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Imprints of Cultural Consciousness in Amy Tan's '*The Joy Luck Club*'

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Abstract

Colonialism has left very deep and irreversible marks on the psyche of the colonized. The imprints of colonialism in terms of living, language, culture, festivals, ideologies and so on and so forth; can be seen in every aspect of the colonized; which has not only marred but has also altered the entire world of the colonized. In the era of Post colonialism, concepts like 'cultural consciousness' have come up on the surface and have been used as a weapon against the dominance of colonialism and simultaneously it plays the role of a preserver of uniqueness and differences belonging to the colonized. Amy Tan used 'cultural consciousness' extensively by highlighting and bringing the culture and tradition of China on almost every page of '*The Joy Luck Club*'.

Keywords: Colonialism, Post colonialism, Cultural Consciousness

The themes employed in the works of Amy Tan are varied. Apart from the dominant theme of mother-daughter relation, memories of past in relation to present also play a significant role in her novels. It won't be inappropriate to call Amy, a personal storyteller as her personal experiences can be traced in the episodes of her stories. Violence and injustice against women is another major theme; the presence of which can be sensed in almost every chapter of her novels. She has taken the instances from the life of her own mother, the way her mother escaped from the brutality of first marriage in China and other atrocities women faced in the man dominated society. Her stories are also full of a wide range of Chinese festivals, traditions and beliefs – presence of haunting spirits and ghosts, symbolic meaning behind every happening, belief in the presence of life after death and family relationships are apparent on the pages of her stories. Looking back and peeping into the Chinese culture and

making an attempt to know more about it, reveals Amy's efforts to establish a reconnection with her roots.

Chinese are very closely connected with their roots. In the past China did give an access to western influence but it did not let the west to wipe out its cultural values and heritage. For a very long time the nation remained at a safe distance from the impact of western powers and had no major contacts with other civilizations partially due to geographical barriers like huge Pacific Ocean on the east, unwelcoming plateaus of Tibet, deep ravines of the Burma border; second due to the 'self-sufficient' attitude of Chinese dynastic rulers. Chinese emperors and the people never liked any form of intrusion from outside. The Great Wall of China is one such example which evidently shows China's dislike towards the meddling of external forces in its internal affairs. The culture of a nation has the strength to keep its people united but without a strong bureaucratic check the diversity within a culture can lead to the fall of a nation. For example, in case of India, the country was not under one strong government rather there were regular splits and disputes among the regional kings which consequently benefitted the British to rule India. While in China, there was a dynastic rule which covered almost the entire nation and never allowed any religion or cultural practice or belief to create a split in the nation. As a result, China grew as a separate and isolated nation with its own way of living. W Scott Morton in his book *China* (1995) says,

The country is so large and the regional differences are so great that it might easily in the course of its history have broken up permanently into separate nations, as Europe

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did after the decline of the Roman Empire. What seems to have prevented this breakup in China was a relatively stable and powerful bureaucracy, which was the guardian of a common script and a common highly prized culture. (5)

The use of Talk-story by Amy Tan plays a key role in unfolding the cultural colours of China. E. D. Huntely mentions Linda Ching Sledge definition of Talk-story in *Amy Tan A Critical Companion* (1998) as

a conservative, communal folk art by and for the common people, performed in the various dialects of diverse ethnic enclaves and never intended for the ears of non-Chinese. Because it served to redefine an embattled immigrant culture by providing its members immediate, ceremonial access to ancient lore, talk story retained the structures of Chinese oral wisdom (parables, proverbs, formulaic description, heroic biography, casuistical dialogue) long after other old-country traditions had died. (32)

The culture of China consists of a strong belief in philosophies, superstitions, ghosts, life after death, Feng-Shui, dragons, social etiquettes, Chinese language, attachment with past, patriarchal system, feet-bound system, fortune telling, dragon bones, conserved and rigid society, belief in fate, Yin-yang concept and the touch of mysteriousness. Due to Sino-Japanese War followed by regular political conflicts, Chinese in bulk moved to America. They settled and got assimilated with the new lifestyle of America but nothing new could snap down their relation with their homeland or could destroy their firm faith in Chinese culture. Europeans could not penetrate and break down China; similarly, in the works of Amy Tan, the strong and dominant presence of cultural aspects shows that no westernization can break off their connection with Chinese culture and tradition.

The first story “The Joy Luck Club” narrated by Jing-Mei Woo depicts the desire to search for and to get linked with what is left behind and to make the past, the part of very present. The four ladies who arrived in America, including Jing-Mei’s mother, regularly meet to play ‘Mahjong’. To keep the China alive in them, they tell stories and share their experiences that they had in China and the adversities which forced them to leave their homeland.

Chinese beliefs might appear meaningless or superstitious to some people but for Chinese, these beliefs hold a very significant place. There are various philosophical beliefs that Chinese believe in and which forms an integral part of their daily life. For instance, they always try to seek a balance in everything and believe that whenever any of the elements with which humans are constituted, goes out of balance, troubles don’t take time to visit and knock the door. The **impact of these philosophical ideas and beliefs** made a dominant presence in Tan’s works.

Jing-Mei’s mother was considered as a very wise woman who believed every human being is made up of five elements and whenever any of the elements increases more than adequate amount, things fall out of balance.

Each person is made up of five elements, she told me... Too much fire and you had a bad temper... Too little wood and you bent too quickly to listen to other people’s ideas, unable to stand on your own... Too much water and you flowed in too many directions, like myself, for having started half a degree in biology, then half a degree in art and finishing neither when I went off to work for a small ad agency as a secretary, later becoming a copywriter. (22, 23).

Superstitious Beliefs Form Another Important Part Of Chinese Life. Even after living in America for years, Chinese Americans have stick

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to their age old beliefs. The book *The Joy Luck Club* clearly shows that the modern American ways could hardly bring any change in the behavior of Chinese immigrant mothers. In the story *Scar* we find a strange peculiar way of curing a dying relative. Anmei's grandmother, Popo was almost near to her death. Her daughter came and in order to save her mother she prepared a special soup cooked with her flesh along with varied special kind of herbs. Another unusual belief could be seen in Popo's act of holding her lips tight so that she can block the passage of her spirit to move out of her body.

My mother took her flesh and put it in the soup. She cooked in the ancient tradition to try to cure her mother this one last time. She opened Popo's mouth, already too tight from trying to keep her spirit in. She fed her this soup, but that night Popo flew away with her illness. (45)

Chinese have a very strong belief in spirits, ghosts and life after death. If something goes wrong in Chinese family, say a death or a member falling sick or when some other trouble descends upon the members of the family, they don't take time in blaming the ghosts or evil spirits of the offended ancestors. In *The Red Candle* Huang Taitai's husband fell sick and her mother-in-law immediately concluded that the ghosts want to kill her son. But later when he was cured, she believed the ghosts must have changed their intention and instead of robbing her son they must have got interested in taking away her grandson.

...his father was very sick and his family thought he might die...But his father lived and his grandmother was scared the ghosts would turn their attention to this baby boy and take him instead. (48)

Belief in Feng-shui also occupies a considerable place in Chinese traditional system. The story "Voice from the Wall" further narrates the beliefs related to the 'structure of the house'. Chinese have a firm faith in Feng-shui which is

considered crucial to refer while deciding the structure and construction of the house or any building. In the story, Lena's mother is shown under a terrible influence of superstitious beliefs. For most of the time she remained under the terror of her thoughts. When Lena with her family moved in their new apartment, her mother found the apartment too steep and she used this reason for the bad air to remain trapped in the house, which can result in the destruction of the family. Another mistake she pointed out in the house is - kitchen facing the wash room which indicates all the goodness will be flushed down the drain.

When something goes against your nature, you are not in balance. This house was built too steep, and a bad wind from the top blows all your strength back down the hill. So you can never get ahead. You are always rolling backward...See how narrow this doorway is, like a neck that has been strangled. And the kitchen faces this toilet room, so all your worth is flushed away. (121).

There is a significant place of dragons in Chinese culture. A dragon may be a dangerous creature for the world but it holds a very significant place in China and in the lives of Chinese. In the story "Half and Half", Rose's mother has been shown believing in the existence of dragons. When the family was out for a picnic on the seashore, the tragedy struck and Rose lost her brother, Bing, in the waves of the sea. Rose's mother believed that Bing must be in the clutches of sea dragon. According to her belief, losing of Bing is the result of the misdeed done by a family ancestor, he stole sacred water from the well and now water has taken the revenge upon the family by stealing away Bing. Rose's mother decided to appease the temper of sea dragon by sweetening the sea water and in order to free Bing from his coils, she threw a ring in the sea believing that this will distract the dragon making him forget about Bing and the pacified dragon with

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the ring will allow Bing to return to the surface. But Bing never returned.

An ancestor of ours once stole water from a scared well. Now the water is trying to steal back. We must sweeten the temper of the coiling dragon who lives in the sea. And then we must make him loosen his coils from Bing by giving him another treasure he can hide. My mother poured out tea sweetened with sugar into the teacup and threw it into the sea. And then she opened her fist. In her palm was a ring of watery blue sapphire...This ring she told me, drew coveting stares from women and made them inattentive to the children they guarded so jealously. This would make the Coiling Dragon forgetful of Bing. (148)

China has always remained in the blood of Chinese. They began to live in America but didn't forget to create their own Chinatown in USA. New York is known for world's best Chinatown. On visiting San Francisco, one cannot deny to admit that they have visited mini China or little China. Chinese carry the influence of their land wherever they go. Every section of "The Joy Luck Club" is full of China based tales, beliefs, conventions, traditions, customs and rituals. Chinese immigrant mothers even after getting married to English Americans could not follow the new culture. They stick to their Chinese beliefs and practices.

In "The Joy Luck Club" we saw Jing- Mei's mother used to take East corner of the table for playing 'mah jong'. It shows her attachment for east and her belief that goodness begins from East. In her mother's dialogue 'direction from which the sun rises and, where the wind comes from', sun and wind can be assumed to signify 'life'. "I know her corner on the table on the East. The East is where things begin, my mother once told me, the direction from which the sun rises, where the wind comes from." (25)

Language is an amazing source to stay connected to one's culture and tradition. And if

one has to destroy a culture, he should first destroy the language of that culture because it is the language which decides the life span of a culture.

Throughout "The Joy Luck Club" we see ample use of Chinese Language. Jing-Mei (second generation of Chinese immigrants) preferred to speak in English while her mother always replied in Chinese. "I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese." (26)

Other such examples can be taken from the regular Chinese phrases used every now and then in the stories. For example:

"She said the two soups were almost the same, *chabudwo*. Or maybe she said *butong*, not the same thing at all." (70),

"...a large platter of *chaswei*, sweet barbecued pork..." (23),

"...shou, no respect..." (39),

"...ni, a traitor..." (40),

"...Ching! Ching! – Please, eat!" (42)

In 'The Joy Luck Club', readers can sense 'a looking back'. For the characters in the books of Amy Tan, 'a looking back' is to think over what is left behind, something to which they should be connected but they are not, something about which they should be aware of but they are not acquainted with. The setting of her stories takes place in America but moves toward the land of origin that is China; unfolding the tales of its native land one after another. Her stories begin with a complexity in the characters and family ties but revealing of the past simplifies and resolves the misunderstandings and brings a kind of ease in the relations of characters. Amy Tan has pictured more of China than America in her stories. Her characters seem to pine for the reconnection with their roots. In Amy's works one can trace the reunion with the past-life in the form culture and conventions.

Cultural consciousness in the works of Amy Tan is dominantly visible. Talk story and magical realism in her works play a significant role in

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providing ample room for developing the cultural consciousness. Talk story is the device used by the writers to talk about myths, beliefs and philosophies of the homeland; Amy Tan has made use of it to present China and Chinese culture in terms of belief in ghosts and superstitions, role of past life in China and its significance in the present life in America, patriarchal society, societal norms, Chinese language and presence of China Towns in major cities of America. Magical Realism is used to surface a kind of protest against the dominant American society; the reference to myths, unscientific reasons and beliefs associated with homeland are presented with an intension to keep dominant American culture at the margins of the Amy Tan's novels.

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