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## Bridging Two Worlds: Mother–Daughter Dynamics and Cultural Conflict in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Dr. Anjana Thampi K. S<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Richard Jegadeesan P<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Padur, Chennai,  
India

ORCID: 0009-0000-8246-6151

Email: anjanatks@hindustanuniv.ac.in

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Padur, Chennai,  
India

ORCID: 0000-0003-0599-3710

Email: richardjegadeesan@gmail.com

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### Abstract

The paper discusses Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, examining the complex mother-daughter relations shaped by generational and cultural tensions between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. The novel develops questions of identity, communication gaps, and cultural displacement and shows how divergent worldviews create friction and misunderstanding. While the mothers cling to traditional Chinese values and hardship narratives, their daughters are unable to reconcile them with their own American experiences. The text shows how these conflicts establish emotional distance but at the same time allow for reconciliation and understanding. Through experience and narrative, the characters construct their cultural identities and negotiate the past with the present.

Titled "Mother-Daughter Relationships in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*: A Study of Generational and Cultural Conflicts," this paper looks at Tan's work regarding intergenerational tensions and the ultimate recognition of maternal sacrifice and love. By examining the core relationships throughout this novel, the essay facilitates broader concerns regarding heritage, assimilation, and the respective intricacies endemic to mother-daughter dynamics.

**Keywords:** Generational conflict, Cultural identity, Assimilation, Communication barriers, Chinese-American.

### Introduction

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* explores in exquisite detail the intricate relationships between mothers and their daughters, molded by the pull of two worlds: Chinese immigrant mothers and their

American-born daughters. The book probes into struggles of fitting in, finding identity, and miscommunication when long-held Chinese values are challenged by American ideals. The mothers, molded by their China-era experiences, demand obedience, and family devotion through sacrifice, while their daughters, growing up in the United States, desire independence, and self-expression. These gaps in understanding create misunderstandings and emotional distances, yet the story eventually reveals ways toward mutual understanding and reconciliation. Through intimate storytelling and personal tales, Tan shows that heritage and family bonds shape who we are, illuminating both the hurdles and rewards of living between two cultures.

This paper examines the mother-daughter relationship at the core of *The Joy Luck Club*: the ways in which Tan represents intergenerational conflict and the ultimate resolution into love, sacrifice, and cultural identity. The novel probes into the sensitive, painful divisions between the immigrant Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters through the clash between traditional Chinese values and those inspired by modern America. Their mothers, with roots in the culture and China experiences, stress sacrifice, obedience, and family duty, while the daughters have grown up in America and find it difficult to reconcile their American selves with the expectations of their mothers. This intergenerational difference creates misunderstandings, frustration, and emotional distance. Their communication barriers intensify on their conflict, as the daughters tend to interpret their mothers' advice as restrictive instead of protective. In contrast, the mothers interpret their daughters' independence as a rejection of their heritage and sacrifices. "The conflict of generations is not so much the result of individual miscommunication as of the crash of two values systems—Confucian and individualistic American" (Xu, 1994, p. 33).

The mother-daughter relationships in *The Joy Luck Club* have been extensively studied using the framework of generational and cultural tensions, with researchers looking at themes of identity, assimilation, and communication breakdown. Most studies point to the novel's depiction of the challenges Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters face as they try to balance competing cultural expectations. Scholars like Elaine H. Kim (1996) believe that the novel reflects the immigrant experience, particularly how first-generation mothers try to instill traditional Chinese values on their daughters, who end up resisting because they were raised in America. Kim points out that this conflict results in misunderstandings but eventually encourages a greater appreciation of cultural heritage. Likewise, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993) considers how the struggles of the daughters with dual selves reflect larger displacements and beliefs in belongingness, highlighting the psychological weight of existing between two worlds.

Other scholars, like Rocío G. Davis (2003), address the function of storytelling in negotiating intergenerational differences. Davis contends that the mothers employ personal narratives to convey values and experiences that cannot be articulated through words, as a way of transmitting cultural knowledge. Wendy Ho (1999) also explores the daughters' resistance to their mothers' expectations as a process of self-definition instead of total rejection of heritage.

### **Cultural Expectations**

One of the fundamental conflicts within *The Joy Luck Club* stems from the contrasting expectations regarding culture among the Chinese immigrant mothers and American-born daughters. While the mothers, having grown up in China, place much emphasis on conformity with traditional cultural expectations of obedience, sacrifice, and family honour, their daughters, having come up in the US where freedom and self-expression are highly regarded, tend to oppose these. Lindo expects her daughter Waverly to honour her Chinese heritage and use her talents for the family's benefit. But Waverly, a chess whiz, grows resentful of her mother's constant effort to claim the credit for herself. This mirrors Waverly's frustration to establish her identity independent of her mother's values.

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Waverly "I felt as if I had been sent to see a movie where the ending was already known. That my life had been planned for me, and I didn't have any choice besides following it" (Tan, 95).

Cultural expectations are at the centre of the mother-daughter conflicts in *The Joy Luck Club*. The Chinese immigrant mothers, who were brought up in a traditional manner, have strong beliefs regarding family, sacrifice, and obedience, which tend to conflict with the American values of independence and self-expression adopted by their daughters. This cultural conflict generates tension, as both generations are unable to comprehend each other's viewpoints. The daughters struggle to come to terms with their double cultural identity, while the mothers worry about the erosion of traditional Chinese values in a Western world that appears to provide too much freedom and too little respect for the past" (Heung, 1993, p. 600).

In Chinese culture, children are taught to respect their parents by performing family obligations, upholding traditions, and becoming successful to bring honour to the family. "Mothers desire to have their daughters be independent, but in their own way – according to Chinese ideals. This contradiction tends to isolate the daughters, who read their mothers' domination as a rejection of their American selves" (Yuan, 2005, p. 337). The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* make these demands on their daughters, usually without totally thinking about how difficult it must be to grow up in a new culture. Lindo states "She had a peculiar smile. She stood with her arms crossed over her chest, herself looking peculiar, as though she was not angry with me or pleased with me. 'We not concerning this girl.'". This girl not have concerning for us" (Tan, 100). This reinforces the profound generational and cultural divide between Waverly and Lindo. Lindo thinks that success belongs to the family, whereas Waverly sees success as personal achievement. Such divergence in belief breeds resentment and contention, depicting the novel's fundamental theme of generational and cultural tension.

### **Communication Barriers and Misunderstandings**

The cultural and linguistic gap between the daughters and mothers leads to constant misunderstandings. The mothers usually show their love and concern indirectly, which the daughters interpret as pressure or criticism. The protagonist in the novel Suyuan believes in the concept of the "American Dream" and pressures Jing-Mei to be a prodigy, but Jing-Mei interprets this as impossible pressure. Their failure to communicate openly makes them frustrated, Jing-Mei feeling like she is a failure, unaware of the fact that her mother's strictness results from love and expectation of her success. "The emotional miscommunication between mothers and daughters is one of the novel's recurring themes. The daughters mistake silence for indifference and control for rejection, missing the love beneath their mothers' actions" (Huntley, 1998, p. 84).

One of the key conflicts of *The Joy Luck Club* is the challenge of communication between the Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. "Tan demonstrates that in immigrant households, silence and broken storytelling are both a method of survival and a cause of misinterpretation between generations" (Cheung, 1993, p. 152). These communication blocks are not merely linguistic but also cultural, emotive, and differences in how love and expectations are expressed. The mothers, influenced by their Chinese experiences, tend to communicate indirectly through a maze of storytelling, silence, and symbols, whereas their American-born daughters require explicitness and verbal validation. This disconnection results in frustration, misunderstandings, and emotional distance between them.

### **Language as a Barrier to Emotional Connection**

The mothers have trouble with English so that they are unable to clearly express their feelings and thoughts. The daughters, who do not entirely comprehend Chinese, frequently lack the richness of their mothers' messages. Language is a barrier that causes disconnection where genuine intentions get lost in translation. In the dialogue between Ying-Ying and Lena St. Clair, Ying-Ying utters fragmented

English so that Lena cannot completely understand her mother's wisdom and caution. When Lena discusses her deteriorating marriage, Ying-Ying ominously says, "You put something else on top, everything falls down" (Tan, 165). Lena, accustomed to American directness, does not at once realize that her mother is cautioning her about the vulnerability of her own relationships

### **Generational Trauma and Maternal Sacrifice**

The mothers in the novel have endured hardships in China – war, loss, and oppression – that deeply shape their perspectives. They often struggle to convey these experiences to their daughters, who do not fully understand the extent of their sacrifices. An-Mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan as a mother and daughter An-Mei's past, marked by her mother's suffering as a concubine, teaches her the importance of strength. Yet Rose, brought up in America, matures indecisive and obedient, resulting in her marriage issues. An-Mei finally pressures Rose to claim her own voice, demonstrating how generational trauma affects identity and resilience. Generational trauma and maternal sacrifice are recurring themes throughout *The Joy Luck Club*, dictating the mother-daughter dynamics throughout the novel.

The Chinese immigrant mothers have suffered deep pain – war, repression, loss, and personal self-denial – but their daughters, who are raised in America, can't comprehend the depth of that pain. The mothers try to bequeath their resilience, but cultural differences usually result in misunderstanding. But as the daughters develop, they realize their mothers' sacrifices and the burden of their inherited trauma.

### **The Mothers' Past Trauma and Its Influence on Their Parenting**

The mothers have endured difficulties like war, abusive marriages, and oppression in China. These are the experiences that influence their parenting, as they attempt to shield their daughters from the same destinies while imparting strength. The mothers sacrifice a lot to provide their daughters with opportunities they never received. "Silence regarding the mothers' earlier trauma is a generational curse – one which isolates the daughters even while it quietly rules the emotional patterns of the family" (Wong, 1995, p. 31). Nonetheless, these are sacrifices that lie hidden, prompting resentment or misconception in their daughters. Suyuan Woo escaped China during wartime, leaving behind her twin daughters in the hope that they would live. She goes on to establish a new life in America, pinning all her hopes on her American-born daughter, Jing-Mei. Suyuan drives Jing-Mei to be a prodigy, under the impression that everything can be achieved in America. Jing-Mei, however, misinterprets this as incessant pressure, not realizing the sacrifices made by her mother for her to have a better life.

### **The Psychological Burden of Generational Trauma**

The mothers desire their daughters to be resilient, but their daughters, who have not gone through the same pain, do not comprehend the necessity of such strength. This results in emotional distance and feelings of inadequacy. Jing-Mei thinks about how her mother, Suyuan, kept retelling stories about her past, with each telling uncovering deeper layers of hurt. This excerpt points out the way Suyuan's unresolved trauma permeated Jing-Mei's childhood, influencing her identity and her relationship with her mother. "The emotional legacy of the mothers' past is not simply inherited but absorbed, often unconsciously, by their daughters, who must carry burdens they cannot name or fully understand" (Heung, 1993, p. 605).

Amy Tan examines the psychological weight of intergenerational trauma in *The Joy Luck Club* through the intricate dynamics of Chinese-American daughters and their immigrant mothers. The mothers' own traumas shape their daughters' lives deeply, and this often results in misunderstandings and emotional struggles. Ying-Ying had endured an oppressive marriage in China, losing her identity and self-esteem. She brings this trauma with her, becoming a passive and introverted mother. Lena, brought up in America, learns this passive style of relationships, resulting in her own dysfunctional

marriage. Ying-Ying finally comes to realize that she must pass on her painful history so that Lena can learn from it, not inherit her errors.

### The Role of Storytelling in Bridging Generational Gaps

Storytelling plays an important role in bridging the cultural and generational gap. The mothers use stories about their own past to give values to their daughters even when direct approaches do not work. Ying-Ying recounts her painful history of losing herself in an abusive marriage, which reflects the life of Lena in her own deteriorating marriage. Lena does not realize her mother's cautions until she also goes through the same emotional abandonment.

### Reconciliation and Acceptance

Despite the conflicts, the novel ultimately depicts reconciliation between mothers and daughters. As the daughters grow older, they learn to appreciate their mothers' sacrifices and accept their cultural heritage. Jing-Mei Woo's Journey to China after her mother's death and Jing-Mei goes to China to meet her long-lost half-sisters is symbolic of her acceptance of her Chinese heritage and her realization of the deep love her mother had for her.

### Conclusion

Stress and tension mark the mother-daughter relationships in *The Joy Luck Club*, yet simultaneously reveal a thread of love and reconciliation. Using cultural conflict, misunderstandings over personal issues, and personal difficulties, the novel stresses the worth of intergenerational relationships. In using issues of identity, trauma, communication, and storytelling, Amy Tan skilfully illustrates challenges and benefits that come with navigating dual cultural identities.

The communication barriers of *The Joy Luck Club* are more than linguistic but also include divergent cultural expectations for the display of love, advice, and identity. Whereas the mothers speak to one another in terms of indirect speech, silence, and action, their daughters, who have grown up in American culture, expect directness and verbal assertion. It is this misunderstanding that develops into the emotional distance between them, but as the daughters mature, they learn the depth of their mothers' love and begin the reconciliation process. Amy Tan signals that true understanding in fact means transcending words into the true meaning of what they say.

*The Joy Luck Club* gets at the nuance of intergenerational relationships in which conflict is unavoidable, yet reconciliation is possible through empathy and compassion. This research extends those discussions by further evidencing how Tan's characters bridge the cultural and emotional divides. Yet, through narration and shared experience, this novel also illustrates moments of reconciliation in which love and understanding transcend the cultural divide.

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