

Chinese Diaspora: A Study of Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club

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Abstract: *In America, among all the immigrants, Chinese Diaspora consists of the major section and they continue to practice their own culture and tradition even though they are settled in America. Amy Tan is one of the renowned Chinese American writers who have novels reflecting problems faced by the Chinese diaspora in America. Tan garnered worldwide attention with the debut novel The Joy Luck Club. The paper describes the experiences faced by the Chinese Diaspora in America and how they are caught mentally and physically between two worlds, loss of homeland and alienation, clashes of different cultures and their search for identity as portrayed in the novel The Joy Luck Club.*

Key words: *Diaspora, culture, tradition immigrant, journey*

I. Introduction

Diaspora, a Greek word, was first used to refer to the "dispersion" of Jews who migrated outside their homeland Israel. It is regarded as a dispersion of population from their original homeland, a scattering of an originally homogeneous entity such as language, culture or tradition. The word diaspora first recorded in the English language in 1876 referring to refugee of the Irish famine. Later in the 1980s and onwards, the term was regarded as 'a metaphor designation' to describe different categories of people-'expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities tout court'. The Chinese diaspora is the largest group in America. In **Like The Banyan Tree: Images of the Indian American Experience** Leela Prasad(1999) quotes, "The International Organisation for Migration said there are more than 200 million migrants around the world today. Europe hosted the largest number of immigrants with more than 70 million and North America with over 46 million followed by Asia, which hosts nearly 26 million immigrants in 2008,"

Amy Tan is one of the contemporary Chinese American writers. Tan immensely popular debut novel, **The Joy Luck Club** (1989) explores the generational gap and cultural differences between Chinese born mothers and their American born Chinese daughters. The book wins the National Book Award and the L.A. Times Book Award and the Commonwealth Gold Award. It is also produced as a major picture in 1993 and was nominated for Best Picture. The primary focus of the novel is Jing-mei (June) the daughter of the club founder. She succeeds her after her mother died. The novel concludes as Jing-mei embarks on a pilgrimage to meet her elder sisters who have remained in China, and through this journey achieves a sense of reconciliation with her mother and more broadly with her Chinese heritage. The relationship between an immigrant Chinese mother and her American daughter forms the basis of **The Kitchen God's Wife** (1991) as well. Based on events from the life of Tan's mother, the main protagonist describes the tragic consequences of the mother's earlier life in China, revealing all the secrets she has never before imparted to her daughter including details of her previous abusive marriage and the deaths of her first three children. Both these novels were great popular and critical successes. Some of the other works include **The Hundred Secret Senses**(1995), **The Bonesetter's Daughter**(2001), etc Tan has also written short stories and children books like "**Fish Cheeks**"(1987), **The Moon Lady** (1992), **The Chinese Siamese Cat** (1994) etc.

The Joy Luck Club is stimulated by two forces in Amy Tan's life: her relationship with her mother and the death of her loved ones mainly her 16 year old brother and her father, who died of a brain tumour. It highlights the relationship between the different races, between men and women and between different generations. The paper focuses mainly on the relationship between an immigrant Chinese mother and her American daughter which also forms the basis of her second novel The Kitchen God's Wife. It also depicts on the cultural background of the important characters, the intimate relationship between culture and life, the tension and interpretation of characters of belonging to different cultures, the adoption and diffusion of cultures giving rise to new problems and episodes and finally the realisation of unique cultural identity and its impact on the novel as a whole.

The story consists of four sections, each preceded by a fable. Jing-mei, the main protagonist, is in charge for weaving together all the sections and who adds added continuity by narrating the first and last section. The four daughters in this story are the first generation Chinese American and their mothers are immigrant Chinese. Amy Ling says, "The absent motherland looms large on the horizon of the emigrant mothers whose unspeakable tragedies left behind in China, resonate recounted in vivid detail in **The Joy Luck**

Club, resonate in their daughters, Amy Tan herself being one of the daughters.” (438). David Leiwei Li says, “As faithful mothers of China, the mothers may mature and age in America, but their minds and memories are forever mummified in their ancestral land.” In the novel the mother is the guardian-teachers of culture and traditions of mainland China, while their American-born children try to negotiate the contradictory claims of Chineseness on the one hand and forces of assimilation in middle class America on the other. From the beginning of the novel till the end, we detect one culture trying to dominate another - Chinese culture asserting itself over American culture and vice versa.

In this novel, all the mothers are born and brought up in China. Even though they are settled in America they still value the cultural values they had inherited from their parents. Because of this they try to implant Chinese traits and qualities on their daughters who have assimilated American lifestyle. Gabriel Sheffer (2002) states in his **Middle Eastern Minorities and Diaspora writers**, “dispersal in and outside the region, group size, status, organization, and connection to their homelands influence the diaspora’s positions in and strategies towards host countries and homelands. Because of globalization and growth in worldwide migration, their economic and political roles have become increasingly significant.” The main character Jing- Mei is the one who is mainly recalling and reflecting on her mother’s stories. Both the Chinese and American culture is strongly exhibited in the family. Like Jing- Mei, Amy Tan struggled to harmonize American roots with her parents’s Asian customs and with being the only Asian face in her class. She admitted to Bookpage interviewer Ellen Kanner, “Life with Daisy [her mother] was difficult because of her belied in ghosts and her imaginative storytelling in fractured English” (Amy Tan, 9).

The daughters on their part attempt to avoid/ undermine Chinese traditions. A lack of proper understanding of each other’s perceptions results in a communication gap. As a result the miscommunication and misunderstanding increases day by day. The mothers speak a mixture of fractured English and they feel comfortable in Chinese language and often uses the language. The daughters speak English the way it is spoke in America and, what is more, and they fail to understand and even their understanding of Chinese is uncertain. The conflict depicted here is manifested in the relationship between the four Chinese immigrant mothers, who have formed a mahjong group called Joy Luck Club. The mothers cherished ideologies of old China and on the other hand their daughters believe in modern American individuality and independence. The generational and cultural gap between the mothers and daughters is unfolded with the daughters getting confused and frustrated with their mothers while growing up. Avtar Brah in **Cartographies of Diaspora** (2007)states, “the maintenance of these kinds of cultural connections can in some cases provoke both nostalgic and separatist tendencies.” In the novel whenever the mothers express any wishes or get command of their daughters, the daughters try to counter them or resist. They are irritated when their daughters despise their disapproval. For instance Jing- Mei confesses to her self-protective strategy against her mother, “I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won’ts. I won’t let her change me, I promised myself. I won’t be what I’m not (Tan 1989). All the mothers try to exercise their motherly power and authority. They narrate their rigid family experiences in China to gain respect and sympathy from their daughters whether it is of war or famine or mythology. The constant conflict between the mothers and daughters is the misunderstanding of culture, not able to appreciate and understand the unique cultures of both the culture. As mother Lindo Jong succinctly put it, “I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese Character. How could I know these two things do not mix?” (Tan 1989). For instance Jing-Mei’s self- protective strategy against the mother who expected her to be a child prodigy is to disappoint her mother whenever possible, Feeling bound in American culture the daughters is bold and even rebellious and they make their own decisions rather than follow the whims of their mothers. Their independence and defiance of Chinese tradition are further reflected in her strong belief in American style individualism. “I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn’t get straight A’s. I didn’t because class president. I didn’t get into Stanford. I dropped out of college.” (Tan 1989) Ironically, she did get straight A’s, but her mother was disinterested. Amy Ling review that, “The mothers are so strong that they endure all manner of pain to enforce their will, to show their love. The daughters, equally strong, find ways to rebel, if not openly then in secret.”(Kim 1982) Mothers are trapped in nostalgia for their lost relations and daughters on one side unable to decide and follow Chinese or American culture. In addition to cultural and geographically displacement these Chinese born mothers are almost linguistically alienated. Just as in Kingston’s **The Woman Warrior**, the communication barrier here is double one, that between generations and that created by the waning influence of an older culture and the burgeoning presence of another. The mothers being the first generation immigrant not only maintain a cultural correlation with China emotionally, but also have a strong urge to explain their painful China experience as ethnic heritage to give intellectual, moral and social instruction to their daughters. “To penetrate my daughter’s tough skin and cut their tiger spirit loose” (Tan 1989). Mary Ellen Snodgrass admits, “The misunderstandings between generations derive in part from language difficulties and from daughters who

have no clear understanding of how their Chinese mothers survived both a feudal culture and a national catastrophe" (Amy Tan: A Literary Companion, 92).

June finds her mother and Auntie An-mei were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties,"(Tan 1989). June is used to American style of dressing but her mother and her aunts are still using Chinese dresses and cooking in Chinese style even though they are settled in America. William B. Moore in **Metaphor and Changing Reality** says, "cooking and eating more among the enduring habits, rituals, and everyday practices are collectively used to sustain a shared sense of diaspora cultural identity, in recognition that culinary culture has an important part to play in diaspora identifications. Among the everyday cultural practices routinely used to maintain diasporic identities, food is commonly of central importance. There are some reasons for this. Food traditions and habits are comparatively portable: groups that migrate around the world often carry with them elements of the diet and eating habits of the homeland."

The United State of America is a country composed of immigrants from all over the world, however, for historical reasons; English became the official language and definitely represents the dominant culture. Every new immigrant has to manage English to a certain extent in order to fit in or at least to pass the naturalization interview. It is also a carrier of culture. A lack of proper understanding of each other's perceptions results in a communication gap in *Joy Luck Club*. Jing-mei in the short story "The Joy Luck Club" says, "My mother and I never really understand one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more." (Tan 1989) The daughters in these stories are concerned only with American attitudes and habits. First generations children all go by their American names and not Chinese. For instance Jing-mei is known as June and this name is American and not Chinese. Amy Tan agrees that different languages come with different thinking system. Since Amy was raised in a Chinese speaking family and living in America, she found that she is a kind of "two minds" due to richness of her linguistic experiences. She found she was forced to speak modest and polite when she speaks in Chinese. Language enforces the culture behind it implicitly. People who live in a society, which is dominated by certain culture, have to adapt that dominant language. In **The Joy Luck Club**, the female characters speak dual language and live in a dual cultures. The ethnic dissatisfaction manifested in the relationship between the Chinese mothers and the American daughters is the dilemma which many immigrants, especially their descendants, are faced with that is living between two worlds i.e native world and the immigrant world.

The young generation is often split between the two worlds. As Rudyard Kipling wrote, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." The daughters had a difficult time juggling racial and cultural identities. As Lindo Jong laments, "I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?(Tan 1989). Even though daughters are proud of their mothers's strength and ingenuity and are moved by their tragic stories and touched by their fierce love but at the same time the daughter's are exasperated by their mothers impossible demands. They are resented of their mother's intrusions on their lives and sometimes humiliated and ashamed of their stubborn, superstitious out-of- place ways. Amy Ling says, "Their differences, however, are not marked by a slip of the tongue or even the generational gap, but by a deep cultural and geographical chasm"(Kim 1982). Daughters symbolized the contemporary American culture and mothers on the one side the Chinese culture. There is nearly always some tension in the exchange between mother and the daughter, between China and American environment. The focal point is either on a mother, who figures out her China world, or on the daughters, who seen caught in a sophisticated cultural trap, knowing possibilities rather than answers. Strangely, given the common problems presented, there is little concern with peer communication among daughters. Jing-mei explains, "Even though Lena and I are still friends, we have grown naturally cautious about telling each other too much. Still, what little we say to one another often comes back in another guise. It's the same old game, everybody talking in circles" (Tan 1989) This difficulty in communication may simply be a consequence of what Walter Shear says, "A basic lack of cultural confidence on the part of the daughters and thus a sense of their being thrown back into the families they have grown up in for explanations, validations, and identity reinforcement and definition."(Kim 1982)

As Waverly Jong puts it, "I have peered over the barriers I could finally see what was really there, an old woman, a wok for her armour, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in" (Tan 1989). The mother's vulnerability and their weakness is a sign of ultimate surrender for the daughter. Jing- Mei taking place for her mother at the mahjong table and make the trip to China to see the long lost twins. The act of Jing- Mei Woo's returning to China at the end of the novel and seeing the resemblance among herself, her two lost twin sisters and their dead mother. To begin with the train journey, "The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different...And I think, My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese" (Tan 1989). As Bella Adams (2005) puts, "Jing- mei's

experience of becoming Chinese certainly seems to assume an essentialism based on returning the native to natural habitat that is faithful to the geopolitical borders of the sovereign and colonial China and more so to the conceptual and symbolic boundaries of East and West.”

Sheffer (2002) says, “All diasporas have in common significant characteristics. They result from both voluntary and imposed migration; their members wish to and are able to maintain their own cultural and national identity, which is the basis for continued solidarity. Core members establish in their host countries intricate organizations that are intended to protect the rights of their members and to encourage participation in the cultural, political, social, and economic spheres,” In the novel June travelling to China and meeting her sisters identifies the bridging of two cultures. Harold Bloom says, “The trip to China becomes the way in which June Woo claims her name and the other part of herself, Jing-Woo, that she has never understood.”(Bloom 2009).

II. Conclusion

According to Jade Snow Wong, Tan (American daughter) to achieve a balance in the between world condition then, one cannot cling solely to the new American ways and reject the old Chinese ways, for that is the way of the child. One must reconcile the two and make one's peace with the old. Jing- mei may not know her mother even though she stays most of her time with her unlike her two sisters. They all carried their mother in their face and gestures. The togetherness of the family suggests crossing the barriers of geography, politics and cultural distinction and highlighting the ethnic identity. As Walter puts, “The return to the mainland certainly suggests a larger symbolic possibility, one, however, that must still cope with the actual barriers of geography, politics and cultural distinctness.”(Kim 1982).

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