

A Post-Colonial Reading Of Isable Allende's Daughter Of Fortune

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Abstract: Been mostly analyzed within the framework of Feminism, gender-related issue or magic reality, Isable Allende, has been regarded as a woman writer who seeks to establish the mode of female survival in a patriarchal Latin America. While *The House of Spirits* was mostly explored by the literary critics, this paper discusses *Daughter of Fortune*, the less analyzed novel through perspectives of post-colonialism, since the writer is politically exiled from Chile which used to be colonized. Elaborating on certain critical concepts from post-colonialism, particularly Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the transculturation proposed by Fernando Ortiz and Angel Rama, the paper explores cultural identity crisis, displacement and orientalism by scrutinizing the protagonist, Eliza's struggle in the Victorian Era and California Gold rush in the novel.

1. Introduction

Post-colonialism has become one of the most concerned and rapid cultural criticism theories at the turn of the century. Post-colonialism refers to an aggressive policy of cultural encirclement and cultural infiltration to backward nationalities and countries during the Cold War and Post-Cold War period, which is carried out by Europe and the United States, aiming at exploring culture and imperialism, colonial discourse and eastern cultural reappearance, cultural rebellion in the third world, globalization and national cultural identity, and the relationships among race, class, gender, etc.

Isable Allende is a cousin of Salvador Allende, Chile's first socialist president who was assassinated during the 1973 military coup. The woman writer weaved her experience of exile in her story which describes the protagonist, Eliza engages with a range of journeys across and between continents. In the major critics, the journey is a feminine struggle against patriarchy to seek for freedom. Through a post-colonial reading, the journey has much more complicated meanings, which is a process of encountering cultural identity crisis and creeping through opposing forces in the ex-colony.

2. Theories

The theoretical framework of the paper focuses on Homi Bhabha's theories, in particular his theory of hybridity which denotes the impurity of cultures and the quality of mixed-ness to be inherent in all forms of identity. Hybridity, in this sense, acts as "a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth" (Ashcroft, 1995: 183). Homi Bhabha advocates that the colonial and colonized scenes are mixed with each other, and thus develop a new transitional space between the language identity and the psychological mechanism, which is both contradictory and vague. Therefore, its hybridization refers to the process of "mixing different races, ethnics, ideologies, cultures and languages" (Bhabha, 1994, 159). In this authoritative localization process, the two heterogeneous cultures will collide, causing the meaning of the colonial discourse itself to be lost and transformed. The critical strategy of hybridity has received more and more attention, and the mixed perspective of his post-colonial cultural identity has become increasingly influential in the world, especially for diasporas and ethnic minorities who still maintain cultural ties with their home culture, although they no longer intend to go back. Diasporas, have to adapt to the new culture of residence, but at the same time there is psychological need to retain their original culture, traditions

and history. As a result, their cultural identity is no longer single and pure but a mixed cultural identity.

Transculturation approach is applied in analyzing intercultural relationship of Eliza and Tao Chi'en. Within the context of Latin American societies, the concept of hybridity can be interchangeably used with transculturation. Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz believes moving from one culture to another cannot be simply defined in terms of acculturation and deculturation, as both of them having colonial ideological connotation. He does not consider the cultural contact as a one way relation; rather it is a relation in which all members actively participate. (Ortiz, 1995, 98).

Orientalism approach is applied in scrutinizing images of Chinese and Chinese culture in the novel. Edward Said, one of the three chief figures, called "Holy Trinity", including Homi Bhabha, in the area of post-colonialism. In Said's theory, all the images of the Orient are created and twisted by the Occident on purposely. The unreasonable, naive and degenerated "Other" is made to form a sharp contrast to the Occident, thus creating a superior Occident both in culture and politics. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience." (Said, 2003, p.1)

3. Analysis and Finding

3.1. Eliza's Identity Crisis

Eliza is an orphanage girl adopted and raised by the British Family who lives in Chile. They do not know her origin until later known that her father is John Sommers, one of the sons in the family while her mother remains unknown, a young Chilean, disappearing or probably dead. Eliza is raised by Rose and Jeremy Sommers with strict disciplines and greatly influenced by traditions of Victorian Era. Like young ladies in Victorian Era, Eliza is taught French, writing, history, geography and Latin by instructors hired by Miss Rose, who plays the role of foster mother. In this way, Eliza is the foster daughter of British culture. She looks very different from the British due to her Chilean mother, small, slender with black hair. While Miss Rose tells Eliza she has English blood, Mama Fresia, the Indian servant, is sure Eliza has Indian hair, and none of British origin. She has a good sense of smell, using it to recognize smell of various herbs, spices and other ingredients without seeing the object itself. She is bonded with the nature like locals unconsciously. While she is educated to sing, dance and play piano, like all the nobles do as colonizer, she loves cooking best, which is considered to be the role of the colonized, and in Miss Rose's opinion, an adornment for a young lady's education to prepare her for giving orders to the servant, but a far cry from doing with her own hand. The skills of both playing piano and cooking indicate the mixed origin, the former being taught, while the latter being born. Eliza is forced or even threatened to learn playing piano by Miss Rose who grabbed the little Eliza to foundling home and told her to be thankful for the Sommers that they did not throw her down there. While Eliza picks up how to read signs of the nature, recognize the spirits and cook in such a natural way when she follows the Indian servant around as a little baby. Just like the Sommers house in Chile is a hodgepodge which is meant to imitate a style in London, but forced to make changes to store goods from the British Import and Export Company, Eliza grows up in –between, between the British woman's sewing room and the kitchen with the Indian cook, and between English and a mixture of Spanish and the Indian's native tongue. It is clear that Eliza lives in an in-between space without knowing where she comes from and who she is.

Eliza is adopted and raised by the Sommers, but is never taken as a real Sommers. Even the Indian servant believes if Eliza has the Indian black hair on the day she is found in a crate, the Sommers will throw her and the crate in the trash. Miss Rose plays the role of her mother, but in ever larger part, a consolation for the children she would never have and another Rose who is buried in her heart due to her unlucky love affair when young. Rose forces Eliza to learn playing piano, sit straight with a book on the head, plan to send her to a school for young ladies or arrange a proper marriage for her, which is Miss Rose's subtle way of living through her protégée, Eliza, though she knows Eliza is her niece fathered by his brother John. Her brother, Jeremy Sommers, master of the

house and head of the family, did not agree, because of her hazy origin. The native Indians are considered to be the most savage cannibals by the British, like John Sommers who believes Indian blood is hidden like the plague, everyone in Chile has a touch of Indian blood, and a large number of people there are hybrid of Europeans, mostly Spanish and the natives. Even the local nobleman, del Valle, owner of agricultural holdings, traces back to his Spanish ancestors proudly. In the eyes of British people, Eliza is neither their kind, nor the Chilean and it turns out that she is a mestizo. Her ability to be invisible is a metaphor that she is often “unseen” when she makes her presence.

Setting of Place in the novel is in Valparaiso Chile, a Spain colony that gains her independence in 1810. The English are coming and soon make their own society and their British tradition, which is considered an example of civility, but the British think it is the unknown and barbarous country, a land of thieves. Even Chileans itself get influenced by the British tradition in Victorian era. Although Eliza is not an English woman, she is raised by the British family with their tradition. Eliza's lover, Joaquin Andieta, a local employee of the British Import and Export Company, Ltd, lived with his mother while his father never found. Their love hurts the Sommers for his social class and obscure origin. Joaquin is the fruit of a passing ravishment, a bastard of a Chilean mother abandoned by her middle class family and unknown father. As Eliza says, the Sommers are her “guardian” instead of the family, not to mention taking another mestizo in. Miss Rose thinks Joaquin, her brother's employee is a cipher, barely a shadow among the many shadows of that cloudy day, (Isabel, P80), or too poor to be significant. Joaquin's leaving for gold in California means his fight against hazy origin of bastard, poverty and suffocating oligarchy in Chile, while Eliza's leaving is more a way of getting away from identity crisis seeking freedom that simply chasing after a lover , as a pregnant woman without husband.

3.2. Images of Chinese

In the novel, Isabel Allende depicts a variety of images of China and Chinese. Basically, the image of Chinese is a complicated one with two sides in which Tao is the relatively bright while the rest remains dark. Isabel Allende herself is from Chile, the former colonial country and sees the Occident and the Oriental both inside and outside. In “Daughter of Fortune”, Isabel Allende depicts a barbaric “Celestial”: weakened armies, corrupt offices and uncivilized people suffering from poverty and pillage and never daring to fight against the foreign forces like the well-disciplined English fleet. In the novel, Chinese is portrayed as a people of twisted character who throw newborn baby girls like garbage and sell son, are fascinated by women with filthy deformed tiny feet, having uncivilized taste of food and strange animals for healing, hooked by gambling and even celebrating punishments and executions. There are three types of Chinese women in the book: Lin, Tao's wife, living a decent life but with weak character and mutilated feet; peasant or vendor with strong character, rustic manners and big feet; prostitutes, living a disgraceful life, easy or hard. Whereas, images of western women are portrayed in a multi-dimensional way: Miss Rose represented noble women in westerner world, educated and graceful with no spot in her reputation, though involved in love affair; Joe, the Dutch brothel owner, is big-hearted and a protector, almost taking good care of everyone; even there is a racial hierarchy in prostitutes with whites on the top. Even, Pauline, daughter of the local rich family, though running away with her lover, turns out to be a wise woman of talents in business. And Mama sacrifices her life in the Sommers for Eliza's departure. Chinese women in the book rarely speak, and so do Chinese men except Tao, almost mute peons living like ants. On the other hand, Tao symbolizes the more civilized part of mysterious east, though obsessed with “Gold Lilies” and gambling. Tao and his master, a zhongyi, have immeasurable aversion to war and high sensitivity to Chinese tradition arts including appreciation of music, painting and literature. Tao is talented in balancing yin and yang, basic principles of Chinese healing, even Chinese culture. As a follower of Confucius, he has faith in rites and norms of good behaviour, getting up early to do his hour of meditation, chants and prayers. He believes a decent life lies in resonating with the universe. He is eager to learn everything and absorbs knowledge swiftly, a quick learner to English through dictionary and surgery from a British doctor. Tao works wonder in healing illness and wounds in California during Gold Rush with magic

herbs and his acupuncture. In the book, the author shows contradictory images of Chinese, since she herself is caught between two different cultures, experiencing cultural conflicts and observing the East in different perspectives through a prism.

3.3. Transculturation of Eliza and Tao Chi'en

Eliza's first impression of Tao Chi'en is that he is an Asian with a childish laugh in eccentric rags, looking like a boy compared beside the British, and nodding bows repeatedly. Though Tao is a Chinese healer who has to work as a cook in the ship, he is no match of a doctor in Eliza's eyes since she adopts British culture. The Sommers, Rose and Jeremy, feel uncomfortable at the sight of a Chinese since they are from inferior rank and a degenerated Other stereotyped by generations of experts in Orientalism.

Eliza and Tao Chi'en have different beliefs and ways of thinking about cultural tradition, family, women, and relationship. They often argue and conflict due to great differences: Eliza comes from nowhere, missing neither British tradition nor Chile culture while Tao always wants to go back to China, so he could die and be buried with his ancestor; Eliza is driven by her desire to find her lover without thinking about the past, while Tao dreams of Lin, misses her so much, and even sees her appear in the sea. Tao fears that Lin's spirit can't find him since they are ocean apart; in California, Eliza establishes her self-identity through independent, hard work and by this way she earns herself freedom as a woman in a new world; before Chen is on board, he marries through an agent for two reasons: one is that the absence of a wife is a sign of poverty, and the other is that he wants to have sons; Eliza grows up in the grand house of the Sommers without friends of her age around, so she doesn't give much thought about establishing relationship while Tao believes life is determined by the acts of the previous generation and the arts of Chinese medicine is to be in harmonious relationship with the nature. From the beginning, Tao refuses to have intercultural relationship with Eliza, a fan wey he scorns. But he adapts more than Eliza because he knows he should. The more he gets to know fan wey's culture, especially surgery, the more he adapts. Finally, he decides to have his queue cut off, which means he doesn't intend to go back to China rather to stay in America. Eliza also makes adaption to Tao, when she gets to know more about his beliefs, tastes and way of healing patients. The great differences bring good effects to each other in the process of transculturation when the East meets the West. Two diasporas build up their hybrid cultural identity in the new land by participating actively in making adaptations.

Conclusion

Allende's *Daughter of Fortune* shows a process of reconciling cultural forces. Finally, when Eliza refuses corset and Tao cuts off queue, which are symbols of their captivity, two diasporas feel free to make a decision about their life, without going back to Chile or China. As the story flows, through conflicts and adaptations in the state of cultural hybridization, the main characters, Eliza and Tao Chi'en shake off spiritual shackles and get at their final destination of building up new cultural identity in the United States where the races meet and melt.

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