

AMY TAN'S „THE VALLEY OF AMAZEMENT”:
POSTMODERN SAGA ON TRANSGRESSIVE AMERICAN
CHINESENESS

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Abstract: *From a broad philological perspective, involving West/East culture, literature, philosophy, history, this paper highlights the mechanisms of literary representation and identity specificity in the interplay of constructed Chinese American images of „the Self” and „the Other” in Amy Tan’s latest novel The Valley of Amazement. The application of imagological methodology opens new vistas in researching Chinese American literature at the different stages of its formation. Imagological approach to the study of Amy Tan’s novel, based on comparative literary analysis, allows revealing the multiple dimensions of Chinese American identity through unveiling such categories as „Chineseness”, „Americanness”, „American Chineseness”, involving cross-cultural intertextuality and narrative intermediality. The emphasis is placed on literary representation of Chinese American images and synthesis of various cultural images and identities in portraying the changing nature of American Chineseness. The research is conducted with reference both to cultural, historical contextualization in the study of Chinese American images as dynamic results of cultural interaction of Chinese and American and in-depth analysis of the image qua image. Cultural globalization that has recently become a topic, much debated in literary circles, has resulted in the creation of a fictional character, unrestricted by ethnic, cultural, and territorial boundaries. This is the main protagonist of The Valley of Amazement, Violet Minturn. Her image has deeply personal, author-related meanings, and the paper investigates another dimension of American Chineseness, from identity resistance to identity transgression.*

Keywords: Chinese American literature, the Self, the Other, own – alien dichotomy, identity transgression.

The problem of national and cultural identity, which marks Amy Tan’s early writings, finds a new representation in *The Valley of Amazement*¹. Unlike Tan’s previous novels, where first-generation Chinese immigrants in America experience the inner drama of assimilation in an alien world, while their children are seeking a balance between two halves of their identity, the changed setting of the new novel represents a Chinese American living in the Shanghai International Settlement. The main characters of the novel perceive China from the

¹ A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

inside – they try to succeed in an alien world, to find their love, to reconcile both Chinese and American halves, to create a kind of cross-cultural microcosm. However, for protagonists, a mother, and a daughter, this search turns into a nightmare. Lucretia Minturn is forced to quit her job and flee from Shanghai during anti-foreigner campaigns in China in 1912. On her way to the ship leaving for San Francisco, the accomplices of the legendary Green Gang kidnap her fourteen-year-old daughter, Violet, and force the girl to work in a brothel as a „Eurasian princess”.

Taking into account plenty of historical events and socio-cultural implications within the novel, this paper considers calling it a saga. The richness of fateful events gives enough ground for that: these are the end of the last Chinese imperial Qing Dynasty and anti-foreigner campaign, the Boxer Rebellion, and the establishment of the Republic. Destruction of the image of old China outlines the background of personal dramas of the main characters.

Commenting on *The Valley of Amazement*, Isabel Hilton observes: „Amy Tan is an American writer of Chinese origin. The larger relationship between China and the US is an emotional one that seems to oscillate between mutual demonizing and mutual romanticizing, with an underside of reciprocal racial and cultural prejudice. If it is like that between two huge nations, Tan leaves us in no doubt that the effects at an individual level are no less complicated”². „Mutual demonizing and mutual romanticizing”, „racial and cultural prejudices”, being the age-old background of mutual perceptions and relations between China and the US are also embodied in the image of Violet Minturn, the main character of *The Valley of Amazement*. Her image has deeply personal, author-related meanings and Amy Tan’s investigations on another dimension of American Chineseness.

The literary representation of American Chineseness

Deep considerations of the author on the nature of American Chineseness represent a central idea of *The Valley of Amazement*. The title of the novel comes out of the impression made by the enigmatic painting *The Valley of Amazement* seen by Amy Tan in the museum in Berlin. She was fascinated by its ambiguity and a poetic title that seemed to have a

² I. Hilton, „The valley of amazement by Amy Tan”, 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/09/valley-of-amazement-amy-tan-review>.

secret meaning: „The painting was of a mountain with a valley and dark clouds. And at the very back of this valley was a big golden glow, like a paradise. To me the painting had two meanings ... One was the beautiful valley... And the other was that you would lose everything in your life, you would reach one of these valleys on your way to kingdom come or the hereafter or Nirvana, whatever it was. You would reach that place and you would lose everything. You wouldn't know where you were. You wouldn't know who you were”³.

This motif of being nowhere and not knowing who you are, the state of „limbo” was first articulated in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*⁴. Bella Adams has then rightly commented on the „limbo” concept used to describe [...] the position of the subaltern woman, confined to „limbo lands” somewhere between the past and the future, a „betweenness” that also extends to the post-colonial, if not the postmodern condition⁵ or, taken as a whole, the condition of being neither „Chinese” nor „American”. This concept was further developed in Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning*⁶. The spirit of the main character, Bibi Chen, who found herself in a „current state of limbo” between the world of the living and the dead, became a one-of-a-kind transcultural and „transexistent” narrator. In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, such a state of in-betweenness symbolized a specific transcultural sensibility of a character that is open to the entire world and is not restricted by national, ethnical, or „existential” boundaries.

In Tan's latest novel a state of limbo is experienced by the main female protagonist, Violet Minturn, when she is looking at the painting *The Valley of Amazement*. Violet's perception of the mystic landscape changes with the unravelling of the plot, and so does her self-identity. The state of in-betweenness in the novel is a metaphor for transgressing identities. But in *The Valley of Amazement* there is no drama of being neither „Chinese” nor „American”, but an amazement of discovering the real Self.

The title of the novel hides an intertextual reference to the mystical poem *The Conference of the Birds* written by Farid ud-Din Attar in the twelfth century. The poem allegorically describes the process of spiritual pilgrimage of a man in his search for the supreme goal that is fulfilling a

³ A. Tan, „All things are possible: Amy Tan”, in *Santa Clara Magazine*, 2013. Available at: <https://magazine.scu.edu/magazines/fall-2013/all-things-are-possible/>

⁴ A. Tan, *The kitchen God's wife*, New York, Penguin Books, 2006.

⁵ B. Adams, *Amy Tan*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005.

⁶ A. Tan, *Saving fish from drowning*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2005.

destiny. A man's journey runs through the Valley of the Quest, the Valley of Love, the Valley of Insight into Mystery, the Valley of Detachment and Serenity, the Valley of Unity, *The Valley of Amazement* and ends with the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness – the supreme degree of union with God. *The Valley of Amazement* is the valley where a man recognizes and understands what is behind things, the reason of all reasons, and the cause of all causes. The dramatic visualization of the valley challenges the viewer to question his own life and surroundings.

It is also worth noting that the poem by the Persian poet contains the symbolic image of China, which is very significant: „It was in China, late one moonless night, the Simorgh first appeared the mortal sight”⁷. This image does not mean the geographical China, but alludes to the Muslim hadith „Seek knowledge even unto China”, meaning to the ends of the earth. China as a mythical place of spiritual experience, or de-stereotyped China, squeezed to a microcosm of a Shanghai brothel? For Amy Tan, the image of China always is an ambiguous one. In *The Valley of Amazement*, the author intentionally avoids any orientalist implications.

There is also one, not mentioned, but no less significant intercultural allusion to the novel of the English writer of the seventeenth century John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian, an Everyman character, makes his journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. On his way, Christian gets through many places (the Slough of Despond, the Hill Difficulty, the House Beautiful, the Valley of Humiliation, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the Vanity Fair) and finally reaches the Land of Beulah. In such a way, by invoking classical intertexts, Amy Tan creates a postmodern variation of a search for the truth, which, ironically, starts in the Shanghai brothel.

Many reviewers have immediately responded to the broad intertextual references, hidden behind numerous erotic scenes in *The Valley of Amazement*. The novel was compared to the world-famous writings *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and even has been called *Lawrencian*⁸. Having predicted such responses to flamboyant

⁷ F. Attar, *The conference of the birds*, London, Penguin Classics, 2005.

⁸ J. Ciabattari, „The business of sex: Amy Tan's the valley of amazement on shanghai courtesans”, 2013. Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/11/08/the-business-of-sex-amy-tan-s-the-valley-of-amazement-on-shanghai-courtesans.html>. Sh. Connelly, „The valley of amazement: book review”, 2013. Available at: <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/amy-tan-valley-amazement-book-review-article-1.1506586>. I. Hilton, „The valley of amazement by Amy Tan”, 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/09/valley-of->

erotic scenes, Amy Tan, long before the book was published, had made an ironic remark: „It's not *Fifty Shades of Tan*. Although it has a lot of sex in it — because it's set in a courtesan house and they don't sit around playing ping-pong”⁹. This gentle allusion to the erotic 2011 bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* reveals a warning of the writer against one-sided criticism of her novel.

Amy Tan's creative vision lies behind a double coding of a postmodern text. *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden¹⁰ – is a dramatic story of a young woman, Nitta Sayuri, working as a geisha in Kyoto before and after World War II. The conceptual core of *The Valley of Amazement* essentially is a different one. While Golden describes a dramatic and soul-crushing process of becoming a geisha, Tan deliberately parodies the „difficulties” of the job. Irony occurs in the specific set of advice given by the skilled and experienced courtesan Magic Gourd to Violet: „How to become a popular courtesan while avoiding cheapskates, false love, and suicide”¹¹. There is no place for the lyrical image of a Chinese beauty in the novel. This clichéd exotic image conceals the inner world of a business on attracting influential and wealthy men.

The reason for an artistic reflection on such a theme comes from the writer's considerations on a photo from the family archive depicting her young grandmother supposedly dressed as a courtesan. As in the previous novels, family history plays an essential role in *The Valley of Amazement*, though it does not predetermine the development of the plot. In her interview, Amy Tan has mentioned that this novel is not autobiographical or historical, let alone erotic. The writer has emphasized: „It's a literary novel”¹². Earlier Amy Tan has also commented on the reviews of her books: „The main issue seems to be the ethnic identity, and not the gender ones – and not even literary issues so much”. Amy Tan speaks out against an entirely ethnical approach to her writings, that addresses „role models, cultural explanation, historical

amazement-amy-tan-review. J. Schuessler, „An old Chinese novel is racy reading still”, in *The New York Times*, 2013. Available at: https://www.timesargus.com/old-chinese-novel-is-racy-reading-still/article_037f32dd-7eaa-5e68-a616-170105bd5233.html.

⁹ „Literary spoof: Amy Tan discusses „The valley of amazement”, 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92rODWsJNy8>.

¹⁰ A. Golden, *Memoirs of a geisha*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

¹¹ A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

¹² „Literary spoof: Amy Tan discusses „The valley of amazement”, 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92rODWsJNy8>.

point of view ... [but] leaves unacknowledged the literary dimension of her texts”¹³.

According to R.G. Davis and S. Lee, in the late twentieth century, Asian American literary criticism has been mostly restricted to limited concepts, such as cultural politics, nation, transnation, Orientalism, resistance, subversion¹⁴. Previously published studies did not take account of literary devices, genre particularities, nor did they examine Asian American literary works as aesthetic objects. The situation has considerably improved in the twenty-first century, still, the importance of literariness (the term introduced by R. Wellek¹⁵ and regarded as the principal concept for comparative research) should be abided when studying the aesthetic devices of image creation in Amy Tan’s novels.

Lucretia Minturn: the image of an American in Shanghai

In *The Valley of Amazement*, Amy Tan creates an image that is not typical not only for her early writings but also for a broader canon of Chinese American literature. This is a fully elaborated character, American woman Lucretia Minturn, who tries to find her place and happiness in China. At the age of sixteen, Lucretia came to Shanghai with her Chinese lover, Lu Shing. Blinded by passion for this man – „he possessed Oriental Wisdom and could whisk me away from unhappiness”¹⁶ – she takes China for *The Valley of Amazement* (the name of her lover’s painting). In Lucretia’s mind, the East keeps exotic secrets and knowledge unavailable to Western consciousness.

Simultaneously with the traditional representation of exotic and mysterious East, Amy Tan develops a dramatic story of disillusionment. Like Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, who fell in love with a man and her idea of him as a noble representative of the Old World, Amy Tan’s female character from America falls in love with an artist. However, like in James’ novel, romantic dreams are replaced by bitter disappointment. In contrast to the girl’s illusions, China and the Chinese turn out to be hostile to Lulu, and her life turns into a nightmare. Lu Shing refuses to marry Lucretia and leaves her and their daughter without means of support in alien Shanghai. Lucretia’s parents

¹³ B. Adams, *Amy Tan*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005.

¹⁴ R. G. Davis, S.-I. Lee (eds.), *Literary gestures: The aesthetic in Asian American writing*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2005.

¹⁵ R. Wellek, S. G. Nichols (eds.), *Concepts of criticism*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1963.

¹⁶ A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

refuse to welcome back the freedom-loving daughter in their house in San Francisco. Lu Shing's family, dreaming of a male heir, fraudulently takes Lucretia's second child from her. This conflict makes Lulu come to know a completely different patriarchal and inhumane China. The woman sees her lover in a different light now, in San Francisco Lu Shing, in his traditional Chinese outfit, looked like a mysterious „Chinese emperor”, but in China, he has turned into a „cowed Chinese son”. Despite his western education, Lu Shing obeys traditional ways and cannot decide his destiny. The influence and power of a Chinese family are compared to „the weight of ten thousand tombstones” in the novel.

The novel starts with the description of middle-aged Lucretia, successfully living in China. This is a story of „an American in Shanghai”. This adventurous and smart woman has managed to see another image of China – as the country with broad opportunities, as „the land without ghosts”. Surprisingly, Lucretia has arranged to make this city own for a while.

The representation of Shanghai in *The Valley of Amazement* very much resembles the location, described by Kazuo Ishiguro¹⁷ in his novel *When We Were Orphans*. It is based on Tan's family memories and also on the historical documents and photographs, used to reconstruct all the details of courtesan houses and images of the International Settlement community. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Shanghai has become a unique multicultural European enclave. Its rapid modernization went decades ahead of mainland China: „In Shanghai, however, nothing is impossible”¹⁸. There is a vivid image of Shanghai at the intersection of two cultures, Chinese and European/American, in the novel. The text is rich both in Chinese and American imago: Li Shangyin's poems, Chinese story about *Peach Blossom Spring* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* are equally successful within the territory of the Shanghai International Settlement. More than a hundred years of international administration have changed the city, which seems to be located beyond the limitations of ethnic, national, religious, and other boundaries now.

In *The Valley of Amazement*, the center of this small world is a luxury courtesan house „Hidden Jade Path”, owned by Lulu Mimi (Lucretia Minturn's Chinese name). The uniqueness and originality of this place is that it serves both Chinese and Western customers. In such a way, the distinction between two usually opposite worlds, East and

¹⁷ K. Ishiguro, *When we were orphans*, London, Faber and Faber, 2000.

¹⁸ A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

West, disappears in this house of love: „On each of the pillars was a panel with the two names of the house: HIDDEN JADE PATH on the right side, and THE HOUSE OF LULU MIMI in Chinese on the left”¹⁹.

The author carefully describes the details of the exterior and interior of Lulu Mimi’s house. Behind the classical Chinese facade with curved upward eaves, windows showing a simple cracked-ice pattern, and grey tiled roof, one can see entirely Western grand salon with colorful tapestries, thick carpets, fainting couches, Turkish ottomans and the paintings of rosy-cheeked Roman goddesses. This is a kind of ironical interpretation of Rudyard Kipling’s notion of East and West meeting/non-meeting. In the Hidden Jade Path’s grand salon, East meets West both literally and figuratively: „For our Western guests, I offer a social club with pleasures they are accustomed to: billiards, card games, the finest cigars and brandy. [...]. For our Chinese guests, I provide the pleasures of a first-class courtesan house”²⁰.

An exotic world of elite courtesans is an essential part of the Shanghai literary image. This ironical device addresses imagological issues by deconstructing the image of Chinese women as obedient and submissive, who must follow certain rules of behavior. Chinese courtesans in the novel are educated self-confident women, all having an indestructible spirit. They stand apart from Chinese wives, who live in a patriarchal society, but, what is more, they also stand apart from American women: „We have our freedom, unlike American women who cannot go anywhere without their husbands or old maid aunts”²¹.

In *The Valley of Amazement*, Lulu Mimi embodies the quintessence of American identity: she is adventurous, energetic, and sharp-witted. Facing an alien Chinese world is always a challenge for the protagonists of Amy Tan’s novels. Survival through hard times in the alien country and conflicts with the traditional Chinese values, however, brings Lulu Mimi the opportunity to realize her business skills in full: „Gentlemen, there is a lesson here for anyone who wants to make a fortune in Shanghai. [...]. You have to make the old meet the new, rearrange the furniture, so to speak, and put on a good show. Guile and get. Opportunists welcome”²².

The Valley of Amazement is the in-depth study of the national characters and national stereotypes. In this novel, Amy Tan again renews

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

the subject of cultural differences between the East and the West. First of all, Amy Tan introduces new strategies into the literary representation of the Colonial World. The World of Americans in *The Valley of Amazement*, for example, is very different from the British one, represented by Maugham in his famous novel *The Painted Veil*. The symbolic image of the veil that separates the East and the West reveals an unwillingness to explore and accept China by Maugham's characters: „Kitty had never heard the Chinese spoken of as anything but decadent, dirty, and unspeakable. It was as though the corner of a curtain were lifted for a moment, and she caught a glimpse of a world rich with a color and significance she had not dreamt of”²³.

In *The Valley of Amazement*, the worlds of the Americans and the Chinese, on the contrary, interact closely. The philosophy of life of an American, Philo Danner, the one who helps Lucretia with a front-end support in Shanghai, speaks much about his respect to the world around: „You cannot change thousands of years of Chinese custom about shame in the family. We create our own laws in the Settlement and govern what a Chinese person can do. But there is no law you can use to disallow their philosophical outlook. Shame, honor, and obligation cannot be cast off”²⁴. Danner warns Lucretia about the mistaken opinion, that „American pioneer spirit that scouted the rivers and mountains, opened new frontiers, and conquered the Indians” can also conquer the Chinese.

Secondly, unlike the previous Amy Tan's novels, the names of her characters in *The Valley of Amazement*, not transcribed, but translated into English, become more resonant and meaningful to a reader: *Golden Treasure*, *Golden Dove*, *Little Ocean*, *Loyalty*, *Perpetual*, *Pomelo*. A keen observer of Chinese culture, Amy Tan, cannot help but notice that for Americans living in China and speaking the language, Chinese names do have meanings. Such fine and elaborated representation of the unique aesthetics of Chineseness is the distinctive feature of Chinese American writings by Amy Tan. The intertextual field of *The Valley of Amazement* is rich in allusions to the world and the Chinese cultural context. A variety of Chinese imagoes forms the auto-image and the hetero-image of China in the novel. These are the erotic novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅), a traditional Chinese story about *Peach blossom spring* (“桃花源”) – a utopian image of eternal serenity, created by Tao

²³ W. S. Maugham, *The painted veil*, London, Fontal Lobe Publishing, 2011.

²⁴ A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers, 2013.

Yuanming (陶淵明, 365–427), love poetry by Tang poet Li Shangyin (李商隱, 813–858). Thus, when creating the image of China, the writer relies on Chinese literature, which helps to convey the aesthetics of Chineseness to an English-speaking reader.

Lulu quickly identifies certain Chinese qualities and superstitions, and sets up a profitable business in Shanghai: „If you want to make money in Shanghai,’ she said, ‘take advantage of other people’s fear’²⁵. She makes cultural differences tradable. As a casual observer of the visitors coming to her courtesan house, Lulu Mimi has a keen eye for national and cultural differences: „most Westerners view the Chinese as their inferiors – intellectually, morally, and socially”, „The Chinese, by the same token, resent the imperious way foreigners treat Shanghai as their own port city and govern her by their treaties and laws’²⁶. In such a way, the author represents the stereotypical images of the Americans and the Chinese, as well as the peculiarities of their mutual perception.

The novel is also rich in auto- and hetero-images of the Americans: „The Chinese did not hold the same opinion about honesty as we Americans”, „Most Americans aren’t adventuresome about delving into the foreign world”, „I was American enough to go anywhere I pleased”, „I can assure you he is polite, humble, and bashful – ha! – truly unusual in an American”, „Americans are known to make up all kinds of things when they’re away from others who know better”, „Only Americans think they have rights”, „Or maybe he would turn to religion. Many Americans did so when faced with heartache and hardship’²⁷.

The representation of American and Chinese national characters from such varying perspectives, viewed in the large, constitutes a kind of psychological survey of the parts and the very nature of a Chinese American identity. In *The Valley of Amazement* the considerations of the author on the complex and multidimensional image of a Chinese American, usually characterized by ambiguity and indeterminacy, result in anything but a typical image of Violet Minturn.

Violet Minturn: identity resistance and identity transgression

The Valley of Amazement is a life story of Violet Minturn born in Shanghai to an American mother and a Chinese father. At the beginning

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

of the novel, Violet appears as a spoiled daughter of an American businesswoman. She speaks perfect English and is aware of her status and privileges. The girl grows up in the isolated world of elite courtesan house, that's why her perception of China is limited to the Shanghai International Settlement, peeping courtesans and communicating with servants. Young Violet calls herself „a thoroughly American girl in race, manners, and speech”²⁸ and hardly relates herself to the world around: „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 [...] Most Chinese girls learned only how to behave [...] What's more, I did not think like a Chinese person [...] And I did not do everything a certain way just because that was how it had been done for a thousand years [...]”²⁹.

In Violet's mind, China appears as a set of stereotypes, marked with distinctive clichés of Orientalism: kowtowing to statues, smoking incense, believing in ghosts, and foot binding. However, just like in Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*³⁰ and *The Hundred Secret Senses*³¹, the image of China is changing as the story goes. It is worthy of note that in Amy Tan's novels the image of China is not evident from the very beginning, and the characters have to remove layers of stereotypes, bit by bit collecting the true knowledge about the country. Only then real China reveals to them, just like *The Valley of Amazement* shows to a traveller.

At the same time, Violet's ability to speak perfect Chinese makes the girl a laughing stock in her school for English-speaking children: „You spoke Chinese to a Chinese beggar and that makes you Chinese”³². The comparison between her and the Chinese deeply offends the girl, and she is trying to abstract herself from the Other identity, usually by beating her offenders.

The drama of resistance to Chinese identity becomes more acute when Violet finds out that her father is Chinese. The girl carefully studies her facial features in the mirror and refuses to accept this Other Self. Moreover, Violet suspects that her Chineseness is the reason her mother doesn't truly love her: „I was her half-American, half-hated child”³³. The girl tries hard to hide her origin. The absurdity of such national

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ A. Tan, *The joy luck club*, New York, Penguin Books, 2006.

³¹ A. Tan, *The hundred secret senses*, New York, Penguin Books, 2010.

³² A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

³³ *Ibidem*.

prejudices becomes more ironic when Violet is dreaming of an outstanding father. She would proudly acknowledge herself to be half-Chinese if her father was a famous politician and founder of the Republic of China Sun Yat-sen. The child's version of „Chineseness” is formed by the stereotypes learned from the world of adults.

In her daughter's opinion, ambitious and intelligent Lucretia Minturn embodies all the American virtues. Desperately longing for maternal affection, Violet is eager to become the same independent woman. She refuses to speak Chinese and dreads the moment when someone sees a Chinese in her. At the same time, the girl is afraid of returning to the United States. She feels she doesn't belong in the American world either: „I felt humiliated. Here we were foreigners by our appearance. A cold thought ran through my veins. Would I look like a Chinese foreigner in San Francisco?”³⁴.

The problem of identity resistance manifests itself at the paratextual level of the novel through Walt Whitman's³⁵ *Quicksand Years*, quoted as the epigraph. The poem states that in a changing world of historical cataclysms, the only thing that remains for a man is „one's-Self”: „One's-self, must never give way – that is the final substance – that out of all is sure”. And the paratextual and intertextual levels of *The Valley of Amazement* articulate its main philosophical and cultural problem – not only the search for but also the experiencing of one's Self by a man.

Only when half-Chinese half-American Violet grows up, she finds a way to deal with her two identities: „I became a different girl, a lost girl without a mother. I was neither American nor Chinese. I was not Violet nor Vivi nor Zizi”³⁶. This discovery allows Violet, being fluent both in English and in Chinese, to change her identity depending on the situation. She can appear as a Chinese („[...] the Western half of me had disappeared. I had the face of a courtesan [...]”³⁷, „[...] China was, in my heart, my homeland”³⁸), or as an American woman („I remade myself into Edward's legal wife and widow [...] To impersonate her and not raise suspicion, the new Mrs. Ivory spoke no Chinese in public”³⁹). Grown-up, Violet learns to take advantage of her double identity. Possessing

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ W. Whitman, *The complete poems*, London, Penguin Classics, 2004.

³⁶ A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

numerous „Selves” Violet accepts them all: „[...] an American girl in my sailor dress, a virgin courtesan in a high-necked silk jacket, an American widow with streaming tears, a Chinese wife with a black eye”⁴⁰. That is why the world does not split between the Self and the Other for Violet. Both „Chineseness” and „Americanness” interact freely in her character, not causing dramatic collisions of identity search.

Compared to Amy Tan’s early novels, in *The Valley of Amazement*, the representation of American Chineseness goes beyond the dramatic conflict of the self-identity search. Amy Tan deconstructs the stereotyped image of the „Chineseness” being in one’s bones (*The Bonesetter’s Daughter*⁴¹). Violet is a free person and is aware of her right to freedom of choice. She can easily change her appearance and behaviour, comfortably acting either as an American or as a Chinese under different circumstances: „But now I was no longer wavering between the two halves. I had stepped across a threshold that had divided my American and Chinese halves only to discover I had imagined there was any such line”⁴².

In *The Valley of Amazement*, Amy Tan continues to elaborate on new methods of representation of national and cultural identity. In her novels, the author often supplements the imagological aspect of the representation by different forms of art – photography, film, and painting. These are the ekphrasis of bamboo painting in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Olivia’s photos of China in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. In *The Valley of Amazement*, an ekphrastic representation of a painting by Chinese artist Lu Shing is an essential compositional core of the novel, a yardstick of self-awareness and self-identity for two main characters, Violet and Lucretia.

The painting of the valley is a mysterious picture in which each of the characters sees something different. Like a mirror, it reflects the inner thoughts of a viewer. An American Lucretia Minturn, who at the age of sixteen falls in love with an artist Lu Shing, sees on the painting the symbol of endless love and pure knowledge of life: „I sighed, fulfilled in that valley where I was My Self”⁴³. After moving to China and being disappointed in her lover’s feelings, Lulu bitterly recalls past „foolish

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ A. Tan, *The bonesetter’s daughter*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2008.

⁴² A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

hope”: „*The Valley of Amazement*, always with a sick feeling that I had once believed in the illusion of a Pure Self-Being”⁴⁴.

Changed perception of the painting’s hermeneutics⁴⁵ represents variations of Violet’s identities: „It looked like dawn. Or was it dusk? I could not tell whether the rain was coming, or the sky was clearing, whether it was about arriving there with joy or leaving it with relief. Was the painting meant to depict a feeling of hope or was it hopelessness? Were you supposed to be standing on the cliff charged with bravery or trembling in dread of what awaited you?”. When Violet and her first husband, Edward Ivory, look at the picture, their first impression is fateful: „My eyes passed over a painting on a wall next to the bed. It looked familiar: the shadowed land, the sharp-toothed mountains, a false glow of life that would soon be extinguished”⁴⁶.

Edward had died shortly, and Violet, having no livelihood, had to go back to her job in the courtesan house. In Violet’s second marriage, she has a different understanding of the same landscape. Moon Pond Village, Violet’s new home, reminds her of the mountain landscape in the painting. And this time the view provides her with a feeling of family happiness, and a hope that all sorrows were left behind: „The valley gradually took on its own shape and coloring. It was not gloomy, I told myself. Dusk would bring a close to my past and leave it behind as a secret. Tomorrow would be a bright beginning. I would be a Wife”⁴⁷.

But later, when humiliated Violet leaves her brutal husband, the view of the village over the hill again resembles the new Valley of Amazement to her, as the symbol of a quiet shelter now: „The sun lowered and Buddha’s Hand turned golden. I was walking in a place that was strange and familiar. I thought of the painting that had belonged to my mother, *The Valley of Amazement*”⁴⁸.

Every moment experienced by Amy Tan’s characters has its position within painting coordinates. Every time the painting becomes an enigmatic space for self-exploration. But the hermeneutical mystery of the landscape, filled with the endless search for the Self, is destroyed when Flora, Violet’s daughter, sees no aesthetic value in her grandfather’s painting, but only a way of „make a living”. The irony of

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ V. Dubinina, “Hermeneutics H.-G. Gadamer as a universal philosophy of understanding”, in *Skhid*, 2019, vol. 1, no. 159, p. 5-9. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.21847/1728-9343.2019.1\(159\).157988](http://dx.doi.org/10.21847/1728-9343.2019.1(159).157988).

⁴⁶ A. Tan, *The valley of amazement*, New York, Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

this passage is that Flora, being an art student, unlike her mother and grandmother, has never experienced the drama of the Self-search.

In *The Valley of Amazement* Amy Tan's creative quest continues, the author says that, „[...] at the heart of the book is a story about mothers and daughters, and the kind of love that we expect from them, but also from other people, from men, from children; and also who we are and how we're shaped by our circumstances that are given to us, or by choices we make”⁴⁹. The author creates options and variations for transgressive American Chineseness, reducing in a postmodern manner the drama of duality, experienced by the daughters in her previous novels. Easy switching between the Chineseness and the Americanness in *The Valley of Amazement*, which may be viewed by a reader as a convenient exchange of masks, also hides the inherent ability of a protagonist to accept both Chinese and American identities, to remain own Self while not being always the same.

The problem of national and cultural identity, which marks Amy Tan's early writings, finds a new representation in *The Valley of Amazement*. Unlike Tan's previous novels, where first-generation Chinese immigrants experience the inner drama of assimilation in an alien world of America, while their children are seeking a balance between two halves of their identity, the changed setting of the new novel represents Chinese Americans living in the Shanghai International Settlement. The main characters of the novel perceive China from the inside – they try to succeed in an alien world of China, to find their love, to reconcile both Chinese and American halves, to create a kind of cross-cultural microcosm. In the paper, the emphasis is laid on the artistic mechanism of destereotypization, and synthesis of various cultural images and identities in portraying the American Chineseness. The novel presents the in-depth study of the national characters and national stereotypes. Lulu Mimi embodies the quintessence of American identity: she is adventurous, energetic, and sharp-witted. Facing an alien Chinese world is always a challenge for the protagonists of Amy Tan's novels. Survival through hard times in the alien country and conflicts with the traditional Chinese values, however, brings Lulu Mimi the opportunity to realize her business skills in full. Lucretia has arranged to make city of Shanghai own for a while.

The representation of American and Chinese national characters from such varying perspectives, viewed in the large, constitutes a kind of

⁴⁹ „Amy Tan talks „The valley of amazement”, her first novel in eight years”, 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7jhSsGEIK4>.

psychological survey of the parts and the very nature of a Chinese American identity. The considerations of the author on the complex and multidimensional image of a Chinese American, usually characterized by ambiguity and indeterminacy, result in anything but typical image of Lulu Mimi's daughter. Violet Minturn is a free person and is aware of her right to freedom of choice. She can easily change her appearance and behavior, comfortably acting either as an American or as a Chinese under different circumstances. The author creates options and variations for transgressive American Chineseness, in such postmodernist manner reducing the drama of duality, experienced by the daughters in her previous novels. Easy switching between the Chineseness and the Americanness, which may be viewed by a reader as a comfortable change of masks, also conceals the internal ability of a protagonist to accept both Chinese and American identities, to remain own Self while not being always the same. This issue of cultural barriers' disappearance remains a hot topic in today's era of "the planarization of culture". An ekphrastic representation of a painting by Chinese artist Lu Shing is an essential compositional core of the novel, a yardstick of self-awareness and self-identity for two main characters, Violet and Lucretia.