

## **East West Encounters in Amy Tan's the Joy Luck Club**

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**Abstract:** *America was an inspiring symbol of hope and emancipation for all the colonials of the east. While the east admired western ideas of progress, it also watched with interest how the west was drawn to Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism as a relief for the material pursuit of boom and amplitude. The east west encounter needs to be viewed from the point of view of a discursive break between the east and the west. It is an understanding of one's singularity, with an infinite responsibility towards the other. Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club meditates on the inability of the characters to translate concepts and sentiments from one culture to another. Jing-mei's experience in China at the end of the book certainly seems to support the possibility of a richly mixed identity rather than an identity of warring opposites. For immigrants and their families, the contrasts within this amalgam can bring particular pain as well as particular richness.*

**Key words:** *culture, east, identity, immigrants, west*

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### **I. Introduction**

The Chinese American novel in English, either by the first – generation Chinese immigrants or by America -born Chinese Americans, is a relatively newcomer, with its debut in the twentieth century. As suggested by Madsen, the development of Chinese American novel undergoes three stages, each with thematic concerns under changing social circumstances: the decades before the 1960s witnessed the sprouting of Chinese American novels which appealed to little concern and a limited reading community because of the unsteady Sino- American relationship, especially when the new communist China is concerned; from the 1960s to the early 1990s, Chinese American literature established the undoubted position in American literature through some notable works, accumulating most of its creative impetus from the increasingly flourishing African American literature inspired by the civil rights movement of the 1960s; from the mid- 1990s to the present Chinese American novels manifest a kaleidoscopic vision far beyond what American readers have ever expected, owing to Chinese Americans' assimilation into American culture and, to some extent, the effects of multiculturalism.

In the pre-1960s, critical self-awareness of Chinese American identity and literary tradition had not been a conscious concern of Chinese American writers. The novels of the period reacted to the social milieu dominated by racial discourse by resorting to Chinese culture. Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) is the only remarkable exception. The Chinese American novels widened their thematic scope in the 1960s with the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. Two outstanding writers of the period who redefined Chinese images and Chinese American experiences are Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin. While Kingston and Chin were acclaimed and recognized by Chinese American writers, Amy Tan appeals to the common American readers with novels that depict conflicting cultural values and attitudes of different generations.

The *Joy Luck Club* is a 1989 fiction by Amy Tan, portraying the conflicts between four Chinese immigrant women and their daughters, who have been raised in the United States. The novel describes the difficulties surrounding dual cultural identities, specifically Chinese American but also transcends cultural conflicts by depicting the generational conflicts between mothers and daughters. The novel divided into sixteen interwoven stories details the complex relationship between four sets of mothers and daughters, Suyuan Woo and Jing-mei Woo; Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong; An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan and Ying Ying St. Clair and Lena St. Clair.

The joy luck mothers and daughters experience cultural and intergenerational conflicts due to widely differing expectations of social achievements and accomplishments. They compete through power struggles made even complicated by communication difficulties that are caused only partly by language barriers. The mothers, raised in China are silenced as much by cultural gaps as by language barriers. The mothers and daughters spoke two different languages. Jingmei in her first narration says, "I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (34). The communication barrier here is a double one, that between generations and that created by the waning influence of an older culture and the burgeoning presence of another. Jingmei announces in the first section,

My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's

meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more(37).

Lena's narrative describes the struggle to understand her mother and her life as a translator for her mother. Lena understands the Mandarin her mother speaks but does not understand the meaning behind those words. She often thinks her mother is speaking nonsense. In fact, when she serves as a translator for her, she edits her mother's words and the words of others to make them appear more mainstream and less eccentric.

The first narrative in the first section of the book is narrated by Jing-mei Woo. With the death of Suyuan Woo, June's father asks her to join her mother's three friends to become the fourth member of the Joy Luck Club. June considers the club to be a shameful custom. She says, "I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war" (28). Her mother's friends urge her to travel to China to find her two half-sisters. But June is reluctant to travel as she feels unable to tell her mother's story to her half-sisters. She confesses to Auntie Ying, "What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything" (40). The answer of June creates fear among the Joy Luck Club aunts, as they understand that their own daughters like June do not understand their stories and are missing out, not only on their cultural heritage but also their family legacy.

And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America.

They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation (41).

The first section of the book entitled, "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" provides insight of the sexism prevalent in Chinese culture. The mothers who are aware of this want better for their daughters, they want their daughters to realize the American Dream. At the same time the mothers do not want their daughters to forget Chinese customs or to grow up unaware of the struggle of the women in their families. As a child Waverly is a chess champion, but her mother Lindo brags about her all the time and pushes her to a breakdown. Chinese mothers unlike western mothers want their daughters to be the best among all the other kids. Suyuan wants Jane to be a child prodigy like Waverly and forces her to take piano lessons. She wishes Jane to be good enough to play the piano on the Ed Sullivan Show, but June does not live up to her expectations. The difficult nature of these expectations makes the daughters distance from their mothers.

Ironically and tragically the achievement of the mothers' dreams for her daughter which entailed physical removal from the motherland, results in the alienation of mother and daughter. While the daughters readily and entirely adapted to the customs and language of the new land, the mothers still held onto those of the old. The mothers firmly believe, anything, that is Chinese is best, be it Chinese rituals, medicine, food or Chinese way of parenting. Situations force the mothers to move out of China to America. The mothers believe they can provide better circumstances to their daughters in America. In the fourth section of the novel "Queen Mother of the Western Skies" Lindo Jong says,

I taught her how American circumstances work. If you are born poor here, it's no lasting shame. You are first in line for a scholarship. If the roof crashes on your head, no need to Cry over this bad luck. You can sue anybody, make the landlord fix it. You do not have to Sit like a Buddha under a tree letting pigeons drop their dirty business on your head. You can buy an umbrella. Or go inside a Catholic church. In America, nobody says you have to Keep the circumstances somebody else will give you (254).

Jing-mei Woo in the second section of the novel reveals her mother's idea of America, My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous (132).

While the mothers focus on improving the circumstances for their daughters they fail to teach Chinese legacy and heritage in a manner their daughters could comprehend. As mother Lindo Jong asserts, "I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix? (254).

Tan portrays daughters who are estranged emotionally from their mothers because they feel distanced from and embarrassed by their mothers' cultural traditions. Class and assimilation issues also arise. The daughters often express exasperation over mothers who brag about saving pennies at the grocery market or wear unmatched or brightly colored clothing only because it is cheap.

The absent motherland looms large on the horizon of the emigrant mothers whose unspeakable tragedies left behind in China resonate in their daughters. In the section "Double Face" Waverly wanted to go to China for her second honeymoon, but she is afraid and tells her mother, "What if I blend in so well they think I'm one of them? What if they don't let me come back to the United States?" (253). Lindo feels she is responsible for the

way Waverly is brought up. When she taught her daughter how American circumstances work, she failed to teach her daughter Chinese character in the way she could understand. Lindo reflects,

...I couldn't teach her about Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities. Why easy things are not worth pursuing. How to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring. Why Chinese thinking is best (254).

Waverly is quite displeased with her mother's statement that she didn't look Chinese. Lindo tells her only her hair and skin are Chinese, inside- she is all American made. At this juncture she understands she lacks an identity of her own.

The Americanized daughters' battle for independence from powerful, commanding Chinese mothers is fierce, but eventually reconciliation is reached. Waverly has difficulty telling her mother that she is engaged to marry her boyfriend, Rich. She believes her mother, Lindo, hates Rich. Once she tells Lindo, Waverly understands that her mother does not hate Rich and that she has misunderstood many things about her mother. Rose, An-mei's daughter, tells her story of receiving divorce papers from her husband, Ted. He wants Rose to leave the house because he plans to remarry soon. Rose speaks to her mother, who encourages her to stand up to Ted, and she finally does. The daughters realize that the mothers have always had the daughters' own best interests at heart. Because their own lives in China had been circumscribed by parental and societal constraints that had led invariably to humiliation, pain and tragedy, the mothers have all come to America to give their daughters a better life, a life of greater choice. The novel ends on a note of resolution and reconciliation. The struggles, the battles, are over, and when the dust settles what was formerly considered a hated bondage is revealed to be a cherished bond.

## **II. Conclusion**

To achieve a balance in the in-between world condition, then, according to Amy Tan one cannot cling solely to the new American ways and reject the old Chinese ways. One must reconcile the two and make one's peace with the old. If the old ways cannot be incorporated into the new life, if they do not "mix" as Lindo Jong puts it, "then they must nonetheless be respected and preserved in the pictures on one's walls, in the memories in one's head, in the stories that one writes down".

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