

On the Strategies Used in Narrating the Initiation Story of the Valley of Amazement

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Abstract

The Valley of Amazement by Amy Tan is a typical novel of initiation. The growth of the Protagonist Violet is mainly reflected in two aspects -- her refusal to the acceptance of her ethnic identity, and her awareness that only when a female achieves economical and mental independence can she be respected by the male and be treated equally as men. The change of geographic space and first-person narration are used to depict the growing process of the protagonist.

Keywords

The Valley of Amazement; Initiation; Narrative Strategy; Amy Tan.

1. Introduction

Amy Tan is a famous Chinese American writer. She wrote 6 novels, which all received warm responses from both readers and critics. *The Valley of Amazement* is the last novel published so far. As her former novels, this one is also about the mother-daughter relationship, the cultural identity of the heroine and the process of her identification. But the heroine's identity changes to some extent, and the place that the protagonist lives also differs. Amy Tan's former novels are all about the struggle and confusion of 1st-generation and 2nd-generation immigrants in the United States, while *The Valley of Amazement* describes the identity dilemma of the American mother Lulu and the mixed-blood daughter Violet and the patriarchal oppression they suffered in Shanghai, China.

Scholars tend to focus on its mother-daughter relationship, the identification of the heroine and the Chinese elements in this book. They seldom treat this book as an initiation story, and few has ever studied its strategies in narrating the initiation process of the heroine. The author found that, in order to highlight the growth of Violet, Amy Tan changes the geographical space for several times and use unfamiliar environment to stimulate the growth of the heroine. She also uses first person narration to highlight the mental growth of the heroine, by comparing the mental activities before and after growth.

2. The Change of Geographical Space and the Growth of Violet

Young people's mental growth can only be achieved after they have new experiences. If they always stay in the same place, meet the same people and don't have new experiences, they grow slowly. So, Writers of initiation stories usually change the place that protagonists live. For different reasons, the protagonists leave their hometown or the places that they are familiar with to expand their horizon. In *The Valley of Amazement*, the heroine leaves one place for another before she attains maturity. Her story mainly happens in 5 places--- Hidden Jade Path, The Hall of Tranquility, Lu Shing's Villa, Moon Pond Village and Golden Phoenix Trading, each symbolizing one stage in Violet's growth. The mobility of geographical stage brings comparison and stimulates the development of cognitive ability.

Hidden Jade Path is a high-class whorehouse that Lulu, Violet's mother, ran. When Violet was a child, she led a carefree life here. Though her father was unknown, she was well protected by

her mother. She thought that she was a pure American, as her mother. When she was 14 years old, she was abducted and moved to another whorehouse, The Hall of Tranquility. In Hidden Jade Path, Violet was proud and obstinate. She was not easily defeated, like her mother. The first thing she learns in The Hall of Tranquility is to hide her pride. Only when she forbears and bows under power, like a typical Chinese woman, can she live easily. Her awareness of her ethnic identity is also an important initiation. At the beginning, she believed that she was a pure American who enjoys superior rights over the Chinese. She thought that she shouldn't have the miserable experience of being a prostitute, as Chinese women were. But under absolute power, she accepts her identity as a prostitute, though with unwillingness. After being dressed as a prostitute, she finds that she is not pure American, and she accepts her Chinese features. In Lu Shing's villa, after Violet's lover Edward dies of illness, her daughter is taken away and she is driven out of the villa. She is aware that, she has suffered a lot just because she is lack of protection from father or husband. Then, in order to seek a harbor, she decides to marry the rural scholar Perpetual. After arriving at Perpetual's home, Moon Pond Village, she finds that Perpetual has already got a wife, and she can only be a third wife. She is maltreated and is not able to resist. After Violet's experience here, she realizes that, as a women, she cannot rely on men any more. Only when she can create value, can she be treated equally by men. The last place that Violet stays is an ideal place. She makes use of her strong point of being familiar of both Chinese and American language and culture, and becomes a translator of Golden Phoenix Trading, Loyalty Fang's company. When she helps to create profits to the company and earns respect from Loyalty Fang, she becomes his wife, rather than mistress or concubine. Being a wife is Violet's goal throughout the whole novel, meaning that she gets a fair status as men. Changing environment constantly stimulates the heroine, bringing her new knowledge about the society and herself. And this knowledge promotes her mental growth, helping to restrain and reexamine herself. It also evokes her female awareness, making her a independent woman and bringing her respects from the male. If Violet stays in Hidden Jade Path, from the beginning to the end of the novel, she will not grow quickly. Amy Tan pushes the growth of Violet by constantly changing places that the heroine lives.

3. Narrative Perspective and the Growth of Violet

Writers of Initiation stories like to describe the psychology of the protagonists, reflecting their mental growth. While the third-person perspective provides unreliable descriptions, the first-person narration helps the author to depict mental activities vividly and strike a chord with the readers.

Amy Tan uses first-person narration in *The Valley of Amazement*. Different from most novels, the story is narrated by 3 people, all with first-person narration. Three narrators tell their own stories, but complement each other. This is a typical way Amy Tan used in telling stories. For example, her *The Joy Luck Club* is narrated by 8 people, 4 mothers and their daughters. Readers can see the novel both independently or as a whole. *The Valley of Amazement* is mainly narrated by Violet, complemented by her mother Lulu and her mentor Magic Gourd. Violet tells her story from innocence to maturity, but with suspense. Violet is curious about her father, but without knowing his identity, which is not unveiled until Violet's mother tells her own miserable love story and the birth of the daughter. It turns out that the heroine's father was from a diplomatic family in China, making her a mixed-blood girl. The chapter told by Magic Gourd is mainly inculcation, about how to survive in a upper-class whorehouse. Though Lulu and Magic Gourd's narrations are only complements to the main plot, they are extremely important to the Violet's initiation. Amy Tan focuses on the heroine's refusal and acceptance of her cultural identity. So it's important to unveil the identity of her father. Magic Gourd's teaching and inculcation is also essential because she is the mentor on Violet's way toward maturity.

With first-person narration, Amy Tan compares Violet's mental activity with what she thinks before, to highlight her growth. For example, at the beginning of the novel, Violet firmly believes that she is a pure America. When her identity was doubted by her peers, she expressed her thought:

"I worried for two days, until logic and deduction enabled me to reclaim my race. First of all, I reasoned, Mother was American. Although my father was dead, it was obvious he had been an American, since I had fair skin, brown hair, and green eyes. I wore western clothing and regular shoes. I had not had my feet crushed and wedged like dumpling dough into a tiny shoe. I was educated, too..." [1]

When she stands before the mirror in The Hall of Tranquility, she says:

"... My face, where was my face? I touched my cheeks. Why did they look larger? The headband formed a V at my forehead and framed my face into a long oval. My eyebrows tipped upward at the ends as well. The center of my lips was painted into a red pucker, and my face was pale with white powder. With just these touches, the Western half of me had disappeared. I had become the race I once considered inferior to mine. I smacked my lips and raised my eyebrows. I had the face of a courtesan... I saw how black my hair was. My true face was still there, what had always been there: the phoenix eyes." [1]

These two paragraphs depicts the mental activity of the heroine. When her identity was doubted, Violet was worried, but immediately she gave a series of reasons to overturn the possibility of her being a half Chinese. Her words reflects her despise and repulsion toward China and Chinese people. With first-person narration, Amy Tan depicts the heroine's mental activity naturally. If she uses the third-person narration, the heroine's inner activity can only be told in an inveracious way, by an all-knowing God. With third-person narration, the author can depict what the heroine does, rather than what she thinks, from other people's perspective, making readers guess and extrapolate from details. But in this way it's more difficult for the author to narrate initiation and for readers to sense the growth of the readers. The first-person narration also has limitations. The narration of the heroine is not necessarily reliable, because adolescents have limited knowledge about themselves and the society. But it is this limitation that makes readers sense the of the growth of the heroine from the difference of their behavior and mental activity. In the second paragraph above, the heroine finds her true face --- the phoenix eyes. Phoenix eyes are typical Chinese feature, indicating the heroine being half Chinese. The heroine's acceptance of her black hair and phoenix eyes mean that she has accepted her identity as a Chinese. By writing these two totally different paragraphs, Amy Tan highlights the initiation process of the heroine from refusal to acceptance of her identity as a half-Chinese.

4. Conclusion

Feminine literature and the themes of ethnic identity are not unique, but Violet's journey toward knowing and accepting her ethnic identity and her awakening of her female awareness have their own charm. Amy Tan tells Violet's story of initiation with changing geographical spaces and first-person narration. These ways not only helps to enrich the content of the novel, but they also attracts readers by leaving space for imagination and highlighting the theme of the novel, making it a classic in the history of initiation stories.

Acknowledgments

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