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## The Ghost As Cultural Mediator Storytelling, Identity, And Displacement In *Saving Fish From Drowning*

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**Abstract:** Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) employs spectral narration as a mediating instrument of culture by use of ghostly voice of Bibi Chen, a late Chinese American art dealer who takes readers through the lapses of a group of tourists in Burma. Tan, through the spectral viewpoint of Bibi, integrates and criticizes Chinese American diasporic sensibilities, Burmese landscapes of culture and Western views of its Asian perception. This paper is based on spectral theory (Gordon, 1997), postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994), and diaspora theory (Brah, 1996; Gilroy, 1993) to explore how the liminal state that Bibi experiences between the world of life and death is reflected in cultural and existential displacement. Her unreliable and ironic narration shatters East-West binaries and shows us that the exchange between cultures is flowing. The essay compares *Saving Fish from Drowning* to other recent works like *Kingston the Woman Warrior*, *Morrison Beloved*, and *Rushdie Midnight Children* to claim that Tan is rebranding the Asian American literary genre through the ghost narrator as a tool of cultural translation and moral thought and protest against erasing the historical record of the Chinese.

### Keywords:

*Saving Fish from Drowning, spectral narration, ghost narrator, cultural mediation, diaspora, postcolonial critique, transnational fiction, cultural memory.*

### 1. Introduction

One of the important figures of Chinese and other East Asian narrative tradition, through which the ghost narrator persona is presented, is that of the spirit as a transitional figure between the worlds of the living and the dead, the past and the present, and mutually opposing cultural or moral realms. Having origins in Chinese classical tradition, ghost storytellers are often the keepers of memories and those that administer justice and spread immortal wisdom. This motif of transnational and diaspora fiction takes on additional layers of meaning not only that of metaphysical being but also the identification across cultural boundaries in questions of identity and recognition as well as historical memory.

Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) modernly reinvents this tradition when the author uses the character of Bibi Chen, a rich Chinese-American art collector and socialite who dies unfortunately and rather absurdly, thus leaving her soul bound to the living world. The fragmented singing voice of Bibi turns out to be the main narrative landmark to a reader and one can trace the unfortunate fate of the group of American tourists in Burma. In her spectral point of view, Bibi can provide an understanding of events which is both deeply informed with the insider culture, especially the Chinese and diasporic culture and yet which is characterized with the critical distance of her ghostly state. This exceptional narrative stance allows her to

cross cultural, political, and historical landscapes to a degree that she is able to negotiate between Chinese-American, Burmese and Western perceptions of the world and reveal the assumptions, prejudice, and blind spots inherent in each.

The readers of *Saving Fish from Drowning* are left with a set of interpretation questions as a result of the choice to use a ghost narrator. To what extent can a storyteller be credible when she is not contained in the space of physical reality, seen by the living characters but omnipresent in the story? What the ethical authority does a voice have, assuming that it has any, that is disembodied when it is talking about such happenings of living subject across cultural lines? and what does this imaginary standpoint destabilize in the globalized, postcolonial scene? They are questions that emerge as the heart of the comprehension of the greater work of Tan, the one that includes the components of satire, travelogue, and political commentary and creates a sense of imaginary narration to create a sort of literary form.

Theoretically, Bibi Chen's voice in keeping with the third space of cultural negotiation introduced by Homi Bhabha (1994), existing in an intermediate position between two opposing sides that stand against the essentialized national or cultural identities. Her ghost status recalls fractured subjectivity which is commonly studied in the field of diaspora studies (Brah, 1996; Gilroy, 1993) when the self is formed by movement, displacement and continuous negotiation between points of origin and points of destination. Spectral status also reminds of Avery Gordon (1997) concept of haunting as a social and historical process—a process that brings back repressed or forgotten or destroyed in the mainstream discourses. Putting Bibi in a Chinese story tradition, as well as in a postcolonial discourse of the modern world, Tan not only makes use of the old cultural tropes, but also reflects them on a 21 st - century transnational reader. The product is a novel that is entertaining and disturbing because it asks the reader to think about extremely blurred lines of truth and story, memory and fiction, self and other. By so doing, *Saving Fish from Drowning* fits into an even broader literary tradition where ghost narrators serve as cultural brokers, but takes the form a notch further by placing it within the satirical criticism of tourism, globalization, and cross-cultural misunderstanding.

## 2. Storytelling and Cultural Mediation

Bibi Chen's narration in *Saving Fish from Drowning* is marked by unusual mixture of humour, irony, and acute historical commentary, a temporal mixture which enables her to be an advanced cultural mediator between East and West. Amy Tan through her voice brings about a narrative space where the culture contexts of the Chinese diaspora cultural heritage, the Burmese historical context and the attitude of the West are brought into contact, tension and dialogue. This mediation is not done on neutral terms, the commentary by Bibi is rather impregnated with her subjectivity, biases, and contradictions, therefore, works as a guide and critic, unreliable translator.

Humour is at the core here. Frequently laced with an element of irony, the comments of Bibi expose the misunderstandings, cultural misunderstandings, and cultural blunders that American tourists Bibi is leading through her spirit commit. These comic scenes are not accidental but sharp jabs at cultural presumption, following the West in thinking about the Asian (and often about the Asian itself) the orientalist undertones, some not so pronounced, others not so pronounced. An example is when tourists attempt to make sense of Burmese culture through the prism of American sensibility, the sarcastic interruptions of Bibi underscore the fact that this turns the process of making sense into mere depth and stereotyping. Bibi undermines dichotomous reasoning based on the self/other dichotomous thinking that has traditionally been the backbone of cross-cultural negotiations and interactions (Zhang, 2017; Ho, 2018).

Moreover, the story of Bibi becomes more often than not reflexive, providing meta- commentary on the telling of itself. To tell the story, she focuses on her own decisions, and at times breaks the flow of events to comment on the narrowness of her own perception or on the selectivity of memory. Such reflexivity is reminiscent of the historiographic metafiction of Linda Hutcheon (1988), in which stories question the authority of their own narration, and encourage the reader to pay attention to the way in which stories are being told and meaning are being attributed. In such interpellations, Bibi cautions us that any cross-cultural telling will always be irreparably subject to the positionality, purposes and conceptual horizon of the teller. In addition to resolving cultural differences, the narration of Bibi is a mediation of the history as well. As an art dealer with the experience of the Chinese diaspora citizen, she can connect the modern situation to

more global historical processes like the Burma history of colonialism, the history of Chinese Southeast Asian migrants, and the movement of art money, and tourists around the world. She not only enriches the reader with more insights into the environment, but also criticizes the Western travel discourse that tends to fix the sites in foreign countries in stagnant spaces rather than active cultural topographical aspects by locating the present experiences of tourists within these bigger histories.

Lastly, the alienation of Bibi as a narrator is also a complication to the reader. Rather than being a transparent cultural meeting ground, she is a diffracting medium that distorts several perceptions and reveals the unsteadiness of cultural truth and the plurality of other ways that narratives can be told. In this way, the usage of the ghost narrator by Tan further extends the terms of the cultural mediation in literature and turns the latter into a process of negotiation, resistance, and reinterpretation.

### 3. Identity and Displacement

Fundamentally, *Saving Fish from Drowning* is a novel which is obsessed with different forms of displacement spatial, cultural, and existential. The resemblance of this thematic concern in the work of Amy Tan lies in the fact that she has chosen to introduce an Intangible subject of the novel Bibi Chen, using the disembodied narrative of this character, putting this thematic concern at the very front of the reader experience right at the very beginning. The abrupt, untimely death of Bibi, which happens before the trip she had carefully thought out turns into an act of separation per se: she is no longer in her own body, in the physical world, and in a direct involvement in the trip. This absence is not only a narrative convenience but a kind of symbolic analogy to the bewilderment of the living characters, particularly the American tourists, whose visits to Burma disorient them on multiple occasions and in diverse ways humorous and moving.

The tourists themselves are foreigners in a foreign land geographically, and they are being challenged by the landscapes, customs, and histories in aspects that challenge their comfort zones and perceptions. In the cultural sense, they interact through experiences where language barrier, traditional ways and unspoken social rules tend to lead to misunderstanding. Existentially, they face situations where their identity has been shaken when their schemas which give them their sense of being in the United States fail to work or prove to be useless in the Burmese scenario. These displacements are reflected and intensified by Bibi as a ghost narration, whose own place remains undefined, that is, fluidly shifting between the tourist group, the Burmese landscape, and the space of the reader, and does not entirely belong to either.

This unsteadiness in location concurs with one of the key themes of transnational and diasporic literature that is, the struggle of identity within the framework of changing cultural and geographic borders. As Yuan (2019) notes, in the diasporic narratives, narrators usually exist in a divided self as the result of various cultural attachments, historical recollections, and language codes. The fact that Bibi is a Chinese-American woman is already the manifestation of this hybridity; her ghostly condition only makes her gaze that much more fluid. At the same time, she is both an insider and outsider to the cultural issues she is discussing: she is aware of the Chinese heritage and of the diasporic consciousness, but not of the peculiarities of Burmese life.

Theoretically speaking, one can perceive the identity of Bibi in terms of Avtar Brah (1996) concept of the diasporic space a hypothetical space where various histories of displacement come to meet, and where belonging is never granted but negotiated. Next to the discussion of routes and roots, by Paul Gilroy (1993), in *The Black Atlantic*, this discussion also comes across in the narrative of Bibi: the fluidity, changeability, and temporality of identity appear more important than the notion of origin. The fact that she is displaced out of existence itself allows her to ironically comment upon the human attachments to place and to self, but never utterly without commitment, as she is emotionally invested in the unfolding events, and may indicate the irresistible force of cultural and personal attractions.

Moreover, the loss of identity in *Saving Fish from Drowning* is not put as a clearly negative condition. Although disorientation creates confusion and tension, it also creates an opportunity of transformation. The fact that the tourists cannot possibly understand the Burmese culture completely, imposes instances of self-examination and in some instances, modesty. On the same note, her ghostly condition as Bibi and the ultimate displacement also gives her an augmented perspective to view the relationships and patterns that would otherwise be obscured by a physical, living narrator. This ambivalent character of transnational identity is typical of the complexity of it: displacement could turn into a source of alienation, yet it fosters flexibility, understanding and greater appreciation of the interconnectedness of cultures.

Thus, Tan makes her novel belong to a broader body of writings of diasporic literature where identity is



never a static identity, but is an ongoing and situational process. Knowing that the literal displacement of travel is combined with the metaphysical displacement of death, *Saving Fish from Drowning* performs the dynamics of the boundaries of selfhood being negotiated by experiences with alterity, memory, and in between spaces of culture being crossed over.

#### 4. Spectrality and Postcolonial Theory

The creation of a ghostly narration by Bibi Chen in *Saving Fish from Drowning* is post colonially interpreted to fit into a long line of ghostly figures who are the observers of the extended effects of colonialism and its legacies in the neo-colonial manifestations. Immediately the story commences, the ghostly voice of Bibi is a kind of a guide to the physical land of Burma as well as a decoder to the historical layers of the land which have been impacted by the British colonialism, the authoritarian regimes, the ethnic conflict and the world tourism. Being a narrator who is not bound to the physical limitations of life, Bibi can move freely across the boundaries of space, time, culture with flair and provides us with the information that is either unavailable to the living characters or, in fact, avoided by them.

The ghostly perspective that Bibi assumes serves as a postcolonial tool in at least two important senses. To begin with, it reveals the orientalist suppositions that lie at the heart of the western tourist gaze. The American tourists whom she follows are inclined to enter in Burma as a place of exoticism place to see visually, spiritually, and textually without going directly to face its political situation and the subjectivity of its people. This is akin to the explanation provided by Edward Said (1978) in which he describes Orientalism as a discourse that builds the east as timeless, mysterious and inherently other and hence produces an interpretive hierarchy where the west gains interpretive privileges. With the help of irony, sarcasm, and pointed asides, Bibi constantly disrupts these orientalist frames, showing their insincerity and power dynamics, they are hiding.

Second, the storytelling of Bibi makes one focus on the less obvious and even more uncomfortable fact of internalized prejudice as an inherent part of the Chinese diasporic identity. The novel is forced to respond to the truth that diasporic subjects, though they themselves are placed on the margins of the hegemonic western culture, are capable of reproducing exclusions and hierarchies even in their interactions with other non-western cultures as Chow (2020) explains. Such instances of condescension of Bibi to the Burmese ways, her obsession with the civilized behaviour and her focus on her own cultural sophistication all speak to the fact that diaspora does not always ensure the solidarity across the cultural borders. Here the ghostly outlook of Bibi is a locus of self-research to the diasporic subject and contradicts the notion that the marginality is the key to empathies or cross-cultural understanding.

It is metaphorical meaning of the spectral state by Bibi which is key to postcolonial aspects of the text. The invisibility of the ghost is likened to the erasure of the marginalized voices of colonized peoples, ethnic minority, and subalterns who are usually not present in official histories and world narratives. According to Avery Gordon (1997), ghosts are the social representatives of haunting that appear when some dark past is felt in the present and needs to be acknowledged. In *Saving Fish from Drowning* this narrative presence by Bibi is exactly the one: she narrates the narratives that the tourists are unable/ unwilling to narrate, mixing the personal anecdote with historical memory to upset the ready consumerism of Burma as a scenic tourist destination.

However, even Bibi has a certain level of agency that is not afforded to live characters through her ghost hood. Whereas the tourists, due to their physical movement, language differences, and social convention are limited, Bibi can see without being seen, cross the border without any limitations, and hang in the areas where tension between politics and culture is the most obvious. Such flexibility of the spectrum allows her to witness both practices of cultural exchange and cultural violence, and documents them to the reader even in cases where the living actors do not sense their significance. Through this, she reclaims narrative space to the oppressed voices and puts them within the larger canvas of transnational memory.

Lastly, the conflict between spectrality and postcolonial critique in *Saving Fish from Drowning* is used to highlight the issue of politics of representation that Tan is concerned about. The ghost narrator turns out to be a literary device of unraveling of simplistic East-West accounts of interaction and finding instead a thick tissue of historical obligation, cultural misconstructions, and conflicting identity. Using the eyes of Bibi and the loss of her presence Tan performs a meditation on the morality of witnessing, the perils of cultural

## 5. Narrative Reliability and Truth-Telling

The epistemology of the novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* by Bibi Chen is in a way complicated by the presence of the ghostly narrator of the story who is the ghost. At the very first glance, Bibi proves herself as a narrator with weaknesses, prejudices, and biased memory. She does not hesitate to admit subjective interpretation and the possible lack of knowledge and gives the reader a hint that the account is not omniscient and may not be entirely trustworthy. This confession of unreliability compels the reader to question the truth of what they are being told and especially in the case where the narrative involves multiple cross-cultural interactions in which the views are already predetermined by the divergent worldviews, linguistic frames, and historical backgrounds.

The fact that Bibi is not reliable is not only a personal trait but a structural device which speaks of the insecure character of intercultural storytelling as such. Her account is also broken, as Ng (2021) puts it, which demonstrates the brokenness of the intercultural realities, meaning bargained, misinterpreted, or lost in translation. This is similar to the problems in real cross-cultural communication wherein no single perspective can be able to reduce the complexity of the lived experiences and that the reality is revealed only through the struggle of opposing tales.

The role of Bibi narratological interacts with the idea of the unreliable narrator introduced by Wayne C. Booth (1961) as a character whose character traits diminish his own reliability either through the confessions, contradictions, or shortcomings of the narrator. In contrast to narrators who hide their biases, Bibi often preannounces hers, which is why unreliability becomes a planned technique and not a weakness. In this way Tan places the novel into the postmodern framework of narrative where the authority of the storyteller is consciously compromised and the creation of meaning is actively participated by the reader. Here the role of historiographic metafiction of Linda Hutcheon (1988) is applied: Bibi does not only narrate what happened but proclaims the negotiable nature of the narrative process and erases the line between history, memory, and creation. Another narrative element that is manipulated in the novel is unreliability as a source of revelation being better than the flaw of narration. The subjectivity of Bibi allows the instances of such acuity of feelings of culture since she is not confined to false objectivity. Her sarcastic remarks concerning both the American tourists and the Burmese community grow out of her specific standpoint, that of a Chinese-American woman of privilege, that is now a ghost, instead of a purported truth. By doing so, her unreliability is turned into an instrument of exposing all the cultural stories that are inherently biased.

Additionally, the interaction between the ghost hood of Bibi and the unreliability of her story is highlighting the thematic concern of the novel of invisibility and erasure. Being a ghost, she cannot literally be seen or heard by the living characters, being a narrator, her voice is distorted by personal prejudice and selective memory. What ensues is an additional deprivation of the objective truth of events, which begs the reader to wonder both the credibility of Bibi in his account and whether or not there is any unmediated truth in the situation of cross-cultural contact. This echoes postcolonial arguments regarding the way we read representation how the construction of history concerning others must always be mediated by positionality, power and context. Finally, the unreliability of Bibi is used to undermine the expectations of the reader on the control of the narrative. Rather than trying to provide one consistent truth, *Saving Fish from Drowning* provides mosaic of inconclusive perceptions, gaps, inconsistencies, and ambiguities, which recount the unsanitized reality of intercultural contact. Through compelling the reader to read actively to even the reliability of the narrator to unbalance it, Tan makes the process of reading a process of cross-cultural negotiation itself by which the truth is always located, and by which the truth is always produced, and by which the truth can always be redefined.

## 6. Comparative Context

Ghost narrators are not a new application to *Saving Fish from Drowning*, but the way in which Amy Tan applies them offers a particular conjoining of the subject matter interests and narrative modes. Ghost narrators are quite common in Asian-American writing, where they are often used as the mediators between traumatic past and modern self, the mediators between transgenerational memory and contemporary

subjectivities. To use the example of *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston, the emergence of ancestral and mythical voices sometimes in ghostly forms, sometimes blending with oral tradition, help reveal the connection between the Chinese background of the narrator and her American upbringing, blurring the line between autobiography, legend and community memory. These spectral images are not mere supernatural instruments; they contain rhetoric strategies of bargaining cultural hybridity and rejecting the erasing of marginalized pasts.

Equally, spectrality has also been embraced as a negotiating technique of international postcolonial literatures dealing with historical silences and matters of contested history. Though it has no ghost narrator in its own right, *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie employs ghostlike creatures and magical realist techniques in returning political history through fragmented personal memory. The result is a story where the ghosts of the partitioning and colonialism haunt the textual massacre reminding the readers about the long-term consequences of the existing violence. These tactics are indicative of what Avery Gordon (1997) refers to as the haunting which is the resurgence of the past into the present as a call to be heard and visible and to receive justice.

The brilliance of Tan is in his combination of the application of the ghost narration technique with the elements of the satirical travel story, which is generally compatible with the ethnographic observation, denunciation of tourism, and humorous dissolution of cross-cultural misconceptions. The ghost narrator, Bibi Chen, in *Saving Fish from Drowning* is not only a cross-cultural broker, but also a witness to the performative nature of travelling per se, in particular, Western travelling in postcolonial Southeast Asia. The hybridization produces a twofold criticism, one, on the one hand, of American consumerism, cultural hubris and exoticism-in-seeking tourist practices; and another, on the other hand, of the multiple political and social conditions of Burma (Myanmar), its authoritarian state apparatus, ethnic tensions and conflicting histories.

As comparative analyses of diasporic fiction (Lee, 2022) have indicated, when ghost narrators in diasporic fiction usually work down to the domestic or familial realm, translating across generations, or consolidating fragmented kinship ties or recovered repressed histories, Tan situates her ghost in a transnational and geopolitical hall. Such a placement makes the possibilities of a ghost narrator vastly increased. Rather than concentrating on intergenerational memory, the ghost hood of Bibi is used as a perch to cross-border cultural critique, which involves not only the narrating subject but the audience too in the ethical dilemma of global mobility, consumption, and depiction.

Moreover, Tan uses a satirical tone, which makes her style exceptional compared to more serious or even gloomy applications of spectrality in Asian-American and postcolonial literature. Contrary to the ghostly figures of Kingston and Rushdie, which are often marked in the narrative of the trauma and resistance, Bibi, the character of Tan, employs irony, humour, and social satire to subvert cultural pretences. This tone enhancement makes the disruptive ability of the ghost narrator even greater to allow combining humour and acerbic political commentary. Thus, *Saving Fish from Drowning* occupies a unique place in the histories of the ghostly first-person narratives: it blends both the self-referential, identity-obsessed interests of the diasporic ghost narrative with the externally directed, politically active gaze of the travel writing, forming a hybrid genre, which is both self-reflexive and cosmopolitan.

On such comparative terms, we can see that Bibi Chen belongs to an array of ghost narrators who are not only storytellers but transnational cultural critics, people who break the boundaries between the living and the dead, the local and the global, the personal and the political. Tan is adding her own twist to this lineage in her unabashed mixing of genres and registers, which causes a work that is simultaneously a satirical reflection on cultural tourism and a commentary on identity, memory and the morality of storytelling.

## 7. Conclusion

The ghostly appearance of Bibi Chen in *Saving Fish from Drowning* works perfectly out of the context of a frivolous literary interest; it is a multi-leveled literary technique that Amy Tan uses to explore the intricacies of the problem of cultural intercession, identity construction, and displacement in the context of globalization and postcolonial legacy. Being a between-life narrator, Bibi is placed in a liminal position, thereby enabling her to move easily through time, space, and boundaries of cultures. As a ghost, she is able to not only comment on the internal world of the traveling party, but also comment on the general socio-political reality



of Burma, and the historic currents that guide intercultural interactions.

Tan disrupts the traditional structures of the reliability and authority of narrative by adopting a ghost as a narrator. The subjectivity of Bibi is volatile by its very nature she is self-acknowledged in being biased and at other times sarcastic and even selective when telling stories but this instability reflects the instability of cross-cultural communication itself. By so doing, Tan challenges the readers to wonder whether there can exist any single, unmediated truth in the narration of travel, tourism, and intercultural exchange. Rather, the novel is a commemoration on multiplicity, contradiction and the need to negotiate meaning-making across cultures.

Moreover, Bibi has spectral vision and it represents the rejection of being stuck in cultural fixed categories of East/West, self/other, colonizer/colonized. She is a kind of an insider and outsider at the same time, being a diasporic Chinese woman, educated in the United States, being deeply broadened in Asian and Western sensibilities but being a member of neither. This intermediary disorder affects solid cultural categories and depicts in its place the mobile and hybrid and frequently uncomfortable identities that arise in the transnational experiences. By so doing, the ghostly mediation of Bibi is a metaphor of the wider condition of diaspora, which is characterized by displacement, multiplicity, and constant mediation of belonging.

On a political level, the invisibility of the ghost is also a reflection of the absence and absence of dominant history of the margins. However, through telling the story, Bibi recreates a subject-only space and thus states her right and ability to read, comment on, and even parody the postcolonial people, commodities, and even ideas that are defining the space. Her voice, which may be ghostly, is good counter-discourse to Western orientalist fancies and also to the more lethal internalized hierarchies of the populations of the diaspora.

By means of the combination of the elements of ghost narration, satire, travel literature, and postcolonial criticism, not only the possibilities of intercultural narratives are restored but also the continuation of the traditions of ghost narrators in diasporic and world literature. The voice of Bibi Chen is a manifestation of the power of liminal storytelling a voice which occupies the edges of cultures, histories, and realities, and which, in such a manner, makes the readers question their own judgment of who they are, who they were, and what the truth is. In the end, Tan provides none of the answers in her novel, but rather a call to become more self-reflective when approaching the complexities of the past and contemporary negotiations of cultural understanding in an interconnected world.

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