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AMY TAN'S *THE JOY LUCK CLUB***

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THE CHINESE DIASPORA AND ITS LITERARY PURSUITS

It is not just the Indian Diaspora writers who try to explore their original roots using English as their language of communication. Members of diverse ethnic groups that have migrated to lands far off from their original homes vigorously seek to interpret and re-interpret their lives, histories, and purpose of life.

Transplanted members of the great civilization of China look at their roots in many interesting ways. Overseas Chinese are a very significant part of the great Chinese civilization. They play important roles and perform important functions in many Asian nations. They have been mercilessly persecuted, killed in great numbers in racial riots, and denied even the right to continue to bear their original Chinese names in some nations. For the last 150 years or more, they have toiled hard to build their communities in the United States, from building railroads to building China towns. Their saga is yet to be adequately narrated.

Withstanding all this suffering, they have come through fire, but in recent years, however, like many other minority ethnic immigrant groups, they also have begun to lose interest in the maintenance of their heritage. Novels such as those written by Amy Tan provide a window to understand the psyche of the Overseas Chinese. Even as the world

looks at China in awe and fear because of its sudden and tremendous economic growth, the culture, heritage and enterprise of the Chinese Diaspora attracts the attention of all.

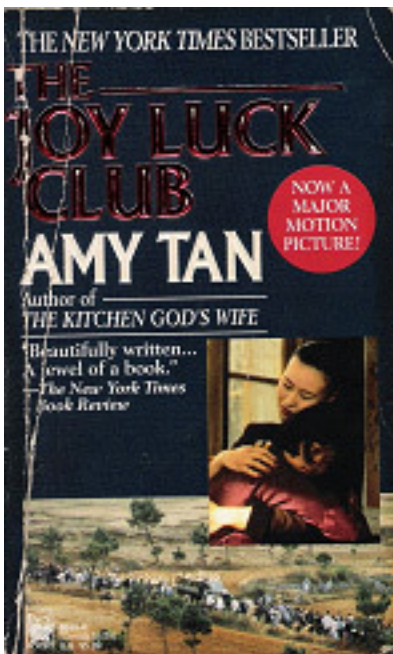
There seems to be a lot of similarity between the Chinese and India Diaspora literature in their quest to identify and understand the heritage and its continuance. Indian readers will easily identify themselves with the themes presented in Chinese Diaspora fiction. And yet it appears, the narrative techniques they adopt seem to be very innovative. Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* is one such novel.

AMY TAN AND HER NOVELS

Amy Tan was born as the daughter of Daisy and John Tan, in 1952 in Oakland, California. After graduation, Tan pursued a variety of careers. In 1985, Tan began writing fiction as a form of therapy for pressure due to the self-imposed overwork on her business writing projects. By receiving the popular and critical acclaims, *The Joy Luck Club*, her first novel published in 1989, became an enormous success. Her other novels include *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005). Many of the stories from Tan's novels are inspired by anecdotes from the incidents from her own life, though they cannot be said as strictly autobiographical.

This article focuses on the study of Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL



Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (JLC) is a long complex and tempting narrative. It was one of the best sellers of 1989.

The novel is divided into four sections and each section is again divided into four stories. The first and the last sections are narrated by the mothers, the first about their past lives in pre-1949 China and the last regarding their immigration to America. The middle sections are narrated by the daughters. The second section presents their childhood and the next portrays their marital life.

There is an exception in this pattern in the case of Jing-Mei. Since her mother is dead, she as the daughter narrates the story. She is the only character who is present in every section thereby providing a link to all the sixteen stories. Each of the four sections is prefaced with an initiatory thematic tale or myth, portraying a mother figure.

We notice a very deliberate and well-conceived plan in the structure of this novel.

Feathers from a Thousand Li Away

The first prologue entitled "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" (JLC 3), comprises of a bundle of representations, which reflect the nature of the mother-daughter relationship. The prologue commences with an old woman, recollecting about a swan she bought for a small sum in Shanghai. In America, the swan is seized by the customs' officials and she is left with only one of the feathers of the swan. She is unable to describe how beautiful the swan was. The prologue ends on a touching and pathetic note:

For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, 'This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions'. And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English (JLC 4).

The "swan" and "the old woman" symbolize the four mothers who came from China to the United States, with the hope of giving their daughters a life superior to the one they have had in China. The "swan" is symbolic of the mother's past life in China which she wants to pass on to her daughter. In the four stories of the first section, "The Joy Luck Club", "Scar", "The Red Candle" and "The Moon Lady", the mother narrators try to give only a part of their past life. Thus the stories symbolize the only left out feather.

Twenty Six Malignant Gates

In the second prologue, "Twenty six Malignant Gates" (JLC 87), the mother warns her daughter not to ride the bicycle around the corner, by quoting from an old Chinese book "The Twenty six Malignant Gates". The mother further adds that the book lists twenty six bad things that can happen to the child outside the protection of the house. When the daughter asks her to explain those bad things, the mother maintains silence. The girl furiously shouts at her mother and goes out, taking her bicycle and falls down before she arrives at the corner. The daughter feels sorry for her thoughtless action and disobedience towards her mother. The experience as narrated by Amy Tan is worthy of note:

"It is written in Chinese. You cannot understand it. That is why you must listen to me."

"What are they, then?" the girl demanded. "Tell me the twenty -six bad things."

But the mother sat knitting in silence.

"What twenty-six!" shouted the girl.

The mother still did not answer her.

"You can't tell me because you don't know! You don't know anything!"

And the girl ran outside, jumped on her bicycle, and in her hurry to get away, she fell before she even reached the corner(JLC87).

The childhood stories of the four daughters are narrated in the four stories of the second section. The stories "Rules of the Game", "The Voice from the Wall", "Half and Half" and "Two Kinds" are narrated by Waverly, Lena, Rose and Jing-Mei respectively. The daughters neglect their mothers because of the frail relationship with them. Later they regret for having lost the opportunity of expressing their love for their mothers.

American Translation

"American Translation" (JLC 159), the third prologue is about a mother, her daughter and the grand child. The mother tries to rearrange the mirror in her daughter's bedroom to enable her to have a good relationship with her husband. The mother remarks: "You cannot put mirrors at the foot of the bed. All your marriage happiness will bounce back and turn the opposite way" (JLC 159). The daughter becomes irritated that her mother sees bad omens in every thing. The mother points to a gilt-edged mirror.

To quote,

"You hang it here," said the mother, pointing to the wall above. "This mirror see that mirror-haule!-multiply your peach-blossom luck."

"What is peach-blossom luck?"

The mother smiled, mischief in her eyes. "It is in here", she said, pointing to the mirror. "Look inside. Tell me, am I not right? In this mirror is my future grandchild, already sitting on my lap next spring".

And the daughter looked - and haule! There it was: her own reflection looking back at her (JLC 159).

The present lives of all the four daughters are recounted by them in this section. The problems in their marital relationships are described in "Rice Husband", "The Four Directions," "Without Wood" and in "Best Quality". Their mothers try to solve them and prove to be supportive of their daughters.

Queen Mother of the Western Skies

The fourth prologue "Queen Mother of the Western Skies" (JLC 239), portrays a grandmother and a baby. When the grandmother narrates her past life, the child laughs for no reason.

As the baby continued to gurgle, the woman felt a deep wish stirring in her heart.

"Even if I could live forever", she said to the baby, "I still don't know which way I would teach you. I was once so free and innocent. I too laughed for no reason.

"But later I threw away my foolish innocence to protect myself. And then I taught my daughter, your mother, to shed her innocence so she would not be hurt as well" (JLC 239).

According to her when one recognizes evil in other people it is not because she has become evil too. Baby laughs listening to her grandmother's laments.

"O! O! You say you are laughing because you have already lived forever, over and over again? You say you are Syi Wang Mu, Queen Mother of the Western Skies, now come back to give me the answer! Good, good, I am listening ..."

"Thank you, Little Queen. Then you must teach my daughter this same lesson. How to lose your innocence but not your hope. How to laugh forever" (JLC 239).

THE PROLOGUE

The delicate way Amy handles the concept of **prologue** reminds us of "Each and All," in which Emerson writes about the mystical unity of the many and the one (Ghymn 24).

The stories titled "Magpies", "Waiting Between the Trees", "Double Face" and "A Pair of Tickets" in this section offer the complete picture of the mothers' lives in China. The daughters are not serious about the Chinese heritage of their mothers and show little interest to understand it.

The narrations by the mothers in this section seem to be unrealistic and exaggerated. Hence the mothers can be said to be undependable. Janet Burroway remarks that the unreliable narrator has become one of the most favoured characters in modern fiction, but is far from a new comer to literature and in fact predates fiction. Every drama contains characters who speak for themselves and present their own cases and from whom we are partly or wholly distanced in one area of value or another (quoted in Ghymn 26).

USE OF PROLOGUES

The use of prologues is thus a unique technical device of Amy Tan. They exemplify the theme of four different sections of the novel. It is a part of the pattern of the novel, which indicates clearly the four divisions of the novel. The prologues of the four sections highlight the themes of the ensuing four stories. They portray the life style and the society of China and America. They illustrate generational conflict and bring out the novelist's moral intentions.

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