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Amy Tan'ın "Mother Tongue" Yazısının Etnik Otobiyografi Açısından İncelenmesi

*The Analysis of "Mother Tongue" by Amy
Tan form the Perspective of Ethnic
Autobiography*

Öğr. Gör. Gamze Ar
Bartın Üniversitesi,
Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu,
gamze.ar@bartin.edu.tr,
0000-0002-8918-2124



Öz

Amerika'daki etnik gruplar her zaman kimlik arayışı içindedirler, çünkü kendi kültürlerinden ve benliklerinden uzakta yaşam sürerler. Bu süreçte hem geçmiş hem de gelecek ile bağlantılarını devam ettirerek kimliklerini kaybetmemeye çalışırlar. Bu noktada, etnik otobiyografi topluluktaki üyeler arasında var olan aydınlatıcı bir bakış açısı yaratır. Amerika'da yaşayan pek çok etnik grup vardır ve bunlardan biri de Çinli Amerikalılardır. Amerika birçok etnik gruba ev sahipliği yaptığı için mozaik bir yapıya sahiptir. Bu çalışma, Amy Tan'ın yazdığı "Mother Tongue" adlı yazısını etnik otobiyografik bakış açısından inceleyecektir. Bu kaynak dilin nasıl sınırlar oluşturduğunu ve karakterleri sessizliğe ittiğini gösterecektir. Bu sessizlik bir tür kültürel yabancılaşma ve yalnızlıktır. Tan etnik farklılıktan yola çıkarak ötekileşme duygusunu deneyimlemiş ve kendi kişisel deneyimleriyle birlikte etnik otobiyografi türünde anlatmıştır. Gerçek olaylar okuyucuları her zaman daha derinden etkilediği için çalışma okuyucularda duygusal etkiler oluşturmuştur. Dil gibi sosyolojik bakış açısının yanı sıra, eser Amy'nin kendi bireysel ifadeleriyle hayatını yansıtmaktadır. Bu nedenle, çok yönlü bakış açısına sahip olan eser bir tür sosyolojik, kültürel ve biyografik çalışma niteliğinde olacaktır. Bunun yanı sıra, eser protesto edebiyatına güzel bir örnek olabilir, çünkü Çinli Amerikalı örnekler ile etnik ayrımcılığı eleştirmektedir. "Mother Tongue" hangi yönlerden etnik otobiyografinin içinde yer alır? Amerikan toplumundaki Çinli Amerikalıların deneyimleri nasıldı ve ne gibi zorluklar yaşadılar? Çinli Amerikalılar için kimlik ne demektir? Bu çalışma, bütün bu soruları farklı bir etnik grup olan Çinli Amerikalı yazarın tecrübeleri ışığında yanıtlamaya çalışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Etnik otobiyografi; Çinli-Amerikalı; Irk; Etnik grup; Amy Tan.

Abstract

Ethnic minorities in America are constantly in the search of identity since they live far away from their own culture. In this process, they try to protect the connections to both their past and presents. At that point, ethnic autobiography creates an inspiring perspective. There are many ethnic groups living in America, and one of them is the Chinese Americans. America is like a mosaic with various ethnic groups living there. This study will seek "Mother Tongue" written by Amy Tan in the light of ethnic autobiographical considerations. This autobiographical source indicates how the language creates boundaries and it pushes characters into silence. This silence is a kind of psychological loneliness and cultural alienation. Tan closely experiences the otherness with her ethnic difference and she uses the genre of ethnic autobiography while narrating her personal memories because the real issues always affect the readers more deeply. Besides the sociological concerns such as language, it also explores the life of Tan with her own personal expressions. Therefore, it can be considered sociological, biological, and autobiographical text since it deals with multi-dimensional critical outlooks. It is also a great example inside protest literature because it criticizes ethnic discrimination with the examples from the life of Chinese American. From which perspectives does "Mother Tongue" approach the ethnic autobiography? How do the Chinese-Americans suffer from hardships in American society? What does the identity of Chinese-Americans mean for themselves? This paper tries to shed light on these questions in the framework of different ethnicities in America.

Keywords: Ethnic autobiography; Chinese-American; Race; Minority group; Amy Tan.

 Bu makalenin araştırma ve yayın süreci "Araştırma ve Yayın Etiğine" uygun şekilde yürütülmüştür.

Introduction

The ethnic autobiography is a great source for seeing the individual and collectivist roots from the aspect of ethnic considerations, and so they are the reflections of racial and cultural sides of nations. Besides their common identities, these works can be the proof of their existences in America, and they can contact between each other's experiences and hardships. They portray the life itself from the frame of their ethnic perspective. Amy Tan is one of them who creates the Chinese-American ethnic consciousness with their sincere and direct writing style. She is the child of Chinese immigrant parents, and so her narration is full of in-between memories and traumas. Her autobiographical narration approaches the racial issue from the sociological and cultural aspects, and so it is a kind of historical agenda. Autobiographies are mostly used to teach the culture itself because it deals with not only history, but also personal issues. The following quotation explicitly reveals the essence of autobiography: "Autobiography,' now the most commonly used term for such life writing, thus described writing being produced at a particular historical juncture, the early modern period in the West with its concept of the self-interested individual intent on assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement" (Smith and Watson, 2001, 2). Thus, the autobiographies are considered the projection of self and community together like the bridge between history and psychology as it does not only concern about the story but also its cultural, historical, and social connections in life.

Amy Tan achieves to write the ethnic autobiographical texts with diverse concerns such as the linguistic problems, cultural adaptation and personal narration of her family life. "Mother Tongue" is a significant manifestation of mother and daughter relationship in the frame of their struggles towards each other and American society. Amy Tan is the narrator of the story and she reveals how the language which is the main figure in the recognition of identity, sociologically opens various social aspects. She starts with her self-experience about the identity itself, and she states:

I am not a scholar of English or literature. I cannot give you much more than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others. I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language -- the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. (Tan, 1990, 1)

Amy Tan's first narrative style attributes to the intimate and close outlook into the story because she is inside the story and plays an active role herself. Moreover, her connection to language points out the authorial identity and language as a sociological tool. For minority groups, language always constructs the wall between them and America in that they accustom

to talk with their mother tongues like Tan's mother here. Ethnic autobiographies use this kind of thematic approach since it deals with "matters that transcend the individual and the range of his [/her] inner life ... [and] form the larger structure of social and historical life." (Mills, 8). In the story, mother is an emotional figure for Tan in that she represents the family and Chinese culture itself. While referring her mother's incapability of speaking perfect English, Tan mentions her English speech as follows: "a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother" (Tan, 1990, 1). This ethnic autobiographical excerpt stresses the idea of American's dominant and oppressive hegemony with its institutions like the schools. America's oppression is also seen within the language of Tan's mother that is full of "broken" or "fractured" English in the eyes of Americans. In response to this kind of racist and insulting commentaries, Tan's reaction glorifies her mother and ancestral culture: "but to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world" (Amy, 1990, 2). Her mother's natural style indicates Tan's close relations towards her own culture and tradition. Despite living in America, they are still in desire of their intimate expressions. For Tan, her mother is the embodiment of naivete. Throughout the story, Tan reveals many memories and experiences about herself and this side enriches the racial and ethnic features in autobiography. Thus, it explores both cultural and historical source in Chinese-American literature as it deals with Tan's life and her close relationship to her mother sociologically and psychologically.

The author's background is the most significant point in the field of ethnic autobiography because the experiences of writers lead the readers' expectations. The following statement directly points out this process as Chinese American writer Amy Tan is the representation of her own ethnicity with her intimate writing source:

Readers also have expectations about who has the cultural authority to tell a particular kind of life story, and they have expectations about what stories derived from direct, personal knowledge should assert. For instance, readers expect the slave narrative to be written by an exslave, or the Holocaust narrative to be written by a survivor or survivor descendant, or the narrative of nationalization or exile to be written by an immigrant (Smith, 2001, 30).

Amy Tan is born into the practices of American worldview, and so she gets easily accustomed to live under white privileged practices. However, her mother had many troubles about language. "Mother Tongue" is a great embodiment of people who have linguistic problems because of their identities as minority groups in America. As mentioned in the quotation, readers always expect cultural differences while reading the ethnic excerpts such as

ethnic autobiographies. These kinds of sources also reflect the authors' lives in a sincere mood. Like Amy Tan there are many authors who live first-second generations cultural alienations towards America. Tan is a good connection with her mother and so she communicates with her very well. Nevertheless, most children of the minority group have great troubles with their own mother and father in terms of understanding the cultural essences and principles. Cultural authority shapes the principles in any country and throughout history America is governed by white people. Therefore, the historical background of America is full of racial discriminations towards ethnic minorities.

The ethnic autobiography creates both instructive and emotional tone for readers because it is the real life. Amy Tan here focuses on her personal experiences about her mother and so she has also emotional moments while writing it. The power of language is seen with diverse real-life experiences in "Mother Tongue." Among her experiences, the most emotional one is that Tan is ashamed of her mother's 'broken' English and she pretends as if she is her mother while talking with their friends or their parents on the phone. She states: "my mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she" (Tan, 1990, 2). This event memorizes the painful experiences for Tan because she meets racial and ethnic discrimination in American society and she tries to handle these issues. Another painful event is the hospital appointment of her mother. She lives some hardships and Tan reveals it in this way: "My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. [...] She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors" (Tan, 1990, 2-3). Tan's mother faces many difficulties because of her language that comes from her ethnic situation. After having narrated her mother's experiences, Tan, like other autobiographical writers, also "become reader(s) of their experiential histories, bringing discursive schema that are culturally available to them to bear on what has happened" (Smith and Watson, 2001, 27). At that point, ethnic autobiographies construct a mirror for their writers because of presenting harsh realities for themselves.

The Ethnic Analysis of "Mother Tongue"

Ethnicity is a collective state of minds for people who have common history and its definition mainly encompasses cultural, social, and historical points. For most people the meaning of home is ancestral roots and their traditional systems. The following statement explicitly shows the definition of ethnicity from the cultural point of view:

An ethnicity is a collective that has a shared common name, a shared myth of common descent, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific "homeland," and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of

the population. A subjective sense of being a group—that is, subjective identification with the group by its members—is essential. (Zagefka, 2016, 1)

Cultural commonalities arise from the countries' common history because of respecting the same values. Ethnicity is in similar considerations at that point, as if you have a common history with other people, you can easily adapt to the environment. The minority groups living in America do not feel like home because of being far away from their own culture. Cultural alienation can be a perfect illustration of this issue and people can suffer from the identity problems. At that point, people live identity crisis. Erikson, Prelinger and Zimet summarize this issue in the theoretical perspective:

An apparently central assumption underlying the writings on identity crisis is that there is a single, definable phenomenon that constitutes identity crisis Erikson (1956) described a unidimensional continuum ranging from firm identity to confused or diffused identity Prelinger and Zimet (1964) relabeled the problematic end of Erikson's continuum as "diffuse-conflicted," but they continued to think of a unidimensional continuum (qtd in Baumeister, 1985, 407).

The most important point here is the unidimensional position of identity crisis that comes from both psychological and physical state of minds. There is a complex process to comprehend the idea of identity crisis, as it brings unsolved situations such as cultural values, traditions, or habits. These are unstable truths for human beings and every person belongs to their own cultural traits. For instance, if you are Chinese, you can look for Chinese traditions in the place where you live. Thus, minority groups in America cannot express themselves properly in that they conflict in the practices of white privileged American lifestyle.

Amy Tan starts with the presentation of her identity as a writer and so it is the indicator of her intimate relations with language itself. Although her origin comes from China, her American identity makes her writing style Americanized and Tan reveals how she is obsessed with English itself. She loves English so much that her identity as a writer shows her emotional and sincere mood in the life. She always believes the power of language as people can use the language itself to be understood by others. She also emphasizes her success thanks to the admiration in English. Although her origin is based on Chinese culture, she is a writer in American literature. With "Mother Tongue" she experiments with the importance of English for her life and family. She explains its useful side in the beginning of her work:

I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language -- the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all -- all the Englishes I grew up with. (Tan, 1990, 1)

Tan explores her own life within the context of the power of language from sociological and cultural aspects. She discusses about the Chinese children's success towards Math rather than English, and she expresses: "this was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience" (Tan, 1990, 3). These statements are full of ethnic anxiety and unequal circumstances for Chinese-Americans as they seem they are incapable of expressing themselves. Language is always seen as a problem for ethnic minorities in that they indicate the collective identity for each nation. Tan's protesting nature explicitly reveals her determinative character. Despite all troubles coming from the ethnic differences, Tan achieves her dreams, but she faces the white discrimination and she states this event as follows:

Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management. (Tan, 1990, 4)

The white interruption indicates the hypocrisy of white dominant society, and the ethnic groups try to survive with their aims. At the end of the story, the close relationship between Tan and her mother reveals how the family is important because Tan writes her experiences while thinking of her mother. America can be so cruel to the minority groups like the mother of Tan. Her mother's in-betweenness affects her psychological state because the lack of something always makes people depressive. Even Tan is affected by her mother's 'broken' English, but she supports her mother every time. At that point, the mother-daughter relationship indicates how they have a strong connection. The following quotation includes both sensitive and intimate connotations:

And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind -- and in fact she did read my early drafts--I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as "simple"; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as "broken"; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as "watered down"; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. (Tan, 1990, 4)

Tan's mother has troubles about language and this limitation is a great problem for herself. Tan tries to imitate adult voice in the role of her mother and this is a significant example of role-shifting between the mother and the daughter. From the perspective of a daughter, being a mother is a harsh duty and it is a kind of burden. It is also America's shame

since people in America hide their identities due to not have a perfect English. The statement that is mentioned-below clearly indicates how the first-generation Chinese American suffers from the problem of communication and that is why Tan tries to be a mother in this context:

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan" (2).

It clearly shows the achievement of the mother-daughter relationship and the autobiographical genre perfectly presents the story itself. The author Tan is the main character in her own story and it strengthens her experiences within a close eye for herself. Personal relationship always raises awareness for the readers as they want to see the story deeply. In the autobiographical theory the importance of 'I' is stated as follows:

The "I" available to readers is the "I" who tells the autobiographical narrative. This "I" we will call the narrator or the narrating "I." This is the "I" who wants to tell, or is coerced into telling, a story about himself. While the historical "I" has a broad experiential history extending a lifetime back into the past, the narrating "I" calls forth only that part of the experiential history linked to the story he is telling. (Smith and Watson, 2001, 59-60)

The language is always seen as the communicative tool besides its sociological and cultural meanings. Thus, "Mother Tongue" can be a great source in the context of sociology besides history. Chinese immigrant mother has linguistic troubles in the process of understanding and expressing herself in America. In the story, Tan's last expressions that are told by her mother's understanding "so easy to read" implies the successful communication between Tan and her mother. The conflicts between generations are still on-going process in America and most of them are caused from the reason that is mainly about the language itself. Therefore, it can be said that the power of language is significant especially between first and other generations in many groups.

There are many restrictions in the field of American policies including education, health, and economy. One of them that Tan stresses the problem of treatment on the hospital indicates how the first-generation minority groups like Tan's mother suffer from many hardships. Even they cannot take the treatment. The following quotation expresses the ignorance of American history towards minority groups, because it is obvious that Tan's mother is in pain with the deaths of her husband and son. Despite all these painful memories, she faces with American's prejudiced discrimination. At that point, identity is also scattered into pieces because Tan's mother cannot belong to anywhere with her complex feelings.

People's hostile behaviors cause from her ethnic identity and badly accented language. However, it is a kind of exclusionary action. Tan detailly mentions about this issue as follows:

My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had spoken very good English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital did not apologize when they said they had lost the CAT scan and she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors. She said they would not give her any more information until the next time and she would have to make another appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the doctor called her daughter. She wouldn't budge. And when the doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect English -- lo and behold -- we had assurances the CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through for a most regrettable mistake. (Tan, 1990, 2)

America deals with chaos in relating to the ethnicity because of having various cultures. At that point, there are many ethnic autobiography writers who are from different countries and these are in arguments with white privileged class in America. Bergland (1994) states this statement: "In the United States, ethnicity has generated debate and struggle. Fundamentally, controversies center on meanings of the word, ethnicity, and the relationships between ethnic and non-ethnic implied by the definition Distinctions between race and ethnicity compound the debate" (71). In America ethnic minorities have also the problems of their representations. Tan expresses this issue in "Mother Tongue": I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother's English, about achievement tests. Because lately I've been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans represented in American literature." (Tan, 3) This statement reveals the questioning of her cultural existence in America. Tan wants to see more Asian examples in American literature. In that way, she can feel like home. Even if she was born in America, her ancestral background is based on Chinese culture. Therefore, she has multi-dimensional point of view towards life. Tan, like other minorities, lives otherness and alienation in America, but she also gets accustomed to live there.

Conclusion

In conclusion, autobiography presents the lives of author as well as the historical and cultural circumstances at that time. Thus, it has a multidimensional aspect because of concerning about various issues. Ethnic autobiographies investigate the individuals' experiences and it is an important embodiment of subjective issues. These subjects can be the indicators of communities' cultural backgrounds such as religion, ethnicity, and identity, and so it reveals the larger collectivities in the end. This genre opens a lot of opportunity for seeing the lives of authors in detailed, and Tan's "Mother Tongue" creates a perfect example

for indicating the existence of her ethnic group in addition to the author's individualistic and collective consciousness. Thus, "Mother Tongue" is a kind of sociological agenda in terms of dealing with the Chinese Americans' experiences in American life. It is important to explain the identity politic to understand the background of identity crisis and problem. Identity politics is "a political approach based on people prioritizing their particular racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, social, cultural or other identity, instead of engaging in more traditional, broad-based party politics" (Zhitong, 2020, 532). Most second or first-generation Chinese people (e.g., Tan's mother, who is first generation) feel closer to their own ancestries. Most first or second generations are strongly bound to their ancestral roots and it creates their cultural identities. The status of identity relates to nations' ethnicity and origin in general. People are always in the search of their cultural belongingness at that point.

Tan's mother does not know English although she lives in America and she feels her Chinese identity more than American. She also does not want to be as Americanized with the practices of white society. Her ethnic identity is oppressed and insulted that she does not learn English. It is also seen as a kind of rebellion in herself. Most of the first or second generation are not treated well by Americans. That is why they cannot feel like home in the US and the identity crisis is an ultimate result of all these circumstances. Ethnic autobiography deals with the real-life issues of ethnic minorities and so it encompasses both ethnicity and real-life experiences, and so it is the history itself. Ethnic autobiographies show both historical experiences and personal memories. Thus, it is a kind of historical agenda. The ethnic autobiographies bring commentaries about racial perspective in America because of dealing with minority groups. At that point, it sometimes should be related to the harsh prejudices with racist considerations. America has a multicultural structure and so there are many ethnic minorities living together. At that point, racist discourses are common with racial attacks, social chaos and violence towards the ethnic minorities. America's mosaic structure is about its social and cultural life closely and it should be harmonious relations between different cultures at the same time. Otherwise, the country turns into the devastating and chaotic structure. However, in history America has many prejudices towards minority groups and even now it still has. For example, Ku Klux Klan is a kind of death machine for minority groups like African Americans. for Asian Americans there were many illegal executions and they worked under harsh conditions to survive. These kinds of examples present the history of America and it is a great commentary about American society and culture itself.

Stereotypical considerations identify prejudices and discrimination in a white dominated American society and because of this reason ethnic minorities have difficulties in relating to the socialization. This process is learnt with behaviors, psychological status, and cultural situations. At that point, ethnic minorities behaviors are shaped by omnipresent American practices. Chinese Americans, who are one of the minorities in America, have their own

cultural values or traditional norms. However, with the process of socialization they enter the practices of American culture. The first generations live more troubles and they try to be accepted into the lifestyle of America. Identity crisis is another result of all these circumstances and it is an encompassing term in terms of relating diverse elements. Identity is shaped with diverse elements such as class, gender, sex, and race. Thus, individual's identity constructs the human beings culturally and socially. All is the formation of experiences as a result. The ethnic point is closely in relating to the society and its relations to the dominant culture, and it explores the author's "interior insight" ethnically. The autobiography also creates a sincere atmosphere with the use of first narration and intimate expressions from the mouth of author, and so this genre affects the readers deeply. Racial identity can be modified through autobiography because personal experiences shape the minds of human beings. Therefore, this genre is seen as a kind of deeply effective source and it explores both individual and collective roots. For example, Tan shows her Chinese identity in addition to her Americanness. These various identities reveal a different perspective in Chinese American literature. Furthermore, Tan's essential concern that is language that points out the unifying theme here as Tan's mother states at the end of the story: "so easy to read" and it seems so short but meaningful. Throughout the story, Tan achieves this meaningfulness with a close eye to her own life and the ethnic discriminations provide to understand how these kinds of people suffer from personal and social difficulties in American society. America is seen as a country of opportunity and it presents American dream for people all over the world. However, all discriminations and unequal behaviors towards ethnic minorities show how America is still racist and discriminatory country.

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