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Cultural Barrier through Communication – As Explained in
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Lakshmi Priya, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate



Amy Tan

The Structure of *The Joy Luck Club*

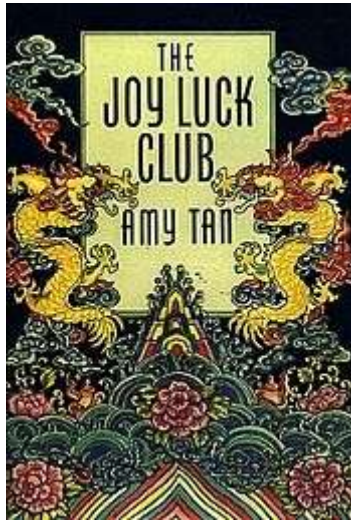
The Joy Luck Club is Amy Tan's first novel. The novel comprises of four sections, each proceeded by a fable.

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Jing-mei (June), the main and important character, is responsible for weaving all the four sections together. The four mothers in this novel are immigrant Chinese, the four daughters are the first generation Chinese-Americans. From the beginning of the novel, we discern one culture trying to dominate another, that is, Chinese culture asserting itself over American culture and vice versa.

The mothers are born and brought up in China; they try to implement Chinese traits and qualities on their daughters who have assimilated American lifestyle. The daughters avoid adopting or accepting the Chinese traditions. Due to lack of proper understanding of each other's perceptions, a communication gap develops. Mothers speak a mixture of fractured English and Chinese; the daughters speak English the way it is spoken in America. Jing-mei in the story "The Joy Luck Club" says:

"My mother and I never really understand each other. We translated each other's meaning and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more." (TJLC 37)

Change in Attitudes

The daughters in these stories are concerned only with American attitudes and habits. First generation children all go by their American names and not Chinese. For instance, Jing-mei is known as 'June' and this name is American, not Chinese. Jing-mei thinks that her mother's English is terrible, but her mother prides herself in her Chinese language.

Divergent perceptions and absence of a common language of communication have rendered each incomprehensible to the other language. As a result, they fail to fathom each other's feelings and likes and dislikes.

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Jing-mei hardly knows anything about her mother's life. "Something was always missing. Something always needed improving. Something was not in balance. This one or that had too much of one element, not enough of another" (TJLC 31).

Turn of Events – History Revealed and Realized and a New Hope

Only after the mother's death does she come to know of her past and her plans for the future which came as a shocking revelation. Jing-mei is taken aback that she has two sisters back in China. When her aunts tell Jing-mei that she is the one who has to tell everything about her mother, she feels inadequate as she really had not understood her well enough to be able to talk about her: "What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything" (TJLC 40).

America is where Jing-mei's mother's hopes lay. In China she had lost everything, her mother, father, her first husband and two daughters, twin baby girls. She had believed that one can do anything in America. One could become rich and instantly famous.

Two Kinds

In "Two Kinds," another short story, we encounter Jing-mei and her mother again. When Jing-mei was young, her mother thought that Jing-mei could be a Chinese Shirley Temple. She wanted her to become 'child prodigy' while Jing-mei realized that only a few could achieve that status. She tried hard to become a prodigy to make her mother happy. When Jing-mei won the chess tournament, her mother coerced her to achieve a lot more. She wanted her to excel at playing the piano. This relentless pressure often led to acrimonious arguments and violence:

"Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius! I can't play the piano. And even if I could, I wouldn't go on TV if you paid me a million dollars" (TJLC 136). The mother asserts her parental authority and slaps her, "Who ask you be genius? ... Only ask you to be your best. For your sake. You think I want you be genius? Huh! What for! Who ask you?" (TJLC 136).

A Cultural Divide – Living Up to the Expectations of Parents

From this context we understand the exchange is a cultural divide, a clash of cultural values. Fostered on American lifestyle and American values, Jing-mei believes in freedom of speech and the right to choose her career, while the mother believes that it is her prerogative to govern her daughter's life. The parents feel that they know what is best for their children and pay no heed to where the inclinations of the latter lie.

Often enough failed parents drive their children into achieving what they could not. Jing-mei's mother's dreams are fuelled by the American dream that promises infinite success and

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infinite riches. The daughter is aware of her own limitations and is content to seek herself in more modest pursuits. But the mother has dreamt of seeing her as an American icon of success, something that she could not achieve as a child in China. Jing-mei cannot and does not want to live up to her mother's expectations. After a disastrous piano recital there is a major quarrel between the mother and daughter with the latter simply refusing to play anymore: "No! I won't" You want me to be someone that I'm not...I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be" (TJLC 141-142).

One's sympathies are with jing-mei as she is realistic about her shortcomings. But the mother fails to see eye to eye with her daughter. Sensing her daughter's belligerent mood, she classifies daughters by saying:

"Only two kinds of daughters. Those who are obedient and those who follows their own mind. Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter! Jing-mei shouted. "Then I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother." "Too late to change this," said the mother. "Then O wish I'd never been born...I wish I were dead like them." (TJLC 142)

A Tragedy of Incomprehension

The story is a tragedy of incomprehension resulting from a clash of cultural values and generational divide. The mother belongs to the old world order and believes in the inalienable right of the mother to regulate and run the life of the daughter. She swears by the adage that mother knows best. The daughter brought up on the cultural values of the New World find it difficult to understand her mother's hawk-like attention to everything that she does. The do's and don'ts imposed by the mother leave her disenchanted. Her individual liberty is trampled upon by the mother's domineering and dictatorial attitude. East frowns upon the attitudes of the West.

Amy Tan the Writer and Her First Novel

Amy Tan is a first generation Chinese American writer who speaks English fluently, correctly and with ease, unlike her mother who is an immigrant Chinese and whose English leaves much to be desired.

In her essay titled, 'The Mother Tongue', she begins by talking about English language and its variations, or English as she calls it, in other countries. Being a writer she is acutely conscious of how language in general has the capacity to 'evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex of idea, a simple truth.'" But happens when one's language stilted, truncated and charecterised by flagrant violations of even the simple rules of grammar?

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These ideas come up for scrutiny while talking about her book ‘The Joy Luck Club before an audience. She begins her lecture well enough until at some point she becomes conscious of the fact that her mother, who was also present, would feel lost, perhaps alienated, at listening to her daughter the way she was talking. Amy Tan realized that this was not the way she used English in her day-to-day conversation with her mother. She finds herself saying things like:

“The intersection of memory upon imagination” and “There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to thus-and-thus”, a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases...” (TJLC 923)

Her speech was characterized by ‘all the forms of standard English [she] had learned in school and through books, the form of English [she] did not use at home with [her] mother” (TJLC 923).

Personalizing the Story: Focus on Language Choice and Use

Amy Tan suddenly becomes aware that her mother would not be able to comprehend what she is speaking because she never used such type of perfect English at home with her. A sense of distancing, therefore, is visualized. Her mother would feel left out as she (Amy Tan) was using English language different from what they used at home to communicate with each other. It was a different linguistic register that was employed at home and this made for mutual comprehension, both intellectual and emotional. Her mother who is an immigrant Chinese is well versed in Chinese but not in English language. She uses fractured English combined with Chinese. Communicating with each other in this broken English helped build the bond of understanding between mother and daughter. Within the close family circle this fractured English seems perfectly legitimate. However grammatically incorrect it maybe, it has a local colour and flavor; it carries the essence of Chinese English but hearing her daughter speak in chaste English leaves the mother bemused. It is as though the daughter has suddenly lost her personality and sensibility.

This language has suddenly created different identities, with the mother being every bit a Chinese with her incorrect smattering of English and the daughter dwelling in America with her school learnt English with its stress on correctness of speech. The point that is focused is that in one context this fractured language creates intimacy, fosters ties and promotes family talk. In another context where interaction with a larger section of American society is concerned, this kind of Chinese English would become an impediment, resulting in social ostracism and discrimination. While talking to her husband Amy Tan would say without any inhibition: “Not waste money that way” (TJLC 23).

It sounds natural, however incorrect the expression maybe. The husband too does not sense it to be incorrect. They are on the same wavelength. But were she to change her syntax she would sound artificial, out of harmony with her social surrounding, predominantly Chinese.

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Amy Tan then goes on to give an example of the way her mother uses English. This is what the mother says about a gangster who had the same family name and who had made it big in life:

“Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street kind. He is Du like DuZong – but not Tsung-ming Island people...Now important person, very hard to inviting him. (TJLC 23)

How many people will understand what she is saying? Some will understand and some may understand none of it. But to Amy Tan says:

to her ‘mother’s language is perfectly clear, perfectly natural and it is ‘vivid’, direct, full of observation and imagery.’ But, let us face facts, it is broken, fractured and limited English. It lacks wholeness, completeness, logic. “No wonder people in department stores, at banks and at restaurants did not take her seriously.” Do not give her good service. They even pretend they did not hear. (24)

One’s linguistic facility reflects one’s thinking. Amy Tan says that when she was growing up she felt that her mother’s limited English “limited my perception of her....I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say” (24).

Well, that is a wrong perception on the part of the child. But one cannot deny the fact that one cannot express one’s thought unless one is well equipped in the language of communication. Not to know the language well enough is to run the risk of saying the wrong things. It is terrible situation.

Though Amy Tan has no problem with her mother’s language, there are others who frown upon it. Amy Tan cites examples to illustrate the difficulties her mother encountered in dealing with people. On each occasion she would ask the daughter to come to her aid and what seemed one moment an insurmountable hurdle would be sorted out in a jiffy. Amy Tan had only to talk to people on behalf of her mother and it was open sesame. The ability to speak the language correctly ensures social acceptance and a sense of belonging to a group or coterie. Failure to do so renders one an outcast or an outsider.

Uncertain and Vague Understanding of Mother

From her short stories we learn that Amy Tan’s understanding of her mother was uncertain and vague. The mother’s limited knowledge of English served as a barrier to effective communication with the daughter who understood English well enough but her understanding of Chinese was limited and what is more she made no attempt to learn her mother Tongue. The failure to communicate effectively has led to cultural conflict. Amy Tan remains an outsider to the Chinese culture and the life there. For the people acquiring a new language of

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communication, the problem is that they have a mother tongue which is used for all thought processes, but useless for communication and; the acquired language of communication (BROKEN English) is inadequate to carry the burden of their deeper emotions, feelings and thoughts. Translation fails and so does communication in this process.

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