



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

MOTHER - DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN AMY TAN'S *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

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ABSTRACT

The cathexis between mother and daughter: essential, distorted, misused, is the greatest unwritten story, wrote the poet Adrienne Rich in her 1976 seminal book "Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution". The mother-daughter relationship is undoubtedly one of the strongest and intimate bond in the world. It is that powerful connection that ties a child to her mother nine months more than any other relation. This bond is always the special one surrounded with layers of happiness that pay a way to all other relationships. There are several reasons for focusing on this beautiful relationship. First, the lifelong bond that is forged at birth between mothers and daughters is of utmost importance to all women, irrespective of their ethnicity or background. Secondly, mothers play a pivotal role in bringing up their children and socializing them as functioning members of society. Thirdly, this relationship is the most intimate, deep and long lasting one. Writing about mothers and daughters serves the dual purpose of amending the lacuna in male defined history and at the same time contributing to consciousness raising in society about how women's lives are shaped and influenced by their interaction with other woman in the family. At the same time, exploring this magnificent relationship offers a rare glimpse into the separate world of women. The present paper aims to enhance the knowledge in understanding female bonding, the issues of cultural difference, linguistic barrier and generation gap as well as the challenge of women's liberation, freedom and independence in her life.

Keywords: Asian American literature, Amy Tan, cultural displacement, linguistic barrier, generation gap

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"Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement"-Adrienne Rich

I will always introduced as the author of the Joy Luck Club. On my tombstone - if I wanted a tombstone, which I don't - it would say Author of The Joy Luck Club.....Amy Tan (*The Guardian* 2005)

Amy Tan was born on February 19, 1952 in Oakland, California. She grew up in Fresno, Oakland, Berkeley and San Francisco. Tan completed her graduation in Montreux, Switzerland and her post-graduation in Linguistics from San Jose State University. Her journey in literary field started with *The Joy Luck Club* (TJLC 1989) that added L.A Times Book Award to her hat. *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Moon Lady* (1992), *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2000) and *Saving Fish From Drowning* (2005) are her prominent works which gave her the position of one of the best Asian-American writers. One of the most obvious reasons for the success of her novels is the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in these books.

Tan was influenced by both the cultures - Chinese and American. Her novels are the study of many different cultures and the generation gap that exist between the parents and their children. Both the cultures have a strong pull on mothers and daughters of *The Joy Luck Club*. Mother-daughter relationship features a gap in which the daughter thinks of her mother as old-fashioned, extremely strict, interfering and suspicious at times, whereas the mother thinks that her daughter is imprudent, disrespectful and unsagacious. Tan becomes the representative of whole Chinese community residing in America and at the same time highlighting the dilemmas and tensions erupting between the mothers and their daughters. She focuses on the conflicts and circumvention, delusions and misunderstandings in mother-daughter relationship opposing Chinese mothers to raise their American daughters in a society that is entirely different from the society in which they were raised. These mothers face the high predicament in raising their daughter between two cultures.

The Joy Luck Club is a work reminiscent of Tan herself. The novel's episodes and events are directly taken from her own life, her parents and her grandparents lives. She skilfully dwells into the art of narrating personal relationships among her characters in the novel. The life of her mother and her mother's mother is still fresh in her mind. Both the ladies had lived through unhappy experiences in their lives. Further, Tan's grandmother herself had witnessed her own mother committing suicide. Tan's mother too suffered from bouts of hysteria and depression living a traumatic life. She experienced a further misfortune when her father and brother were diagnosed brain tumours. Eventually Tan's mind have those uncanny and baffling memories full of sadness, loss, pain, death and distress.

The novel comprises the story of 8 Chinese women. Four are mothers who each had different hardships that forced them to leave China. Four are the daughters who each face their own struggles in their everyday living. The novel thus has stories of Suyuan and her daughter Jing Mei or June, Lindo and her daughter Waverly, Ying Ying and her daughter Lena, and An-Mei and her daughter Rose. The action in Tan's novel begins in the United States, but there is a shift in the narrative to China. It traces past life moving backward to the childhood of the mothers in China and present lives of the daughters in America. These shifts of past to present and vice-versa signifies the universal love and bond between mother daughter in two different cultures. Irrespective of different culture and identity, they have to negotiate in many ways to understand and even accept each other. The story is mainly about Chinese Americans, the first generation parents and their second generation offspring. The first generation immigrants value their Chinese heritage and are keen that their children are imbued in it as well. They remember their life in China, or recount it to their daughters who in this manner learn about China. The mothers in the novel are the symbols of Chinese life, heritage and tradition whereas the daughters embody American life, its language and also its culture and values. Each of the mother is aware of the pain of cultural difference and separation between herself and her daughter, but still they yearn to let their daughters retain Chinese culture and values.

The title '*The Joy Luck Club*' is derived from the same name of the club founded by Suyuan Woo in Kweilin. The club comprises of mah Jong game instilling elements of strong will and determination among its members to survive. In order to cope with their difficult times, the members of the group arrange feast to 'celebrate good fortune and play (Mah Jong) with seriousness and think of nothing else but adding to happiness through winning'. (TJLC,p.11) Thus the club helped its members to get off their difficult times and live their life with hopes in their minds.

The novel is divided into four sections. '*Feathers From a Thousand LI Away*' is the first section dedicated to stories of mothers in China. Here, Tan has given us the holistic picture of China by describing the lives of

mothers who immigrated from China to America. She vividly describes the past life in China, their experiences, values, superstitions and beliefs that influence their lives and decisions. The stories in this section embody pain, struggle, loss and survival. The mothers are very protective of their daughters, only trying to save them from agony and pain they themselves have endured as girls in China. But the daughters did not take this love and protection of mothers on a positive note. Rather they feel criticized and interference of their mothers in their life. Hence, cultural differences, linguistic barrier and generation gap arise many conflicts and tensions between the immigrant mothers and their American born daughters. The section introduces Jing-Mei Woo and her late mother Suyuan Woo who founded the Joy luck club along with her three companions Lindo, Ying Ying and An-Mei. Suyuan Woo, who was married to an officer in the Kuomintang during world war ii, escapes the Japanese invasion of Kweilin along with her two twin daughters. As she could not carry the load of the two babies on her back, she abandoned them on the road side; 'And without looking back, she walked down the road, stumbling and crying, thinking only of this one last hope that her daughters would be found by a kind-hearted person who would care for them'. (TJLC, p.283) Later she marries Canning Woo and immigrates to the United States where Jing Mei is born. She always attempted to find her lost daughters. But Suyuan died before she could locate her daughters. Jing Mei learns from the other mothers about her half-sisters who are alive. As a result, in order to fulfill her mother's last wish, she decides to leave for China and embrace her long lost sisters. Another mother An-Mei Hsu narrates the story of her mother who left her family and becomes the fourth concubine of a rich merchant, Wu Tsing. Her own son was also forcefully taken away by the second wife of Wu Tsing. All these circumstances forced her to commit suicide as in the Chinese culture at her time; 'suicide was the only way a woman could escape a marriage and gain revenge....'(TJLC, p.234) Lindo Jong, explains how she runs away to the United States from a suffocating marriage. She was married to Huang Taitai's son who was much younger than her. She was time to time pressurized by her mother-in-law to produce children. By inventing some lies, she escaped from her marriage and flees to America. Though she manages to escape China, but memories of her mother always haunted her mind when she thinks of past; 'I was so much like my mother. She did not see how my face changed over the years.' (TJLC, p.257) The fourth mother Ying Ying St. Clair narrates her story of how she was abandoned by her rich husband and lived with her poor relatives. She too describes the incident when she was lost during the Moon festival on a boat cruise. Although she was found back, but the incident completely changed her life. Her rich drunkard husband had left her for an opera singer, thus she was reduced to poverty and drudgery. This filled her heart with pain and hatred and she even aborts her baby carrying in womb; 'I became abandoned goods... I thought of throwing myself in the lake like the other ladies of shame...(TJLC, p.248)

All these stories in the first section are full of tragedies dealing with their past life growing up in China. The daughters could only understand their mothers when they recalled their childhoods in front of their daughters. These mothers wait for the day she could tell her daughter her good intentions in 'perfect American English' (TJLC, p.17) but they failed to do so as they are deeply imbued in Chinese values and traditions.

The second section of the novel '*The Twenty Six Malignant Gates*' traces the childhood of daughters Jing Mei, Waverly, Lena and Rose. The section witnesses the growth and development of the girls personalities and their conflicts with their mothers regarding the cultural settlement. It is difficult for the girls to embrace Chinese culture and values while residing in America. As a result, they protest against their mothers who wish to amalgamate both the cultures. The girls are not ready to accept any advice of their mothers as they reply; 'you can't tell me because you don't know! you don't know anything' (TJLC, p.87) shows their rejection of Chinese heritage. They had to suffer the trauma of balancing the past and future - traditional Chinese and refined Americans. Thus, both mothers and daughters have to face the problem of communication gap and misunderstandings that raised conflict between them.

The third section '*American Translation*' is Tan's account of the daughter's lives once again but this time adult life. It gives the strength and power to the daughters to contemplate their mother's advice and preaching, finally realising that the mothers are always right. Earlier, Rose had learned; 'Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version

was much better (TJLC, p.191). But later after heeding her mother's counsel and looking at her own life, she discovers that American version is not as perfect as she had thought of; 'There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing.' (TJLC, p.191). Sometimes a lot many options makes a person abash and choose the other side not appropriate to him. Sometimes the western beliefs and too much broad altitude carry along their demerits and loopholes.

The fourth and final section '*Queen Mother of the Western Skies*' narrates the stories of mothers living in America. In the section, the mothers finally conclude their stories and the daughters realise their pain and sufferings and their repentance of not listening to their mothers. In each of the section, with the narration of the mother, the daughter comes to understand her mother's indefatigability that can be absorbed to solve her dilemmas. The past should not be ignored as it has lessons to teach. One can never be free of his mother's influence even if we mature into adulthood. This is a sort of chain that we pass to our children and so on. June realises the fact that her mother is in her "bones". 'All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way (TJLC, p.215)

Conclusion

The Joy Luck Club is truly the dedication of Tan to the memory of her mother and her mother's mother. The daughters are the extensions of their mothers. Before Tan wrote *The Joy Luck Club*, her mother told her, I might die soon. And if I die, what will you remember? (Rozakis, p.387) Tan's answer appears on the book's dedication page emphasizing the novel's adherence to truth. "All the daughters are fractured bits of me." she said in a cosmopolitan interview (Rozakis,p.387) Further Tan added that the members of the club represents different aspects of her mother. The Chinese culture had not given the daughters that freedom that they avail residing amidst American culture. Being born and brought up in America, their view about mother's control over them is quite different that they are unwilling to accept. They bear their mothers as being powerful ancestors to mould their life and identity. Throughout the novel, in spite of many issues that tug from both the cultures, Tan structures her novel in such a way that the chain remains unbroken. She has ascribed more power and strength to the mothers as she feels mothers has the powerful presence in the lives of their children. To quote Nancy Willard; "Amy Tan's special accomplishment in this novel is not her ability to show us how mothers and daughters hurt each other, but how they love and ultimately forgive each other."

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