

The Challenges of Cultural Translation and the Problems of Immigrant Identity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

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Abstract

The Joy Luck Club is a novel by Amy Tan that traces the sentimental stories and relationships of four pairs of mothers and daughters. Tan develops the novel by handling the traditional Chinese beliefs to highlight the differences in values between mothers and daughters. In Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, one of its themes is the challenges of cultural translations that causes misunderstanding in relationships. The immigrant identity in the novel reveals the sufferings and the difficulties of the mothers and the daughters which they face leaving their native land since they are genetically Chinese.

The novel describes four women with different characters and their fates to immigrate to America when facing the dangerous disasters of the country and their life and which covers the growing experience of the four daughters of the four women. This paper focuses on this novel and tries to bring out the features distinguishing men and women and gives a perspective from the feminist point of view.

Keywords: Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, Relationships, Challenges, Translations, Misunderstanding, Immigrants

Amy Tan's writings attest to her success at feminist and universal themes. Her novels, stories and essays brim with support for strong mother-daughter relationships and she better links woman-to-woman relations. She fills her plot with praise for female characters who accept near-impossible tasks. The story of gender differences in Shanghai during the war contrasts the male and female digestive systems. Men earn prestige by their loud belches and women survive by swallowing their sorrows a private act implying the beginnings of life-long secrets, silencing and internal unrest.

The Chinese view of fate is a dominant focus in Tan's novels. In *The Joy Luck Club*, four immigrant women – An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, Ying ying St. Clair and Suyuan Woo – dispossessed of wartime China, a weekly game of mah jong. Their laughter in the face of family separation, exile, unhappy marriage and violent death characterizes powerless women as risk takers who have nothing to lose by grasping at joy and luck.

In Amy Tan's works a generational problem develops over time, and cultural displacement occurs as family lines expand. While this is not the problem in and of itself, indeed, it is natural for current culture to gain over culture, it serves as the backdrop for the disorientation that occurs between generations. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan calls close attention to the idea of forgetfulness. Through these two factors, Tan tries to explain displacement on the parts of both mothers and daughters. The daughters, we find, are lost and found always wandering, and the mothers themselves seem paralyzed by past secrets of pain and sacrifice. The death of Suyuan Woo is explained like this:

“‘had a new idea in her head,’ said my father. ‘But before it could come out of her mouth, the thought grew too big and burst. It must have been a very bad idea.’”

“The doctor said she died of a cerebral aneurysm. And her friends at the Joy Luck Club said she died just like a rabbit: quickly and with unfinished business left behind” (Tan 19).

Suyuan maintained a secret she had kept from her daughter, Jing-Mei to her entire life about the two sisters that had been left behind while she fled from China. She could never tell her daughter about her past life and to Jing-Mei because she could never know her mother completely till the end of her life.

Ying-Ying St. Clair is an excellent example of this separation. In the chapter “The Moon Lady” she describes how the pain of being separated from her family on a trip to see the Moon Lady. The whole theme of the story is lost in the beginning and regained at the end. Interestingly enough, Ying-Ying tells us this story has gone unremembered for so long, that up until now, she had never remembered the end of it: “It is my earliest recollection: telling the Moon Lady my secret wish. And because I forgot what I wished for, that memory remained hidden from me all these many years” (67). She never reflected upon her tale enough to glean from it the lesson of being found and not being lost. She had kept her silence and never thought about her memory enough to tell her daughter up until the present, when she sees the state in which her daughter lives:

“All these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me. She

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sees a list of things to buy, her checkbook out of balance, her ashtray sitting crooked on a straight table. And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others” (67).

All of the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* suffer from the same problem. They do not want to talk about their pasts and so China never enters the minds of their daughters. Their daughters never find a compass to guide them through life because the mothers never offer concrete anecdotes to teach them with. Entire chapters of their mothers’ lives are locked to them, and because of that, the daughters simply cannot accept the wisdom their mothers give. The mothers, in turn, fade into the background of their daughter’s lives, never being heard. Ying-Ying wisely compares herself to a shadow and realizes what her silence has cost her. She understands that because of her silence, she has faded into the background, and because she has never told her daughter what she knows. All the aunts suffer from this problem. As Jing-Mei Woo accurately observes:

“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” (41).

While Tan creates a situation in which it seems like all is lost – the daughters do not respect their mothers and their mothers realize too late that they have their daughters –we understand that in case of Jing-Mei Woo. Jing-Mei follows the wishes of her aunts and deceased mother and goes in search of her long-lost half-sisters. She journeys back to China, and in doing so reunites herself with her past:

“The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And I think, My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese” (266).

Finally, Suyuan Woo gains a form of new life in the unification of her past in the form of her Chinese daughters and her present in the form of her American-born daughter, Jing-Mei. In *The Joy Luck Club*, therefore, the past is an important element to the Chinese-American identity.

Throughout the novel, the narrators consider on their inability to convert concepts, emotions and sentiments from one culture to another culture. The incomplete cultural understanding of both the mothers and the daughters raise obligation to their incomplete knowledge of language. In addition, the hurdles that exist between the mothers and the daughters are often due to their impotence to communicate with one another. Although the daughters know some Chinese words and the mothers speak some English, communication often becomes a matter of translation between them, of words whose intended meaning and accepted meaning are in fact quite separate, leading to ethereal misunderstandings.

At some point in the novel, all the characters express anxiety over her inability to reconcile her Chinese heritage with her American surroundings. Indeed, this reconciliation is the only aim of Jing-mei's journey to China. While the daughters in the novel are by genetically Chinese and have been raised in mostly for Chinese households, they also identify and feel comfortable in modern American culture. Waverly, Rose, and Lena all have American boyfriends or husbands, and they consider many of their mothers' customs and their decisions as old-fashioned or even unbelievable. Most of the times the childhoods always try to escape their Chinese identities as they belong to America. Jing-mei didn't accept during adolescence that she had any Chinese aspects inside her, insisting that her Chinese identity was under only to her external features. Lindo observes that Waverly would have joined her hands for joy during her past years if her mother had told her that she did not look Chinese.

The first difficulty with translation occurs when Jing-mei links the story of her mother's founding of *The Joy Luck Club*. After attempting to explain the intendment of the club's name, Jing-mei perceive that the concept is not something that can be translated. Tan points out that the daughters think their mothers are ludicrous because of their damaged English, while the mothers are impatient with their daughters who don't understand the cultural differences of their language and who do not intend to pass along their Chinese inheritance to their own children.

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