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Symbolism in Contemporary Asian American Women's Short Stories

สัญลักษณ์นิยมในเรื่องสั้นของสตรีอเมริกัน
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Abstract

This research aims to study symbolism in nine short stories written by contemporary Asian American women. The selected short stories have two major themes including cultural conflict and identity and women's subordination. Other significant literary elements such as plots, characterization, setting and tones will also be discussed to better understand the stories and their symbolic presentation.

It is found that, in the selected short stories, characters, animals, actions, objects, settings and situations are presented as both private and traditional symbols to clarify the major themes of the short stories which center on Asian American women's subordination and cultural conflict and identity. The distinctive symbols also reflect the writers' bicultural backgrounds and perspectives from American and Asian cultures.

Symbolism is, thus, considered one of their significant literary features in the nine selected short stories. These symbols in the nine stories by contemporary Asian American women are employed to reinforce the two major themes in subtle and thought-provoking ways, which make the stories

concise and yet complex as well as moving, as the readers are invited to analyze and interpret the hidden meaning.

Keywords:

Symbolism, Asian American Women, Short stories

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาการใช้สัญลักษณ์ในงานเรื่องสั้นของสตรีอเมริกันร่วมสมัยเชื้อสายเอเชีย จำนวน 9 เรื่องโดยมีความคิดหลักที่สำคัญคือการขัดแย้งและการรักษาอัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรม และสภาพอันต่ำต้อยของสตรีสังคมและวัฒนธรรมเอเชียโดยศึกษาทฤษฎีทางวรรณศิลป์ที่สำคัญประกอบการนำเสนอสัญลักษณ์เพื่อสร้างความเข้าใจในการใช้สัญลักษณ์มากยิ่งขึ้น ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ในเรื่องสั้นดังกล่าว ผู้เขียนใช้ตัวละคร สัตว์ การกระทำ สิ่งของ ฉากและสถานการณ์เป็นสัญลักษณ์ ทั้งแบบตามขนบและแบบเฉพาะตัว เป็นสัญลักษณ์ในการสื่อความคิดหลักของเรื่อง การใช้สัญลักษณ์สัญลักษณ์ที่โดดเด่นยังสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงภูมิหลังและทัศนคติที่มาจากการเป็นคนที่มีสองวัฒนธรรม

การใช้สัญลักษณ์จึงเป็นจุดเด่นของงานเขียนในเรื่องสั้นทั้งหมด 9 เรื่อง ซึ่งช่วยให้ความคิดหลักของเรื่องชัดเจนยิ่งขึ้น การที่สัญลักษณ์สื่อความคิดหลักของเรื่องอย่างแยบยลและกระตุ้นการตีความทำให้เรื่องสั้นเหล่านี้กระชับ มีความลึกซึ้งและซับซ้อน ความแนบเนียนของสัญลักษณ์โดยการซ่อนความหมายยังสร้างพลังให้แก่งานเขียน เนื่องจากผู้อ่านต้องคิดวิเคราะห์และแปลความหมายอันเป็นการสร้างอารมณ์และความรู้สึกด้วยตัวผู้อ่านเอง

Keywords:

สัญลักษณ์นิยม, สตรีอเมริกันเชื้อสายเอเชีย, เรื่องสั้น

Statement of the Problem

After Columbus's discovery of 'the New World', many groups of Europeans came to settle in America. The English were the European settlers that took the supreme power and gave birth to a new nation, the United States (Rose, 1997 : 31). After the census of 1820, the United States met the genuine stream of immigration. The trans-Atlantic immigration brought mainly the Irish and Germans while the Hispanics from Mexico crossed the southern border. Asians began the trans-Pacific migration to the United States in the middle of nineteenth century.

The significant trans-Pacific immigration started with the coming of the Chinese to the California Gold Rush. The Chinese were followed by the Japanese who came to work in farms in Hawaii and the West Coast. Later, a group of Koreans immigrated to the United States for farming in Hawaii and California. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Filipinos and South Asians immigrated to the United States for education and jobs. The Indochinese, especially the Vietnamese, immigrated for political refuge in the late twentieth century. As a group of non-white immigrants, the Asians confronted racial discrimination, social exclusion and limitation of rights. These problems were caused by their skin color and cultures. In the ethnic classification, those with white skin and European cultural origins were more readily categorized as the American majority while Asian immigrants who were 'yellow' and had their own Asian cultures were assigned to the class of minority.

Non-white ethnics have struggled enormously under mistreatment. The native Americans encountered the cruelty of the white colonists and had to live in the reservation areas (Rose, 1997 : 26). The African Americans became free after the Civil War (1861-1865), but still

faced racial discrimination and limitation of rights (Baym, et al, 1998 : 1773). Similarly, Hispanics and Asian Americans suffered from racial discrimination.

The Chinese who settled in the United States after the California Gold Rush had to endure the anti-Chinese sentiment and were excluded from American society by several exclusion acts (Gudykunst, 2001 : 55). Similarly, the Japanese underwent antagonism caused by their farming skills. The attack of Pearl Harbor in 1941 worsened their condition when they were moved to the Security Camp in the desert of the Rocky Mountain, losing their properties and experiencing bitter hardship (Gudykunst, 2001 : 65). Among Asian American ethnics, the Filipinos and the South Asians received better condition because of their better education, English language ability and expertise (Gudykunst, 2001 : 72).

Among Asian Americans, the women suffered more than men. Besides the hardship due to their minority status, these Asian women suffered in their own community because of the patriarchy, putting women to a lower status and confined them to domestic roles.

Social changes started in the middle of the twentieth century when young Americans started to deny conformity and fought for personal freedom and individual self-expression. The African Americans refused the second-class status after being enlisted in the war (Baym, et al, 1998 : 1773). Women had more education, denied domestic roles and came out to work. In this atmosphere, the Civil Rights Movement exploded.

The African Americans were the first ethnic group to claim their rights. Their standing-up made Americans aware of the social existence of minorities and the cultural differences among the Americans (Nittaya Masawisut, et al, 2001 : 6). After this Movement, other ethnic groups

including Asian Americans followed their lead.

American women also joined the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960s, a movement, called 'Women's Liberalization' (Chanthana Chaiyachit, 2001 : 9), requested their voting rights, custody over her children, equality within marriage as well as equal access to employment and political activity. During this period, the ethnic women strengthened their existence and demanded sexual equality.

The Civil Rights Movement in the second-half of the twentieth century enormously influenced American literature which started to represent the experiences of the entire people of differences in gender, ethnicity, religion and region (Baym, et al, 1998 : 1776). Writers were innovative, self-aware and reflective with artistic identities. This period was, therefore, a renaissance of multiethnic literature (VanSpankeren, 1994 : 89). Minorities' writings, led by African-American, show their existence, identity, ethnicity, cultural complexity, experiences and social reality (Hilfer, 1992 : 49). The Asian American writers started to explore their Asian cultural sources: Chinese opera, Zen, Asian literary traditions, cultural diversity, cultural differences, etc. Works by women writers expressed feminist perspectives and awareness of female artists' roles (Gilbert and Gubar, 1996 : 1615). Their works conveyed various themes including sexism, racism, national origins, liberation in social structure and oppression of age, sex, class, religion and ethnicity (Perkins, Warhol and Perkins, 1994 : 2). Interestingly, Asian American women also added anger of inequality, female subordination in their original cultures and cultural complexity in their stories.

Asian American women writers have written in every genre: poetry, novels, short stories and plays. Many have chosen short stories

as they are brief narratives with uncomplicated plots and few characters and settings and also became very popular as "American Arts Form" in the twentieth century (Holman, 1972 : 495). Asian American writers, who were mainly born in the second half of the twentieth century, exploit this genre to effectively narrate their experiences and personal concerns. In making this literary genre artistic, striking and concise, an important technique which the Asian American writers have widely exploited is symbolism which gives their works subtle meanings and powerful impacts.

Asian American women writers come from different national origins, but they share certain common experiences and personal concerns. In a book of selected short stories, *Home to Stay*, the Asian American Women's Fiction (1990) collected by Sylvia Watanabe and Carol Bruchac, a group of short stories demonstrates rich and striking symbolism. The authors apply both traditional and private symbols to their works in order to present and reinforce their ideas. In this study, nine of these short stories with effective use of symbolism are selected for special examination.

Categorized on the authors' ethnic backgrounds, the nine selected stories include three stories written by Chinese American writers - "The White Umbrella" by Gish Jen (born 1956), 'Long Way Home' by Sarah J. Lau (born 1967) and 'The Red Sweater' by Fae Myenne Ng (born 1967), three stories written by Japanese American writers - "Family Dinner" by Tina Koyama (born 1959), "The Japanese Mountain" by Deborah Fass, and "1895 The Honey Moon Hotel" by Marie M. Hara (1945), stories written by South Asian American authors - "Brave We are" by Tahira Naqvi (born 1945) and the "Doors" by Chitra Divakaruni (Born 1957), and one story written by a Southeast Asian writer - "The

Blossoming of Bong Bong' by Jessica Hagedorn (born 1949).

Objectives

To study the selected short stories by contemporary Asian American women authors with a focus on symbolism

Significance of the study

This research will give a picture of symbols from bicultural women's perspectives and their use of other literary techniques to convey the ideas of the stories.

Research Methodology

1. Selecting the short stories in which the symbolism is employed distinctively
2. Studying related literature
3. Examining literary techniques of each short story : the theme and the plot, characterization, the setting and the tone
4. Analyzing the symbols under two major themes :
 - 4.1 Cultural conflict and identity
 - 4.2 Women subordination
5. Concluding

Result of the Study

In this study, it will explicate the examination of the symbolism in the short stories relating to its presentations and effectiveness. It will also show other important literary techniques to illustrate the stories and the symbolism.

Literary Elements of the Selected Short Stories

Important literary techniques employed in the selected short stories are themes, plots, characterization, settings and tones. The study of such literary techniques will enhance the understanding of the stories and render the light to the examination of the symbols.

1. Themes

There are two major common themes in the selected short stories: cultural conflict and identity and women's subordination.

1.1 Cultural Conflict and Identity

After the Asian immigrants began settling in the United States, some of them can integrate into the American culture while some cannot. The immigrant generation generally wants to reserve their traditional culture and object to the assimilation while the younger generation are Americanized and refuse their parents' cultural conformity. This results in cultural conflicts. "The White Umbrella" focuses on the internal conflict caused by a bicultural dilemma. The young Chinese-American protagonist suffers a bicultural dilemma because she wants to like white Americans but her Chinese identity cannot be denied. "Long Way Home" highlights cultural and generational conflicts. This happens between a Chinese immigrant mother and her American-born Chinese daughter. From different cultural perspective, they have a serious argument and end with a sudden leave of her daughter from the family. "A Red Sweater" also pictures a cultural conflict in a Chinese family. An American Chinese girl suffers alienation in a conservative Chinese family that considers women inferior. She finally leaves her family for freedom.

Another significant theme is the loss of one's ethnic identity from the assimilation. The assimilation to the main stream culture causes fear to some Asian Americans for losing their ethnic identity. "The Blossoming of Bong Bong" shows the suffering of the protagonist caused by the threat of assimilation into the mainstream white culture. To portray this point, the protagonist suffers alienation from living with White, Hispanic and Asian Americans. Finally, he becomes insane and forgets his name at the end of the story.

Relating to the problem of identity loss is the nostalgia for the Asian culture as a result of assimilation into the American culture. Some Asians are still yearning for their original cultures. This theme is embodied in "The Japanese Mountains". The protagonist longs for her original Japanese cultures and feels alienated to the American culture.

However, although assimilation causes a huge threat to many Asian Americans, a positive perspective concerning minorities' assimilation also exists. Some Asians welcome cultural transition and accept new culture while keeping the original cultures. This is depicted in "Brave We Are". It is the story about a Pakistani in America who keeps her original culture while embracing the American culture.

1.2 Women's Subordination

Women subordination in their original cultures is derived from the concept of patriarchy which is found especially in East Asia and Hinduism and Islam in South Asia. This concept lowers women's status, causes gender inferiority and confines them to domesticity. These women writers stress these phenomena to portray their fates and sufferings in the Asian patriarchal community. In "Doors", the writer depicts suffering of the protagonist, an Indian American woman from her husband,

a traditional Indian man. Her husband shows his neglect of her privacy by opening all the door she shuts. Finally, she cannot deal with this problem and decided to end their relationship. In "1895 The Honeymoon Hotel", the writer illustrates the fate of a Japanese woman who is sent to the United States as a boat bride for an arranged marriage. She sadly accepts her destiny. "The Family Dinner" is a story focusing on gender inferiority in a Japanese conservative family. The protagonist who is a Japanese girl has long frustration and alienation in her family and chooses to leave her family for freedom.

2. Plots

There are two plot patterns found in the selected nine short stories: the modern and traditional. To realistically present stories from their first-hand experiences and social reality, some Asian American writers mainly choose a modern plot which resembles a 'slice of life' tending to be a sketch or a fragment of a character's life with a blurred beginning and ending and apparent climax. It emphasizes 'daily reality' and makes the stories seem true to life. Sexual inferiority of Asian women in "1895 The Honeymoon Hotel" and "The Family Dinner" and the protagonist's nostalgia for Asian culture and obsession to return to Japan in "The Japanese Mountains" are portrayed through the modern plot.

Besides being a 'slice of life', the open ending is another characteristic of the modern plot. The writers leave the major conflicts or problems unresolved and challenge readers to work out for the conclusions and thematic messages. For example, "Long Way Home" ends with the protagonist's elder daughter's sudden leave for China. The problem between the Chinese mother and her American born Chinese is not resolved. Likewise, "A Red Sweater" does not give any hint about

how the protagonist tackles with the family conflicts, but instead, ends with her selection of a red sweater.

Although the modern plot recurs in many stories written by Asian American writers, the traditional plot is also used. This kind of plot has a single effect with conflicts, gradually developing until they amount to sudden decision of the involved. The beginning of the conflict is presented in the exposition, followed by the rising action, the complication, the climax and a resolution. This dramatic plot is effective to emphasize a conflict and a climax in the story. In "The White Umbrella", the protagonist's striking bicultural conflict is very prominent and leads to her final decision to throw the umbrella away, as the story reaches the climax. "Doors" gradually develops the conflict as the protagonist's frustration towards her husband's actions heightens and climatically ends with her explosive and angry expression. Similarly, "The Blossoming of Bong Bong" ends with the protagonist becoming insane after his long struggle with frustrating social contradictions while "Brave We Are" is concluded with the protagonist's integration into the two conflicting cultures and finding a balance between both American and Pakistani cultures.

3. Characterization

To present their themes, these Asian American writers intentionally exploit point of view, conflicts and direct characterization to depict their protagonists.

Protagonists in the selected short stories are all female except the one in "The Blossoming of Bong Bong". Most of these major characters are young American-born Asians while some are young immigrants from Asian countries. The antagonists are mainly female characters who belong to the old immigrant generations.

In terms of point of view, there are two points of view are carefully selected: first-person narration and the third-person narration. Through the first-person narration, the protagonists directly tell the stories, referring to themselves as 'I'. This technique allows readers to closely perceive the characters' emotions, ideas and attitudes. This first-person narration can, thus, vividly picture the protagonist's frustration and dilemma resulted by bicultural conflicts as demonstrated "The White Umbrella", "A Red Sweater" and "Long Way Home", bitterness from gender subordination as experienced by a Japanese woman in "Family Dinner" and happiness derived from finding balance between American and Pakistani cultures in "Brave We Are".

The third-person narration is the technique that depicts the stories and the characters' situation through the third-person eyes. The protagonists' attitudes, feelings and ideas about their problems are witnessed and reported in details by the narrators. Gender inferiority in "1895 The Honeymoon hotel" and "Doors", nostalgia for the Asian culture in "The Japanese Mountains", and the frustration from the assimilation in "The Blossoming of Bong Bong" are highlighted through the third-person point of view.

The use of conflict is another element to characterize the major characters. In the selected stories, major characters share similar types of conflict: interpersonal, internal and environmental conflicts. The interpersonal conflict focuses on problems among characters from distinctive cultural conformity, especially women's issues. In "Long Way Home", the Chinese immigrant protagonist has a conflict with her American-oriented daughter because of their cultural perspectives while

the protagonist in "A Red Sweater" denies her immigrant parents' strict Chinese culture. In "Doors", the American Indian protagonist and her traditional Indian husband have a conflict with each other because of their different cultural orientations. Although personal conflicts between characters are outstanding, the protagonists' internal conflict also recurs.

The internal conflict of American-born Asians is caused by a bicultural complexity. In "The White Umbrella", the protagonist is culturally frustrated because she wants to live like a white American while being restricted to her strict Chinese culture. Apart from the internal conflicts, the writers also exploit the environmental conflicts to give details about their characters.

The conflicts with the environment, in this study, refer to the cultural surroundings. This is illustrated by the protagonist in "The Japanese Mountains" who is alienated from the American society and longs for her Asian culture. The protagonists in "1895 The Honeymoon Hotel" and "The Family Dinner", both have shared conflicts with the strict and oppressive Japanese culture while the Filipino immigrant in "The Blossoming of Bong Bong" is upset with social contradictions in the American society.

Indirect characterization through the characters' thoughts, internal monologues, dialogues and actions are primarily used in the selected short stories to portray the protagonists. Thoughts reflect the way that the characters think about their situations. To show the protagonists' frustration and conflict with their families and original cultures, the streams of thoughts are highlighted in "Family Dinner" and "1895 The Honeymoon Hotel". The use of internal monologue can portray the feeling of the characters through the way they talk to themselves. A flow

of internal monologues suggests the nostalgia of the protagonist in "The Japanese Mountains".

Dialogues and actions can also present the characters in the stories. In "Long Way Home" and "A Red Sweater", the characters' actions and dialogues show their behaviors and interaction with each other while in "The Blossoming of Bong Bong", thoughts and actions are mixed to characterize the protagonist and his frustration. In "Doors", the protagonist's thoughts and actions reveal her internal oppression. Among the selected stories, 'Brave We Are' does not have a clear pattern of conflicts but the major character is described by thoughts and actions.

4. Settings

In the selected short stories, there are two major types of settings used: outdoor and indoor settings. They make the stories realistic and also reveal the characters' information.

The outdoor setting is generally the circumstance around the major characters or with which the characters interact, physically or mentally. The descriptions of those outdoor settings in some short stories significantly relates to the characters' psychological condition and emotional states. In "Family Dinner", the beautiful nature, "Stars blink. The sky, the water, the freeway — whenever I look spots of light move in the darkness" (85), reflects the protagonist's elation after fleeing from the oppressive Japanese family. In "The Japanese Mountains", the repetitive descriptions of the Japanese green forest and mountains and a Japanese-styled garden reveal the protagonist's nostalgia to Japanese culture. In "1895 The Honeymoon Hotel", view of the misty mountains explains the protagonist's sadness and doomed situation. In 'The White Umbrella', the chilly evening rain suggests the protagonist's situation

which is neither warm nor friendly: "I stared out into the empty street. The rain was pricking me all over; I was cold.." (58).

The indoor setting in the selected short stories is mainly rooms. The rooms significantly suggest the space where the two different cultures converge and conflict. "The White Umbrella" is set in a living room of a white teacher's house where the protagonists started to have bicultural dilemma between the American culture and Chinese identity. "Family Dinner" takes place in a dining room, in which the protagonist is frustrated from her gender inferiority in a strict Japanese culture. In "Long Way Home", the climax of the conflict between the Chinese immigrant mother and her American-born daughter takes place in the dining room and ends with their serious argument and sudden leave of the daughter. The problem occurs from their extreme cultural perspective. In "1895 The Honeymoon Hotel", the main story happens in a hotel room where the protagonist has to wait for her husband while pondering about her fate and future. In "A Red Sweater", bitter dilemma of the protagonist happens in a house of a Chinese family where family members still keep strict Chinese culture. "Doors" focuses on rooms such as a kitchen, a laundry room and a sleeping room where conflicts flare around. The rooms in the story refer to the boundary of rights and privacy of an individual but it is not considered so by her traditional Indian husband. Unlike other stories, a kitchen in 'Brave We Are' is not a place of conflict but instead, a place of cultural balance.

4. Tones

Tones can indicate the mood of the stories. There are two major tones in the selected short stories which are frustrated and nostalgic tones.

Frustration is very common in many of the selected short stories.

The protagonists face frustrating atmosphere through different situations and portrayed in different styles. In "The White Umbrella" and "Long Way Home" and "The Blossoming of Bong Bong", the protagonists' internal monologues and dialogues reflect their frustration caused by cultural dilemma and cultural contradictions. Tense atmosphere in "Long Way Home" is presented through harsh dialogues between the Chinese immigrant mother and her American born Chinese daughter. Frustration of the protagonist in "Door" is illustrated by the protagonist's description of her husband and his friend's actions. Distress of the protagonist which is caused by her strict Japanese father in "Family Dinner" is conveyed by the internal monologue. In "The Honeymoon Hotel", the description of gloomy rooms and foggy mountains suggest the frustrating mood of the story.

The tone of nostalgia can be inferred from the characters' actions. For example, in "The Japanese Mountains", the protagonist's obsession with returning to Japan is reflected with her actions, repetitively looking at the Japanese garden and closing her eyes.

The Analysis of the Symbols

In the selected nine short stories, symbolism is a significant technique employed by the Asian American women writers to present the central ideas. Their subtle symbolism strengthens their key messages and gives artistic identity. The analysis of the symbols will be explained under the two major themes: cultural conflicts and identity and women subordination.

1. Symbols that reinforce the theme of cultural conflict and identity

The symbols that clarify the theme of cultural conflict and identity are found in "Long Way Home", "A Red Sweater", "The White Umbrella",

"The Blossoming of Bong Bong", "The Japanese Mountains" and "Brave We Are".

1.1 "Long Way Home"

In "Long Way Home", the main contrast is between the Chinese immigrant mother and her American-born Chinese daughter. They both have extreme different cultural orientations. The daughter tightly holds freedom and individualism and freedom of speech while her mother forces her daughter to only listen and control her behaviors. She wants her daughter to keep the values of collectivity, tolerance and respect to the elder people. From their different cultural perspectives, it turns out to be a very serious and tense argument. The daughter suddenly leaves the family at the end of the story, leading to a broken family and bringing her mother great sadness.

Characters in this story can be interpreted as symbolic characters. The daughter represents the American-ness that favors expressing of freedom, individualism and less respect for the elderly. On the contrary, the immigrant mother represents the true Asian culture that emphasizes the collective relationship and strict respect to the seniors.

At the end of the story, the sudden leave of the daughter without caring for her mother's feeling is a symbolic situation suggesting the truth that people with different cultures fail to live harmoniously if they never try to understand each other and learn to compromise.

1.2 "A Red Sweater"

'A Red Sweater' is a story of an American-Chinese woman who has long suffered from a cultural conflict. In a strict Chinese family, she has to do what her parents assign and plan while she wants to have her own lifestyle just like any other American. The situation for her becomes

worse when she has a baby outside wedlock which is considered shameful in Chinese culture while it is possible in American culture. She finally cannot tolerate the oppression and gender inferiority in her Asian family and decided to leave her family for living on her own.

To present the central idea, several types of symbols are employed. The fish and the tank in the story are symbolic objects to reflect the plight of the protagonist. The fish that tries to jump out from the tank for survival but falls into a garbage pail parallels to the narrator's struggling in the strict Chinese culture and search for freedom. The tank symbolizes the family that limits her freedom. Jumping out of the tank and falling into the garbage pail of the fish is a symbolic situation, suggesting that leaving the family may put the protagonist in a worse condition but it is the only way for her to survive. Similar to the fish, the white doves in this story are also a symbolic object. Bought from a white seller, the doves are cooked and eaten by her mother. The doves and their situation symbolize the American-ness of the narrator which is suppressed and destroyed by her parents' dominant Chinese culture.

Beside animals, a pair of chopsticks is a symbolic object referring to the whole Chinese culture. The protagonist's refusal to use them symbolizes her rejection of the Chinese culture. After leaving her family, she uses chopsticks only for a decoration, not for eating. This symbolically means the Chinese culture is no longer essential to her life. The red sweater which is the story's title, is another symbolic object. The protagonist chooses a red sweater and thinks that this American garment made in Hong Kong is worthy to cheer up her sister. It symbolizes a new identity that the protagonist offers to her elder sister. Although her sister is an American-born Chinese but she lives in America, she should do what

American women do: having more freedom in life.

1.3 'The White Umbrella'

The cultural conflict in 'The White Umbrella' is also seen through symbolism. 'The White Umbrella' is the story of a Chinese girl who receives a white umbrella from a white American piano teacher. She is very happy as she loves it since she first notice the object and hopes that this umbrella will protect her from the chilly rain, but she cannot keep it with her because she knows that her mother will not love this umbrella. Finally, she has to toss it away for fearing that her Chinese mother will notice the umbrella.

The umbrella here symbolizes American-ness. The narrator thinks lifestyles like white Americans will protect her from misery and bitterness caused by the minority status. When she owns the umbrella, she cannot be happy and proud of it. This situation symbolizes the fact that white American lifestyles do not bring genuine pride but they causes conflicts with her life condition and ethnic identity instead. Climactically, the protagonist tosses the umbrella to end her dilemma, a symbolic act suggesting her acceptance of reality.

1.4 "The Blossoming of Bong Bong"

The loss of ethnic identity and threat of assimilation into another culture are presented through symbolic character in this story. Bong Bong, the protagonist, a Filipino immigrant, cannot survive in the United States because of social contradictions. He put a lot of effort to adjust himself and even copies the white's cultural lifestyles, yet his attempt later proves pointless as he later becomes frustrated because of the loss of his identity. Finally, he loses his own ways of living, gradually develops weird behaviors and distorted imagination. He fails to recognize his own girlfriend, talks

about his ability to fly like a bird and gradually lacks ability to speak and write. Finally, he forgets himself and does not know even his name.

Bong Bong is a symbolic character whose actions represent the minority groups struggling in vain to adjust themselves to fit in to the American society, only to face the tragic ending of losing their ethnic identity and cultural essence.

Remarkably, the tragic ending of the character even heightens the irony in the story's title. The word 'blossoming' of the title is iron, suggesting a negative impact of assimilation. Not only they are unable to be like white Americans, but also their identity disappears and does not blossom.

1.5 "The Japanese Mountains"

Relating to the cultural conflict is nostalgia, an obsessive yearning, here, for the Asian culture. This is found in "The Japanese Mountains", the story of a Japanese woman who once goes back to Japan and meets her boyfriend there. She loves the nature and Japanese culture. After coming back to America, she is nostalgic to her life in Japan and obsessed with returning to Japan. She also feels alienated to the American society and culture. To portray her feelings, the symbolic setting, objects and situations are used to present this idea.

The imaginative Japanese mountains frequently pop up in her mind bringing her back to the memory of Japan. The image symbolizes her nostalgia for Asian life and culture. She longs to return to Japan where she can find true happiness and warmth. Moreover, the majestic mountains suggest the greatness of the Japanese culture viewed by the protagonist who still clings on her cultural pride. The Japanese-style garden near her apartment which always captures her interest and reminds her of nature

in Japan is the symbolic setting reflecting the protagonist's nostalgia for her Asian culture. Her repeated act of focusing on the garden signifies her obsession with the return to Japan.

Animals in the stories: a cat and an insect are also symbolic to picture the feeling of the protagonist. The cat that always hides himself in the Japanese-styled garden reflects the protagonist who is still clinging to the memory in Japan. The insect that the cat tries to catch symbolically suggests the dream of the protagonist to return to Japan. When the cat fails to catch the fly again and again, it is a symbolic situation showing that her dream to return to Japan and live in the Japanese culture is impossible.

1.6 "Brave We Are"

Amid cultural difference and an identity crisis experienced by the characters, a new perspective on cultural assimilation is portrayed in "Brave We Are". It is the story about a Pakistani-American woman who embraces the American culture while preserving her own Pakistani culture. In the story, she is cooking a spaghetti dish in American and Pakistani style while explaining the word 'hybrid' to her son. To show the idea of cultural transition and assimilation, various symbols: objects, settings and situations are exploited.

First, the narrator emphasizes the embrace of yellow and the white spaghetti strands in the pot. She is very happy to see the well mixing of two colors. The color has a significant meaning in the story as in America, White normally refers to white European Americans while Yellow, most of the time, refers to the Asians. The situation, thus, suggests the perfect combination of the Asian culture and the American culture of the narrator. Additionally, the dish of spaghetti which is cooked in a

Pakistani and American style even more emphasizes the combination of her cultural origin and the new American culture of her adopted nation. The boiling pot in the story that the narrator focuses on and hopes one day she will find the largest pot in which every kinds of spaghetti can be cooked suggests the special reference to the concept of 'the melting pot', the term used to refer the United States, the place where people of different ethnic backgrounds can live together and create a new identity.

Settings in this story also relate to the mixture of two different cultures. When the narrator looks outside her window, she sees the mountains where the two different kinds of flowers can grow together. She is impressed with the view. This setting symbolically signifies her perfect cultural mixture. She can surprisingly embrace the two different cultures and balance them proportionally in her daily life.

2. Women Subordination

In "1895 The Honeymoon Hotel", "Family Dinner" and "Doors", we can find symbolism highlighting women subordination.

2.1 "1895 The Honeymoon Hotel"

This story is about a Japanese woman who is sent to the United States as a boat bride in an arranged marriage. At the immigration office, she meets her arranged husband and feels quite disappointed with his appearance. While she is sitting a small dark room in a hotel, she is feeling sad and having a notion of freedom. However, she has to accept her fate and determine herself to be a good wife as her parents have asked her before she comes. To reflect women's subordination in this story, several symbols are used.

The dog that the narrator notices while she is waiting for her husband at the hotel room has a symbolic meaning. The dog is trying to jump away from his master but it is taken back by his master with triumphant smile. The dog represents the protagonist's fate. Although she wants to have her own way of life, she is controlled by the Japanese culture and now by her own husband. An ox which is tamed and headed for farming is another symbolic object representing the protagonist's situation, being owned, guided and controlled by her husband. It portrays life of Japanese woman who have to live in male-dominant society. The mule-trams in the story are also symbolic. The mules are tied to the tram and they are waiting for people to choose. This pictures the life of the protagonist, being tied to the Japanese conventions and waiting to be chosen in marriage. Moreover, the crowded mule-trams waiting for choosing parallel the Japanese boat brides who crowd in the customs house and wait for their husbands to pick up.

Wearing kimonos also gives significant suggestion in the story. Although these Japanese brides are now in the United States, they still wear Kimono while the Japanese men wear a western suit. This symbolizes the strict Japanese culture which binds the women while their male counterparts enjoy more freedom. This traditional costume, rife with bindings and tightness also symbolizes the strict Japanese culture which limits women's freedom and causes oppressive subordination.

Misty mountains with no house on them are a symbolic setting. The protagonist notices those mountains when she is in the hotel room. This setting represents the protagonist's life which is misty and unclear. She does not know about her future and there seems to be no way to go except surrender to her fate. This situation is also supported by another

symbolic setting. The gloomy, lonely and empty room with small window and hazy light in which she has to wait for her husband after leaving the customs house represents her hopeless and uncertain future under the arranged marriage and strict Japanese culture.

At the end, the protagonist starts to serve her husband, acting as a good Japanese wife. This is a symbolic act, suggesting her surrender to her husband and her fate. She accept her submissive roles, allowing her life to be in his husband's hands.

2.2 'Family Dinner'

'Family Dinner' is another story about woman subordination with selective symbolism to highlight the theme. The story of Japanese woman who is having dinner with her family and describing her long frustration resulted by sexual indignity in the Japanese culture.

The cut-up turkey in the story is a symbolic symbol suggesting life of the protagonist. During the dinner, the protagonist is looking at the cut-up turkey on the dining table and feels depressed. It looks crumbled and torn apart and undignified. This turkey parallels with the feeling of the protagonist in a strict Japanese family. She has long suffered her gender inferiority because she is a girl. Her life has been overseen and smeared by her strict Japanese father. The cut-up and torn apart turkey reflects the protagonist's soul and life which are torn and crushed under sexual inferiority in her culture. The indignity of the scattered - eaten turkey is similar to the indignity of being female.

Besides this, natural objects in the setting reveal the protagonist's life and internal conflict caused by subordination. When the protagonist leaves her family after dinner, she feels relieved. The natural view: the sky, and blinking stars, light spots as well as the freeway parallels with her

happiness:, therefore, remarkably symbolizes the protagonist's unlimited freedom in which hope, self-pride and happiness can be found.

2.3 'Doors'

There are several symbols to present women's subordination in the Indian culture in this story which is about an American-Indian woman who conflicts with her traditional Indian husband because he opens all the doors she shuts when she wants to be with herself. For her, the doors are significant as they guard her privacy, but all of her spaces are intruded when her husband and his friend open the doors. At the end, she cannot deal with these violations and chooses to end their relationship. Doors symbolize the protagonist's right of personal space and individual boundary. The act of door-shutting signifies the assertion of her rights. However, as such rights do not exist in the traditional Indian society, husband does not realize how much he is offending her. The men's opening of the doors, therefore, is an intrusion upon the women's rights to be themselves.

Conclusion

In the male-dominant and European cultural-based society of the United States, women of non-white ethnics including Asian-American ones have confronted unfair treatments and sexual inequality. The second half of the twentieth century is a turning point as women achieved visibility while their literary merits have been more and more recognized. Being women of minority, these contemporary Asian American women writers have significantly enriched their works with experiences and personal concerns. Their works highlight the issues of women, the Asian-American culture and identity. However, to effectively present those thematic ideas, significant literary techniques are used such as theme, plots, setting,

characterization, tones are employed. Symbolism is one among several elements that plays significant part in clarifying central messages and contributing profound impacts to the stories.

The examination of symbolism in the selected short stories focuses on their presentations and effectiveness while the discussion of important literary techniques to illuminate the stories and the symbolism.

Literary Elements of the Selected Short Stories

In the nine stories under this study, important literary elements are themes, plots, characterization, settings and tones. The themes of the stories mirror the shared experiences of Asian American women in the United States, which relate to bicultural conflicts, cultural identity and women subordination. The themes are often reinforced by the modern plot, resembling 'slice of life' which makes the stories seem more true to life and the traditional plot that focuses on a single effect, a climax and a conclusive ending.

Asian American and Asian immigrant women are the main characters in the stories. Gender and generation are the significant sources of conflicts: women's subordination, sexual inequality and cultural and generational conflicts. Both first-person and third-person points of view are used in these narratives. Internal conflicts, interpersonal conflicts and environmental conflicts are exploited to clarify the characters and those conflicts are illustrated by the internal monologues, thoughts, dialogues and actions.

Settings in the stories illustrate the protagonists' psyche and women's attitudes on domesticity. The outdoor settings which relate to nature parallel character's psychological states while the indoor settings embody women's negative attitudes towards their traditional

sphere. The tones in the selected short stories hint at and intensify the stories' mood. The frustrating tone enhances the female protagonists' bitter and tense dilemmas under cultural conflicts and identity as well as women subordination while the nostalgic one highlights some characters' yearning for their traditional cultures.

Symbolism

Symbolism is a common but effective literary technique used by these selected contemporary Asian women writers to clarify the stories' main issues relating to minority women's experiences and concerns. Being women of bi-culture, they can create a greater variety of both traditional and private symbols based on their experiences in the two cultures. Their symbolism is, therefore, their significant literary technique given them unique artistic identity.

Characters, animals, actions, situations, objects and settings are made symbolic to suggest the main issues of the selected works. Sometimes, the titles serve as the key symbols to call readers' attention to the stories; readers will later gain full understanding of the titles through the interpretation of the symbols presented in the titles. Moreover, these vivid symbols help to strengthen the points by giving concise and vague image, thus, creating substantial impacts upon works.

Some of the symbolic images are made vivid through the use of colors. In these stories, important colors given to the objects are white and yellow signaling different ethnic backgrounds - white represents the white Americans while yellow the Asians.

Symbolic settings, animals and their actions and situations

work closely to show characters' psychology and fates in the selected short stories. Also, in some stories, it is noticeable that there is the parallel between the descriptions of the settings and the presentation of the animals' actions. Characters' inner world, the authors sometimes give parallels between the settings and the animals' actions and the characters' feeling and thoughts, their reactions towards fates and destiny.

Besides, characters' fates are reinforced by symbolic animals and their situations and the settings. The animals that confront different situations such as hardship, domestic bondage and hard burden share the same situations with the human characters who suffer domestic difficulty and cultural conflicts.

Some symbols are subtle because of their hidden meanings, whereas some are even more striking and complex such as remarkable titling, colors and characters' psychological state and condition. The key meanings go beyond their ordinary functions, but can be analyzed and interpreted by relating them to the main themes of the stories and the authors' intentions.

These contemporary Asian American women writers enrich their works with their bicultural experiences and personal concerns of being ones of minority women. Their different backgrounds and perspectives have significantly influenced their shared literary technique of symbolism. Besides giving them unique artistic identity, symbolism makes underlying messages in their works concise, subtle and vivid.

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