

Cross-Cultural Conflicts in Anne Tyler's *Digging to America*

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Abstract

Anne Tyler being an exception in postmodern American literature has published twenty well received novels and other works for a quarter of a century. She has been largely overlooked by the scholarly community. The productivity of these novels possess various themes dealing with the present society and culture. Among her novels *Digging to America* mainly deals with intercultural adoption and reveals about cultures and other relationships. The novel focusses on two different extending families, one the Iranian immigrants 'Yazdans' and the other Donaldson-Dickinson who are Native Americans. The two families are brought together unexpectedly through their adoption of babies from Korea received at Baltimore Washington Airport. At the same place there begins a bond between two different cultures of these two families that is the core of the novel. With the gentle comicality, Tyler draws out the ironies and intricacies of the character's relationships with their own, as well as the complexities between two different cultures. The varying cultural traits sometimes tend to feel the characters questing for the identity. All the time in the novel the Yazdans family feels themselves as foreigners. In the novel mainly the belongingness is the subject of concern not only of the family but of being American too, whether an immigrant can ever feel at home or a foreigner, whether identity is a matter of will or choice or inherited culture and history. The present paper will highlight all the problems and troubles faced in the novel by the immigrant family because of their different cultures.

Key words: culture, immigrant, identity, home, American, Iranian, digging to America.

Anne Tyler's most recent novel *Digging to America* published in 2006 is a complete shift from the previous novels. The novel progresses beyond the family by presenting the family structure in relation with the cultural identity. *Digging to America* moves away from Tyler's traditional focus of a typical white American family. This turn is fathomable considering that, in the past six years, America has undergone a radical change in cultural identification due to the events of September 11, 2001. It is very much acceptable to contend that the novel is directly influenced by Tyler's family life, as she was married to an Iranian doctor Taghi Modarresi. Being part of an Iranian family, Tyler would have observed first-hand the cultural traditions and feelings of 'foreignness' that she writes about in *Digging to America*. Cultural differences play a role in the process of identification. The observance of cultural differences, along with cultural acceptance and political correctness, is prevalent in this work. Cultural stereotyping and profiling has intensified in the past seven years due in part to the after-effects of the attacks on September 11, 2001.

The novel depicts the loss of cultural identity felt by Yazdans family living in United States from two generations. The foreign family here is girdled with the feelings of otherness and the same sense is raised in their minds at the time when they form friendly relations with the Donaldson family. It is obligatory to have a general idea about the plot and main characters in the novel for a better understanding of how Ziba and Sami living in America have lost their own identity. Therefore the plot of the novel is given briefly.

The story is set in Baltimore, Maryland and begins with the families meeting with their adopted Korean children at Baltimore airport. That is how the Donaldsons and the Yazdans meet one another. An Iranian couple, Sami and Ziba are totally different from Brad and Bitsy, an American family. This difference is effective in raising their children. Sami and Ziba change the name of the baby, Sooki, adopted from Korea, into Susan so that she can

easily be adapted to the society. As Tyler writes: “Susan, they called her. They chose a name that resembled the name she had come with, Sooki, and also it was a comfortable sound for Iranians to pronounce” (10). On the other hand Brad and Bitsy want their child, Jin-Ho to adopt her own Korean culture, without her name being changed. Meeting at Baltimore airport at the arrival of these Korean babies, the two families developed a friendly relation and decided to organise annual parties to mark their daughter’s arrival. As the children grow up, their differences become more pronounced. While Jin-Ho wears traditional Korean clothes, Susan wears jeans and T-shirts with an American flag on. From their dialogues during their meetings, the differences in raising their children are revealed. Whereas Brad and Bitsy choose not to Americanize their daughter, Jin-Ho, Sami and Ziba decide to raise their daughter like other American children. In other words, Sami and Ziba all along try to give Susan an American identity. This Iranian couple go even further and get moved to the neighbourhood of the American family, Brad and Bitsy to be able to feel more “American”. As Tyler writes: “The general atmosphere of Mount Washington seemed more Donaldsonian, Maryam thought. Better not say it, though. “Well, still you’ll be very close,” she said. “Five or ten minutes away! I’m delighted” (132). In the meantime, tensions accumulate between the two families. For instance, while Ziba works as an interior decorator, Bitsy is a housewife and therefore able to take care of her daughter, JinHo. Susan is taken care of by Maryam Yazdan, the grandmother. This situation seems quite odd to Bitsy.

In addition to this, when Bitsy learns that Susan is playing in the playpen, Bitsy thinks this is entirely wrong. “Bitsy was still studying Susan. For a moment it seemed she couldn’t think of anything more to say, but then she turned to Ziba. “You put your daughter in a *playpen*?” she asked” (31-32). Giving many similar examples, Tyler aims to draw attention to intercultural differences. As it is seen, while ethnicity matters to an Iranian, to an American it

is obviously a necessary diversity rather than a problem in American society. Tyler is very successful to reflect this.

The Iranian immigrants must wrestle with when to assimilate, when to resist, while their white-bread friends carry on about how much they love ethnicity. [Tyler] is particularly good at conveying the wry humour these Iranian-Americans use to endure numerous little slights from their well-intentioned but condescending white neighbours. (Charles, 2006).

Furthermore, Tyler stresses the importance of the theme “sense of belonging”. However much Sami and Ziba try to fit in America, it is not that easy, for they are in fact not American but Iranians. “Tyler utilizes [the] loss of self-theme in all of her works, but in *Digging to America*, the loss of self is in direct relation to ethnic identity” (Medvesky, 2008: 142). Therefore, their Iranian origin prevents them from becoming “real” American citizens.

In [...] *Digging to America*, belonging is a question not only of family but of being an American too: whether an immigrant can ever feel completely at home in the States, or whether he or she will always feel like an outsider; whether identity is a matter of will and choice or inherited culture and history. (Kakutani, 2006).

The Yazdans’ life in America becomes difficult especially after 9/11 and Tyler makes a reference to this in her novel. Maryam states that she feels more foreign after September 11th and that American public is hostile to them. The same assertion is made by Maryam’s son, Sami.

Ever since September eleventh, every Middle Eastern-looking person is a suspect. They took [Mahmad] away; they searched him; they asked him a million questions. . . . Well, end of story: he missed his flight. ‘Sorry, sir,’ they said. ‘You can catch the next flight, if we’ve finished by then. (169).

Similarly, Westernization, or more precisely Americanization is dwelt upon in the novel in great detail. The efforts of Ziba and Sami to fit in the American community is one of the greatest themes in the novel. At this point, that people forget their own identity to Americanize themselves gains importance. To what extent the Yazdans have succeeded in becoming American is disputable. But as a Yazdan, Maryam’s attitude to Americanization is completely different from that of Ziba and Sami. In fact, Maryam does not want to be American, she wants to hold on to her own identity. Furthermore, she does not believe that America is a perfect country, either. In fact, Maryam is an educated, social woman capable of standing on her own feet. Maryam is married to an Iranian doctor. After her husband’s death, she constantly pines for her former life in Tehran. Maybe the only thing that she does not want to remember is the Shah period in Iran. It should be made clear that Maryam is involved in conspiracy against the Shah and in one case she is arrested. That is, Maryam is not the kind of person who is submissive and easy to defeat.

She attended the University of Tehran but she hardly had time for her classes because of her political activities. This was when the Shah was still very much in power-the Shah and his dreaded secret police. [...] She was thinking she might join the Communist Party. Then she was arrested, along with two young men, while the three of them were distributing leaflets around campus. (183).

Sami, however, is completely different from his mother. He does not like Iran at all. He refuses to speak Farsi in favour of English and he even has an accent. Sami, who always silences her mother when Iran is in question is quite accustomed to live in America like his wife Ziba, who is quite successful in adopting American lifestyle but fails to be a complete “American”.

[Ziba] had a noticeable accent, having immigrated with her whole family when she was already in high school, but she had so immediately and enthusiastically adapted-listening non-stop to 98 Rock, hanging out at the mall, draping her small, bony, un-American frame in blue jeans and baggy T-shirts with writing printed across them-that now she seemed native-born, almost (13).

Moreover, she always speaks English to her daughter, Susan to make her accustomed to English. Ziba forbids her parents, Mr. And Mrs.Hakimi to speak Farsi before American people. Opposition to American lifestyle would mean difficulty after 9/11 in surviving in this “foreign” land. Therefore everyone but Maryam is pleased with this “new identity”.

In the meantime, the grandparents in both families occupy an important place in arrival parties and in the life of these two couples. Maryam, Sami’s mother; Ziba’s parents, Mr. And Mrs.Hakimi; Brad’s parents Pat and Lou; and finally Bitsy’s parents; Dave and Connie appear frequently in the novel. Bitsy’s mother, Connie, is a cancerous patient and dies after a short while. Finding himself in a void after his wife’s death, Dave begins to feel closer to Maryam. Their coming closer to each other helps us better understand the differences between the two cultures. Dave, as an American is fairly at ease and asks her hand in marriage in the presence of all the family members. “Maryam,” Dave said “Will you marry

me?” (208). Maryam, on the other hand, is attached to her traditions as an Iranian and is sad since she is no longer an Iranian citizen. Furthermore, Maryam sees herself as a foreigner in America. As for Dave he is unable to understand the situation Maryam is in.

Maryam accepts Dave’s marriage proposal at the beginning but later she regrets doing so and explains to Dave and other people around her that such a marriage would not keep. Thus, Tyler tells us by means of Maryam how difficult it is to be a foreigner in America.

Furthermore, in the novel answers to such questions as “Who is American?” and “What does it mean to be American?” can be found. Tyler explains this in an amusing and spirited way. To her, Americans are people who are relaxed and comfortable at voicing all their problems, incapable of keeping their private matters secret, fond of giving lavish parties and going to places all together. This is reflected by what Sami says about Americans.

As the novel progresses, the Donaldsons adopt another baby after Jin-Ho. This is a Chinese baby girl named Xiu-Mei. The Donaldsons who bring up this baby in the same way as Jin-Ho, do not shy away from exhibiting even the least important things related with the baby. After making public Jin-Ho’s toilet training, this time they throw a party with the Yazdan family to announce Xiu-Mei’s quitting pacifier sucking. “Guess what, Xiu-Mei! Next Saturday we’ll have a huge party and the Binky Fairy will fly in to take away all your binkies and leave you a wonderful present instead” (216). This celebration of the Donaldsons’ verifies what Sami says about Americans. Thus, Americans are people who like ostentation and sharing their most private things. To them, this is quite normal. Although there are cultural clashes of this kind in the novel, the couples and their children seem to have friendly relations throughout the novel.

In summary, the novel becomes colourful thanks to Tyler's subtleties and her witticism and pleasurable from the beginning to the end. The novel, which treats the effort to belong to America and thus to forget one's own identity (Ziba and Sami) has gained importance because it was written after the attack on the world trade centre. Now, through an analytical eye on the whole story reveals that Ziba and Sami, two main characters in the novel, are alienated from their original identity under the influence of America and Maryam's clinging to her own identity, as a way of survival, in this foreign land.

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