

Traumatic Memory and Cultural Identity: On the War Writing in Zhang Ling's "A Single Swallow"

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Abstract: Taking the novel "A Single Swallow" written by the Canadian new immigrant author Zhang Ling as our research object, we analyze how she reconstitutes the proposition of cultural identity with a female trauma narrative in the extreme historical context of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. Zhang Ling's war writing is not just exposing historical violence; it is also a metaphorical deconstruction and reconstruction of identity. Having suffered from the "triple separation" caused by invaders, compatriots, and even her lover, the protagonist A Yan eventually created a new type of cultural identity via medical redemption which surpassed the hatred and emotional ties across national borders.

Keywords: Zhang Ling; "A Single Swallow"; war writing; cultural identity

Introduction

The issue of cultural identity is one which has been studied within the context of North American new immigrant literature. With regard to the theme of cultural identity, present studies concentrate on its aspects such as intergenerational conflict, homeland remembrance or identity hybridity but there are opportunities left for studying works with war and the female body as narrative foci. Such as: How do the bodily experiences and emotional trauma of women in North American new immigrant literature reflect their complex dilemmas of cultural identity during the process of war and exile? How does, under the double pressure of war and immigrant experience, the multiple identities carried by these women intertwine, conflict and get reconstituted, etc.? My study aims at using the war narrative as a starting point and focusing on the construction of cultural identity via the female body in North American new immigrant literature to extend the interpretative space of this field based upon existing research.

1. The Female Body and Mind as a Field of Trauma

Theoretically speaking, war is considered as an extreme form of systemic violence; the female body both serves as the vehicle for it, asserting its power. The female protagonist A Yan in "A Single Swallow" is precisely this severely traumatized woman who has her body and mind (external and internal wounds) intertwined with her violence and memory.

1.1 The Wound of the Body: Historical Trauma Permanently Inscribed

In 1943, Japanese bombers attacked Forty-One-Step Village. While paying their respect for her father who died in a Japanese bombing, A Yan and her mother were sadly found out by Japanese soldiers. Her mother was brutally murdered; A Yan was gang-raped and a thick wooden stick was put into her body. A Yan's body is the intersection point between national humiliation, war violence, and gender oppression. After being violated, the people pointed at A Yan saying "The Japanese have all seen it"—A Yan's body is a proof of "national shame". However, the violence of the Japanese army does not end upon departure—they continue to "fight" within A Yan's body as illness. A Yan's wound quickly got infected. A Yan had a high fever and stayed unconscious. Pastor Billy used up all his physical cooling methods to no avail before he had to resort to antibiotics. Infection is a continuation of violence—extending the war from one event to a long-term bodily torment. After recovering, the intermittent pain in her right waist lasted a long time. Pastor Billy checked her again and again without finding any physiological cause. Actually, it was a psychological cause—the strength her mother had

passed on to her when, after having three fingers chopped off, she still hugged her daughter closely. Bodily memory has no organic lesion yet truly exists—a sign that war violence not only inscribed the body directly by injuring the body but also engravings trauma onto the survivor's flesh through bodily contact with the tragic death of a family member. Every scar and every infection on A Yan's body inscribe national hatred, war violence, and gender oppression.

1.2 The Predicament of the Mind: Silence and Aphasia

All “A Single Swallow” is told by three men (the American missionary Pastor Billy, the American armorer Ian, the Chinese cadet Liu Zhaohu) gathered together as ghosts at Moon Lake after death: the protagonist A Yan is always an object. She has three names from them – A Yan, Stella, and Wind—but never her own voice. Her story is witnessed through other's eyes, relayed in other's language, borne on other's memories. Pastor Billy describes finding her in the grass, treating her, learning medicine with her; Ian recounts how she sculled a sampan, being named “Wind,” becoming the wind in his memory; Liu Zhaohu recalls picking tea leaves, cutting her braid, being humiliated by Scabby Head. Sometimes, A Yan speaks in fragments of dialogues which are also remembered, filtered, and relayed by male narrators. Being narrated exactly matches the basic dilemma of trauma survivors—the unsayable nature of traumatized experience. In trauma theory, extreme violence especially sexual violence may shatter one's language system so that survivors cannot organize their experiences coherently into a narrative; traumatic memory might survive first as sensations, images, and somatic responses, and is hard to incorporate into a temporally ordered verbal story. ^[2] The silence and aphasia of A Yan is just a metaphor for the atrocity surpassing the limits of what language bears—it exceeds the ability of individuals to tell about it and can be passed around indirectly, fragmentarily, incompletely via others' testimony—even the return of the dead.

1.3 The Collapse of the Foundations of Traditional Identity: Native Place, Ethics, and Gender Identity

Physically and psychologically devastated, War's devastation completely deconstructed her identity system. Identity of individuals are usually based upon three fulcrums in traditional society—native place, community, and gender. Foundation of A Yan's identity was destroyed by the Japanese bombing (Forty-One-Step Village and the tea garden); the family relations she relied upon determining who she is were cut apart—their father killed in the bombing, her mother bayoneted to death by Japanese soldiers—and she became an orphaned girl. Native-place identity was totally ruptured—that she can no longer answer “Who am I?” in this bombed-out village after rescuing her and return her back home, where what used to be a road has become “a huge pit large enough to hold two or three houses”^[1]; discrimination from within the community—for instance, from her fellow villagers is much harder and last-lasting in terms of harm. A Yan's fellow villagers took her story of being raped by Japanese soldiers as an “open secret” at their dinner table. “Scabby Head” tried raping her again when rejected—he spread rumors about how A Yan will “sleep with anyone for a copper coin each time.” Children gather around her yelling out “Take off your pants”, spitting on her. Community's evaluative mechanism didn't find the crime—we shift the signifier of shame away from the atrocity onto the victim—“The Japanese have all seen it; why can't we see it?”, it seems like after being marked by the invaders, she lost forever the qualification to exist in a “pure” position under patriarchy. Expelled by the community—in an ethical sense, she was already “dead”. After her fiancé Liu Zhaohu left A Yan since he couldn't take a “defiled” woman as his wife, A Yan's gender identity was tragically dismantled—with patriarchal ethics she lost her value as a wife. Indeed, A Yan's original identity was thoroughly deconstructed.

2. From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: Identity Reconstruction of Trauma Survivors

We saw how completely A Yan's original identity has been deconstructed through war and secondary harm – collapse of her native-place identity; expelled from community ethics; destroyed gender value—after which she started a hard reconstruction.

2.1 From the Treated to the Healer: The Reversal of Subjectivity

A complete change of subject position from patient to healer. From being treated/defined to treating/defining others' lives. When A Yan first came before Pastor Billy, she was a wounded body – a comatose, naked body impaled by a wooden stick near death—an “object” that needs treatment. After A

Yan was cured, Pastor Billy taught A Yan how to practice medicine: “I can teach you a skill. With this skill, you will never again have to rely on any man. They will no longer be able to hold your life in their grip; instead, you can hold their lives in your grip.”^[1] It gave her a transcendent professional identity which changed completely a woman's fate. If she heals the sick and saves lives then there would be much greater demand for her than her need for them—their (community) need surpasses hers—which she raised herself from the very bottom of society. Showing up as a “healer,” with such a professional identity, her position in the community changed and she got back a social position where she was needed and respected. People wouldn't care if she were pure or not—they only cared about whether she could cure their illnesses. The medical skill gave A Yan another way into society—not through “chastity” conforming to patriarchy morality but having real professional competence.

2.2 Reconstructing Emotional Bonds: A New Type of Self-Identity

Medical knowledge helped A Yan build up a transcendental professional identity which helps her reestablish firmly on the social level; however, about the emotional level, how could she rebuild herself into a person who is capable of building relationships? After falling completely lonely because of being abandoned by her fiancé and expelled by the community. The cross-national emotional bond she established with American missionary Pastor Billy and American armorer Ian were the keys to her rebuilding trust and establish a new kind of self-identity. Pastor Billy brought the wounded A Yan back to the church, treated her wound, named her “Stella” (Stella, meaning star), telling her: “When you go out alone and it gets dark, if you find a star, you will not be afraid, and you will be able to find your way home.”^[1] He also taught her English, made her copy psalms but more importantly taught her to practice medicine. Everything pushed her to complete the transformation from “object” to “subject”. He didn't care what had happened to A Yan nor judged whether she is “pure”, all he wanted to do was healing her body as fast as possible so that her life can continue. Unconditional acceptance was the start of A Yan's rebuilding perception of being loved. Respect for the gaze and desire at an equal level was what Ian gave A Yan. Amazingly and appreciatively, he regards A Yan as a “woman”, liberate her from the role of “victim”; he sees a power not defined by trauma – the ability to scull, withstand wind and waves and stay calm even in the most dangerous environment. His presence restored the part of her gender identity that has been destroyed.

A Yan and Billy and Ian felt a cross-national-cultural-feeling-community built upon the ruins of war; she forged bonds totally different than traditional native-place blood ties or community ethics or marital relations -- not natural blood relationships, not community discipline, but “choice” – A Yan chose to trust Billy and chose to answer Ian's gaze. The bond based on this choice gave her an unprecedented subjectivity – she became an independent individual who had the right to choose.

2.3 Forgiveness: From Victim to Savior

Forgiveness: A Yan reconstructs her identity through forgiveness. Forgiveness for A Yan does not mean forgetting suffering, nor ingratiating towards the perpetrator but rather a process of self-reconstruction.

Three crucial choices for Yan. The first choice at the gate of the training camp. “Slug” was sentenced to death by the commander due to violation on her. In this moment, A Yan was able to give him a way to live. She told the commander, “Commander, you cannot let him die like this; it is too easy for him. I want him to die only after he has finished fighting the Japanese devils.”^[1] This seems “punishment”, but really “granting a way to live”. A Yan transformed from “victim” to “judge”—A Yan decided the life or death of others. Second, A Yan exposed her trauma in front of everyone. Before the crowd, A Yan initiated tearing open her old wound: “I was violated by the Japanese.”^[1] Telling before all, A Yan renamed her identity—not anymore “the defiled one,” but a moral spokesperson with the right to accuse. Taking in the down-and-out Liu Zhaohu. From the end of the novel we know that A Yan finally took him in when Liu Zhaohu reached the lowest point of his life—he was subjected to struggle sessions and had lost almost everything—and lived with him for several decades. An act of the strong accommodating the weak. No longer did A Yan need to define herself based upon her relationship with Liu Zhaohu. She was a village doctor, someone who survived war and turmoil alone, someone who built up her life out of the ruins—the identity had become completely independent of anyone else's existence. We can say that though A Yan saved Liu Zhaohu, she also redeemed the self which used to be defined by hatred and pain.

3. A New Type of Cultural Identity Generated from the Ruins of Trauma

A Yan's culture grew up on many cultural ruins of itself, it does not submit to any cultural system, but rather its survival wisdom was naturally formed from trauma and slowly shaped itself in A Yan's day-to-day life.

A Yan is Chinese: native culture is where she started off and where her wounds were inflicted; The land of her hometown — Forty-One-Step Village — is full of her mother's figure, her childhood memories with Liu Zhaohu, Liu Zhaohu's betrayal and the judgment “you are no longer chaste”. Here, A Yan suffered from her secondary harm—destruction of her original cultural identity happened here. But she never left this land, rather, she stands on it in a totally different posture. She rejected the rules of native culture— “a woman who has lost her chastity deserves to die”, or “the family shame should not be aired outside”—She was not any more the A Yan bowing her head enduring the contempt of her fellow villagers, but one raising her head saying, “Why do you only know how to bully me? Why don't you go settle accounts with the Japanese?” She revised the “rules” of native culture—but she cannot anymore belong to her own culture as a matter of course.

I had a Yan living beside me Billy for three years, taking three things from Christian culture: the language of forgiveness, medical knowledge, and the ritual of copying “Psalms”. From Christian culture, she acquired some discourses on “forgiveness”—story of “left cheek and the right cheek” taught her for the first time how “forgiveness” can be talked about independent; medical knowledge granted her a social identity of needing someone, with medical skills helping Chinese villagers; “Psalms” offered her a spiritual object which she grasps at the verge of collapse. When A Yan's clothes were torn off, her body exposed, spitted upon—what she clutches tightly in her hands was exactly a piece of “Psalms.” At the extreme material scarcity and spiritual collapse, Christian culture bestowed her irreplaceable support but she refuses the theological system of Christianity. She never became a believer nor accepted the core doctrines like “uniqueness of God,” “infinite forgiveness”, and “hope of eternal life”. Her attitude towards Christian culture has been always tentative and functional – whatever she needs, she takes it and uses it. Refusing discipline is a typical cross-cultural survival strategy. It is also a cultural stance that trauma survivors are forced to form.

Ian looked at A Yan with all kinds of American culture – direct, personal, no history and no commitment. He called her “Wind” (wind) - the power of the wind, the freedom of the wind, the angry moments of the wind. Only he doesn't care for her past or ignore her future, only cares about her present. In a world where women are defined by “chastity” and “shame”, Ian sees a person filled with vitality, beauty and freedom instead of a “defiled woman”. Being treated as an equal is so much different compared to the one she had in her native Chinese culture. She felt respected and understood the preciousness of individual life. American culture gave her the experience of being appreciated as a whole person and the understanding that a person can be free from dependence on any relationship; she realized that she could become a person who does not need to be named by anyone. So she accepted Ian's appreciation and affection, but she did not go with Ian. Acknowledged the meaning of this relationship, but did not rely on it to define herself.

The trauma destroyed A Yan's belonging to her original culture but it also provided her with an unexpected chance – on the ruins of destroyed belonging she combined pieces from different cultures in her own way creating a new type of identity which doesn't belong to any one culture allowing her to live on. This was a hybrid, composite, therefore generated cultural identity.

Conclusion

Not only does the trauma of war affect our bodies and minds, it even dismantled the relationship of belonging between a person and her original culture; the reconstruction was a difficult practice of a new type of cultural identity. Violence and violation in war have destroyed her body and dignity, native culture centered on so-called chastity inflicted secondary harm on her which extended the trauma from the level of the body to that of social relations; finally, her fiancé Liu Zhaohu's betrayal delivered the final blow for A Yan. In the process of reconstruction, A Yan reversed her subjectivity from the treated to the healer, forming a new type of self-identity, and she reverses her identity from victim to savior. But the reconstruction didn't end with the reversal of individual identity. From A Yan's attitude towards Chinese culture, Christian culture, and American culture we can see a very pragmatic attitude – rejecting the judgment of native culture centered on chastity but choosing to stay on this land; taking the rituals and medical skill of Christian culture but refusing to accept its core doctrines; accepting Ian's

appreciation and affection but refusing to define ourselves according to their relationship. It is a cultural strategy naturally formed by trauma survivors under the pressure of survival.

The war writing by Zhang Ling doesn't just accuse; it lets us know that we need to build our place of shelter on the ruins using pieces picked up from different cultures when war destroys everything about you and your connection with the world. The end point of cultural identity is being someone standing on their own rather than find a position where they can belong to a certain culture. Thus, the war writing in "A Single Swallow" goes beyond the anti-war narrative in the general sense.

Fund Projects

2024 Guangxi Higher Education Young and Middle-aged Teachers Research Basic Ability Improvement Project, Title: "Research on Cultural Identity in North American New Immigrant Literature Since the 21st Century"; Project Number: 2024KY1653

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