposed to when he returns as a

fleshed form of echo. Of writers who deal in diasporic stories, mirroring can be one way of teasing out the tensions between home-and-host-land; between past and present selves (both traditional and modern); between living on earth or under it. Tan's novel recycles this dynamic, turning familial and cultural meditation into an exercise in both psychological and cultural recuperation.

Theoretical Perspective: Mirror Image and Cultural Reflection

Theory of the Double (Mirror Image) works in a borderland between psychoanalysis, narratology and postcolonial theory. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, it kindles the traumatic status of repetition and recognition in patterns of being. Lacan's concept that the subject first perceives itself as already mirrored by an other echoes powerfully in Tan's representation of Ruth and LuLing, whose selves take shape in reciprocal visions. As Ruth notes, "All her life, she had been translating her mother's stories—from Chinese to English, from past to present, from confusion to understanding" (Tan 112). So translation is in this sense both a literal reflection of history and a psychic reflection, whereby effects of historical trauma as inheritance become instead self-knowledge.

In the Chinese American literature, mirror images usually represent this paradox of the dual cultural identity. Tan uses this device to show how Ruth's contemporary, American self is always worked through in relation to LuLing's Chinese past. This bond illustrates Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory, in which the descendants inherit and relive ancestral trauma. Through twin narratives that reflect and echo each other, Tan makes this legacy a means of healing rather than cycle of trauma.

Structural Mirroring: The Split Structure of the Novel

The diptych architecture that Tan uses here to divide the novel between Ruth's present and LuLing's past has created a splendid architectural mirror. Each one is a reflection and refraction of the other. It argues that without the colors — the two women, or their story as told by each woman — neither half can tell the whole story. It's only another one of Ruth's endless battles — an effort to make herself heard at all — just like her mother, LuLing, has fought her entire life not to be silent as a daughter and a woman aging in this world. And their voices, in turn, blend with (and separate from) a chorus of other others who grow and recede as required by the narrator: "I think about how voices in stories often start out the same but end up very different. It's the telling that changes them" (Tan 45). This double framing, then, turns the narrating act into an instrument of understanding. In reading her mother's manuscript, Ruth learns that her voice is an echo of LuLing's silenced history. The temporal duality — China's then versus America's now — underscores that the traumas of one generation cascade and expand upon another, seeking recognition before they can begin to heal. In its mirror-like form, the novel is an enactment of reflection theory's premise that identity and story emerge in mutual process of recognition.

Characters Holding Up Glass Windows: Mother and Daughter's Images in the Mirror

Ruth Young and LuLing Liu Young, as first they appear in Tan's work, are her most intricate mirror images. Their emotional rhythms — silence and guilt, longing for a home they can never return to, or have lost at home even as they remain there — echo across time and geography. About her mother, Ruth admits not long into the novel, "When she was young, she had sworn she would never become her mother. But now she saw her mother's gestures in her own hands, her voice echoing in her own words" (Tan 197). This instant of recognition changes

imitation into empathy and makes incandescent the Lacanian sense of self-understanding through the gaze of the Other.

The resemblance between mother and daughter also reveals the transmission of trauma. “LuLing believed she was cursed by the past, and Ruth feared she was cursed by her mother’s sadness” (Tan 132). So Tan plays out how silent pain can move subterraneously through the generations. But this reflected moment of suffering challenges Ruth to re-see her relationship with her mother. Upon reading LuLing’s life history, Ruth “Now I can see how much of my life has been her story, retold in another language” (Tan 309).. This is the point of mirror recognition and therefore change that precedes healing—the daughter recognizes herself as not disconnected from but rather a part of her mother’s story.

Imaginary Reflection: Things, Ghosts, and Cultural Productions

Outside of character and form, Tan pushes mirroring into the imagery of her novel. Passing on these emblems provides the intergenerational continuity of culture as mirrors. For example, Precious Auntie’s bones link the physical and emotional healing: “Precious Auntie said she was a ghost, but I didn’t believe her until she burned herself and left me with her bones” (Tan 85). These bones represent the lasting weight of memory as well, and its potential for repair. As LuLing later notes, “Bones can heal, even those that are broken. But the pain of not knowing can last forever” (Tan 276).

Similarly, the ghosts in the novel represent unreconciled trauma. “The ghost followed me all these years. I carried her with me to America, even when I thought I had left everything behind” (Tan 212). The haunting is a reflected nudge that the past lingers present and unacknowledged. Translated, LuLing’s manuscript is the cultural mirror that bounces Chinese history back onto Ruth’s American life. In translation, Ruth comes to regard her mother’s language as a continuation of her own voice; the resonance denoting that you cannot learn a language without undergoing emotional healing. Objects and artifacts — bones, manuscripts, even names — become agents of reflection that span through time, as well as emotional and cultural distance.

Healing Through The Resonance Of Others Celebrating Human Mirroring And Integration

In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, healing is about recognizing the mirroring of trauma and identity. As Ruth cares for her mother in her dementia, she starts to realize their parallel emotionality: “I used to think she was looking through me, not at me. But maybe she was seeing the part of herself she had lost” (Tan 174). This is what mirror image theory is all about: self discovery through someone else’s reflection. Ruth’s recovery is complete when she no longer denies, for the need to escape her mother, her connection with her: “For the first time, Ruth felt she could love her mother without needing to understand everything” (Tan 323).). Instead of alienation, acceptance is the sign of a self that has become whole. This healing in relationship to Precious Auntie’s memory again transmutes its implications on an ancestral scale and leads me to consider that reconciliation is, not just interpersonal but also, transgenerational.

Through Ruth’s empathetic acknowledgment, Tan refashions healing as an act of assimilation — a matter of teaching oneself to see one’s likeness reflected in the mirrors of family, culture and memory. This process allows for Ruth to be able to combine her Chinese past and American present, creating closure between the two cultures.

Diasporic Identity and Cultural Memory Projected

Amy Tan's novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, has theoretical similarities to various cultural models of self-discovery through reflection in mirrors. It illustrates the process of inheritance and remaking as well as how cultural memory converts individual healing into group identity. To read Ruth saying, "Maybe the Chinese part of me had always been waiting—waiting for my mother's story so I could know who I was" (Tan 328) is to experience the profound, diasporic need for agency in mending broken identities. Tan builds a literary mirror through stories and translation, where the past need not be erased but may instead be used as a basis for self-awareness.

Last but not least, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* presents cultural hybridity as mediation rather than disarticulation—a conversation between overlapping histories that produces fresh insights. Both real and symbolic mirrors in the book function as diagnostic instruments for inherited trauma and as transformation agents that facilitate the intergenerational integration of identity.

Conclusion

The Bonesetter's Daughter transforms the concept of the mirror image into a metaphor for psychological and cultural healing through its intricate structure and recurrent mirror motif. The interwoven tales of Ruth and LuLing make the case that trauma—and possibly identity itself—is passed down more so than inherited, not through denial or forgetfulness but rather by acknowledging the apparent. Individual and cultural healing for Tan's characters occurs through facing the past, whether in narrative or translation, or through compassionately confronting the lives of others. The novel demonstrates how self-awareness grows by recognizing oneself in the reflections of one's familial history as well as our larger cultural past. By combining them, Tan offers a timeless framework for forging diasporic identities by actively redefining their traumatized reflections rather than deleting them.

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