THE NOVEL AS A VEHICLE OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY. CHINESE CULTURE IN THE NOVELS OF TIMOTHY MO

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Abstract: This article examines the discursive strategies that Timothy Mo uses in his novels in order to facilitate intercultural communication, in an approach designed to trespass the cultural frontiers of understanding Chinese culture codes by the western public. The author attenuates cognitive filters of alterity using an ethnographic and anthropological discourse, as revealing as it is instructive.

Keywords: alterity, intracultural and intercultural discourse, anthropologic ethnographic discourse, cultural space, cultural, ethnic and racial identity.

Timothy Mo is one of the most powerful voices among the postcolonial novelists of the last decades, whose fiction investigates the effects of imperialism and colonial rule, in terms of their impact on the construction of cultural identity by members of the colonized community in the homeland or as immigrants in the imperial metropolis. Belonging to the same literary generation as Salman Rushdie, Mo shares the same concern with representations of migrancy, displacement and biculturalism, as well as an acute awareness of historical and social processes that influence individual destinies caught in the web of public and private history. He is also an insightful analyst of the psychology and idiosyncrasies of displaced individuals, marginals confronting a hostile ethnic environment, or migrants who voyage from the colonial periphery to the imperial centre and are confronted with the traumas of exile and cultural shock. Their eventual adaptation is achieved by their assuming of biculturality, through a distillation of their inherited Easternness and emerging Britishness into a lucid acceptance of in-betweenness and hybridity.

Mo is of Anglo-Chinese descent and was born in Hong Kong in 1950. He came to Britain at the age of ten. Educated in Hong Kong and Britain, he graduated at Oxford, where he read history. Despite his

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upbringing in a predominantly British environment, he confesses to a marked biculturality and an ineluctable sense of hybridity, ascribable to his mixed-race parentage and background. It is thus little wonder that displacement and the redefinition of cultural identity, ethnicity and minority behaviour patterns and adjustment models should become quintessential themes of his fiction.

Mo depicts of the mental patterns and idiosyncrasies of Chinese characters in the midst of their cultural or ethnic milieu, set either in the distant British colony of Hong Kong or in London's Chinatown. He focuses on the intercultural tensions which unsettle the protagonists' cultural coherence, and on the double pull they are subject to – on the one hand, their retreat in the perpetuation of Chinese cultural codes, as a means of asserting their group identity, and on the other hand the necessity to negotiate their access to new cultural influences. By opening the British novel to the space of Chinese culture, minutely explained and made accessible to a Western audience eager for fictional cultural exploration, Mo breaks new ground in the landscape of British fiction. He offers his predominantly British (and American) readership an insight into a minority culture hitherto unknown and often simply ignored.

His novels provide an induction into the climate of colonial life in Hong Kong or into the interstitial cultural enclave of the Chinese minority in London, thus facilitating the readers' access to cross-cultural knowledge and understanding. His narrative discourse displays an acute awareness of addressing a Western audience, relatively little acquainted with the familial and social codes of Chinese culture. Hence the attention paid to the transparency of ethnographic details, to elaborate explanation and clarification of Chinese patterns of thinking, beliefs, values and behaviour. It is as if the author, constantly aware of his implied reader's otherness, adapts his narratorial discourse to the purpose of imparting unshared knowledge. Thus, his enlightening explanations of attitudes, gestures, and speech coalesce into a veritable ethnographic treatise, a fictional vade-mecum of Chinese culture, permeated by the explanative and instructive discourse of cultural anthropology.

His first novel, *The Monkey King* (1978), is set in Hong Kong and covers the period between the fifties to the early seventies. It follows the fortunes and development of Wallace Nolasco, a young man of Portuguese descent from Macau, who marries into a Chinese family and thus transgresses the boundary of his ethnic culture and identity. Though of

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mixed race and almost indistinguishable from the Chinese, because of interracial marriage policy of Portuguese colonials, he still keeps himself apart from the Chinese majority, convinced of his racial superiority. Being poor and recently orphaned, he ends up as the son-in-law of a tyrannical Chinese patriarch, Mr Poon. A cunning and quite well-off businessman, hilariously hypocritical and mean, Mr Poon rules over the family with an iron authority. Wallace's discovery of a mysteriously organised family ethos progresses in parallel with his resistance to the patriarchal authority and the rigid hierarchical order which regulate the family's existence, behaviour and sense of identity. Through the perceptions of the baffled and riotous young man, Mo offers an enlightening induction to the patriarchal conventions of the traditional Chinese family, in which everyday gestures, from the sharing of food to religious ritual or communal gatherings, revolve around the figure of the family head. Mo describes the family's cultural ethos in a vividly detailed and thoroughly documented ethnographic study, offering enlightening, if satirical vignettes of belief and customs ranging from food, power, kinship or gender relations, dress codes, superstitions, the hegemony of the elders and the cult of ancestors.

Although Mo focuses mainly on the ethnography and traditional conventions of the family as core cultural community, he expands the scope his study to a more encompassing scrutiny of the larger social climate of Hong Kong. The protagonist's brief work experience in the in governmental department and his social contacts offer a glimpse into the corrupting interrelationships between coloniser and colonised, and the cosmopolitanism of moral laxity at all levels of society, from the family unit to the larger social aggregate. The image of the city's labyrinth of ethnicities and cultural mixture, seen in its ambivalent dynamic between fierce antagonism and interpenetrating complicity, is complemented by the portrayal of the timeless stasis of the feudal society in the rural area. Fearing that his attempt to avail himself of Wallace's position in the civil service for obtaining preferential commissions for his construction business might be liable to charges of corruption, Mr Poon arranges the departure of Wallace and his wife May Ling to a distant village in the New Territories, the agricultural region adjacent to the city-colony.

Mo's depiction of village life occasions yet another ethnographic exposition on the ancestral, immutable traditions of the enclosed, culturally hermetic village community, frozen in its immemorial rituals of rice-growing, tea-drinking and clan fighting. Of course, Mo's fascination with

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the dynamic of cultural disruption and change, with the productive tension between continuity and discontinuity, with redefinitions of identity is illustrated in the way in which the marginal newcomers manage to transform and modernise the community. A disastrous flood covers the village's rice crop under a natural lake, and Wallace turns his engineer's training to good account by draining the valley and damming the body of water, which is transformed into a leisure park for weekenders from the city.

Harnessing the villagers' creativity and entrepreneurial acumen, the young couple transgress their former condition of dependence and impotency as powerless subjects in the patriarchal establishment. They transform their experience of displacement into one of replacement and empowering repositioning in society, according to the paradigm of the comic plot and its resolution. Their new identity as independent, active social agents legitimises their changed position in the family. On the death of Mr Poon, the young man is called upon to take over the family business and protect it as an enlightened, democratising kind of patriarch, able to steer deftly between the poles of single-handed authority and collective liberty. It is a fable of personal and communal emergence to a hybridised identity, in which both individual and community negotiate between cultural preservation and change, tradition and modernity, ethnic distinctions and contaminations.

At the same time, both in terms of subject matter and form, the novel enacts a fusion of Western and Eastern tradition. While it fits the paradigm of the Western classical comic novel of education and becoming, the story alludes intertextually to the Chinese classical allegory of the legendary Monkey King. Wallace's versatility and balancing negotiation between rebellion, submission and tolerance replicate metaphorically the attributes of the hybrid, polymorphic demigod, half simian, half human, who embarks on a punitive and redemptive journey, meant to reintegrate him into the human as well as into the divine order of being. The mythical, allegorical import of the legend, suggested in the title but not explicitly clarified in the novel, challenges the reader to further explore its significance for Chinese moral philosophy and thus engage in deciphering the meanings encoded by one of the most popular Chinese archetypes.

Mo's most celebrated fictional exploration of these issues is *Sour Sweet*, his award-winning second novel of 1982 (Hawthornden Prize), also shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It is a heart-rending, if detachedly scrutinizing dramatisation of the cultural transplantation to Britain in the

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early 1960s of a Cantonese family from Hong Kong. In a deeply enquiring and revealing narrative, Mo blends realistic observation, sociological expertise and psychological insight with a sympathetic, yet objective portrayal of his rounded, dynamic characters evolving between social comedy and personal drama. If the previous novel studies the ethos of the Cantonese family at home, *Sour Sweet* explores the vagaries of Chinese identity confronted with the experience of migration and cultural displacement.

Set in London's Chinatown of the 1960s, the story traces the migrant experience of the Chens (Chen, his wife Lily and their baby son Man Kee), of Lily's sister Mui and of Chen's widowed old father. The novel opens with a brief and somewhat abrupt introduction to the family's situation. The objective tone of the third person narrator replicates the factual conciseness of a sociological profile and the stark realism of a journalistic feature report.

The Chens had been living in the U.K. for four years, which was long enough to have lost their place in the society from which they had emigrated but not long enough to feel comfortable in the new. They were no longer missed; Lily had no living relatives anyway, apart from her sister Mui, and Chen had lost his claim to clan land in his ancestral village. He was remembered there in the shape of the money order he remitted to his father every month, and would truly have been remembered only if that order had failed to arrive (Mo 1982: 1).

Chen feels suspended between two worlds – his native land and the 'land of promise' he has come to in order to escape his unpromising economic prospects. He still feels an alien in London, as he is confined to working in the booming food industry of Chinese restaurants in the Soho area. He is drifting apart from the familiar notion of home and from his native and filial bonds. At the same time, he cannot bring himself to feel at ease in the host country, being unable to shake off the pervasive sense of his own alienness and of the foreignness of the place and its people.

Mo proves an informed and perceptive analyst of these processes and behaviours, which he anatomizes with a touching combination of psychological insight, sociological acumen and sympathetic feeling. He aptly identifies different patterns of response to the challenges of immigrant life, which he illustrates via his characters, tracing their progress or regression towards success or failure in cultural adaptation. Success is seen

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to rely on the positive potential to assume one's emerging hybridity or biculturality. Survival is rooted in the ability to negotiate and compromise between one's perceptions of ethnicity and otherness. In *Sour Sweet*, it is Lily who typifies this model of successful balancing and reconciliation between the native and the new cultures, and her gradual advancement towards understanding, learning, change and growth becomes the author's main focus. Through Chen, Mo exemplifies the other extreme, that of the migrant's failure to respond effectively to cultural novelty and contamination and to surmount adjustment problems.

A common response to their predicament is the tendency to seek shelter in the haven of their restricted ethnic community or in the family's domestic space. It amounts to a compulsive refuge into the ethnic enclaves of the group of co-nationals or other marginal groups, and a quasi-religious observance of tradition and native cultural practices. For Chen, community anchorage extends beyond the confines of the family flat on account of his active role as breadwinner and provider for the family. However, the Chinese restaurant where he works seventy-two hours a week is no more than another closed space encapsulating the familiarity of intra-ethnic relationships and limiting his contact with English people to the distanced observation of anonymous customers. Chen is not the only character for whom clinging to tradition and cultural authenticity provides a relief from the pressures of adaptation. Lily, as well as other characters, also tends to seek some kind of consolation in practicing their native culture.

Chen falls into the familiar tracks of his native culture in every aspect of everyday life. Apart from his preference for Chinese media and entertainment he discovers new pastimes which function as an umbilical cord to his homeland. If his carpentry episode is dictated more by practical imperatives rather than by going in for parental heritage – manufacturing wooden benches and tables for their take-away venture – he derives from it both pleasure and a reassuring feeling of home. His gardening, nevertheless, is not dictated by any immediate survival demands, and this return to a familiar way of life functions as a link between his London life and his past, 'an expression of his peasant roots', in Lim's opinion (Lim 97). Chen establishes a symbolic correspondence between vegetable growing and his marginal status, derived from inherited patterns of thought: 'At home in the New Territories vegetable growing was an ignominious mode of agriculture, practiced by refugees and immigrants. It was only fitting he should grow them here in alien soil' (168). This revaluation of his skills as a farmer is but

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another reminder of his Chineseness and alienness from his surroundings. Winning Man Kee over for this hobby works as a bridge and silent channel of communication between father and son, but it signals primarily Chen's desire to hand over to him the traditional values, as 'Chen resolved to bring up Son his own way' (155).

In his social dealings, Chen remains limited to a ritualistic fulfilment of his traditional roles dictated by the Chinese etiquette code. He unswervingly carries out his filial duties, in keeping with the Chinese reverence for the old, especially for the family patriarch: 'Chen was still conscientious about sending money to his father. He was a dutiful son' (60). As a father, he displays a typical reaction of Chinese fathers who, when ashamed of their sons, are concerned with 'losing face' in society and turn their shame into deliberate self-irony in order not to 'lose face'. This explains his constant teasing of Man Kee about the size of his head, especially in public situations, as 'shame arises from the father's traditional concern with 'face' in society, as Chin explains (Chin 93). Chen's preoccupation with appearances and materialistic notions of success and pride are also apparent in his dreams for his son's future business success, another source of 'keeping face' in public: 'he would grow up to own many restaurants, gaining experience in all aspects of the trade on the way' (155).

His patriarchal claims as a husband are emphasised by the capitalisation of his title as 'Husband', which is indicative of his statutory male authority, the key principle of the relationship between the spouses. In this light, despite his gradual and covert loss of his prerogatives as a decision maker in favour of his wife, he cannot help enacting his mere formal part with hollow male rhetoric: 'Who is head in our family? Do you think wife tells Husband what to do?' (107). He needs no real answer to that, as he is aware that he has handed over to Lily his position as family head. His failure is rendered more tragic, because, instead of advancing into an enriched new identity, he loses any claims to his old one, slowly dissolving in the sham of hollow mimicry of native traditions.

Preserving the purity of her beliefs and practices appears equally important to Lily. She proves the most genuine and profound retainer of Chinese philosophy, of which she is a profound practitioner. Her stern observance of the crucial principle of the Yin and Yang principles of universal harmony guides her in all her preoccupations, be they about major issues or more trivial things. For example, she takes care not to give Chen sweets after a meal of sour soup, in order not to upset this balance, which

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somehow contradicts the metaphorical significance of harmonious duality of the novel's title. Paradoxically enough, it will be this essentially Chinese outlook that would help her balance her eventual adjustment into salutary hybridity. Lily's ethnocentric logic dictates that flexibility is a purely Chinese trait, and the more adaptable she becomes, the more Chinese she will be.

But Lily's fervour in practising her culture is most apparent in her unflinching fulfilment of her family duties. A dedicated wife, she is keen on the ritual of serving Chen his soup on his return home, even if he has already dined at work. Her forms of address to him remain within the norms of the Chinese code of deference owed to the head of the household. The textual capitalisation of her appellative 'Husband' points to her wifely devotion and idealisation of Chen as the ultimate, archetypal male authority. The slightly more familiar and intimate appellation 'Ah Chen' is no less deferential. Though considered by Lily an adequate term 'to look upon him as an individual', she aptly perceives it as an equally distancing term, being based on his family name. As she never uses his first name, Chen never acquires a truly personal identity, which is emblematic for the allegorical intention of the author to represent inadaptable Chen as a nonentity fading into anonymousness. Lily's self-assumed and carefully constructed wifely exemplariness extends to her efforts and camouflage tactics of indirectness meant to keep the appearances of Chen's simulacrum authority as she acquires an increasingly dominant role. She tentatively avoids even the slightest suggestion of Chen's tacitly accepted position of subordination, going to any lengths to reassure him of his status quo. The tactfulness and diplomacy of her dissimulating tactics are particularly efficient in realizing her dream of their own take away restaurant, and her shrewd strategies of indirectness will covertly break Chen's opposition and lead to her envisaged results, without causing him to 'lose face' before his wife. It may be a sham of the Chinese domestic hierarchy of power and a simulacrum of tradition, but it is simulated for the sake of tradition.

Through his enlightening, detailed explanation of customs, beliefs, gestures, language and the intricate patterns of cultural identification and differentiation, Mo acts as an informed and empathic ethnographic guide and sui-generis cultural anthropologist, sensitive to the cognitive needs of his western audience. He deftly exploits the Westerner's cultural curiosity and taste for the exotic, but anticipates the need for clarification and explanation which arises from unshared knowledge and the potential

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incomprehensibility of foreignness. Consequently, he is extremely careful to clarify his concepts and terms and integrate his characters' individual idiosyncrasies into the larger context of Chinese ethnicity and sense of identity as anchored in cultural heritage, the only asset which accompanies them in their cross-cultural adventure. Mo takes his role as cultural spokesman and commentator very seriously and does his best to oblige his reader, in a harmonic mixture of fictional discourse and ethnographic didacticism.

Although he claims that he writes about 'the clash of cultures', Timothy Mo seems more concerned with the interpenetration of cultures. The successful integration of his characters depends on their capacity to remain poised between the extremes of isolation and acculturation. Their potential for adaptation ensures survival and integration, but does no reach the stage of acculturation, which means the loss of cultural roots and identity. The complex cultural initiations and negotiations they traverse result in a reassessment of their identity and cultural belonging, opening new possibilities for the affirmation of individual and minority identity in its surge towards an enhanced multicultural world, where 'Englishness' can be used in the plural.

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