

Identity Concerns and Mother-Daughter relationship in Amy Tan's '*The Joy Luck Club*'

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Abstract

First as well as second generation immigrants often struggle to identify themselves with a specific culture. Meeting the expectations of two diverse cultures often leads to tension and the struggle to adjust causes considerable trauma. Amy Tan as an Asian American writer depicts the dilemmas faced by the immigrants in her debut novel *The Joy Luck Club* which relates the story of four mothers and their first-generation Chinese-American daughters; two generations striving to come to terms with their cultural identity. Amy Tan deftly portrays the mystery of the mother-daughter ties in myriad ways.

This paper is an attempt to explore the identity issues and the cultural conflict faced by the mothers and daughters representing two generations in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and how the new generation adjusts and adopts to the host culture. Acceptance of a new culture by an immigrant necessitates conversion at all levels including the ethical and the emotional, and change in life style, dress code, habits and language which leads to a total alteration-of personality. The mothers wish to sustain their tradition and culture through their daughters whereas the daughters struggle to create an identity of their own.

Keyword: Identity, Culture, tradition, mother, daughter, relationship.

As an Asian-American writer Amy Tan, who occupies a prominent place in American literature, depicts the dilemmas faced by the immigrants and the crisis and struggle for identity by focussing on mother- daughter relationship.

In this paper I intend to explore the identity issues and the cultural conflict faced by the mothers and daughters representing two generations in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and how the new generation adjusts and adopts to the host culture. The mothers want to sustain their tradition and culture through their daughters whereas the daughters struggle to create an identity of their own.

The joy luck club is a weekly mahjongg party formed in San Francisco in the 1940s by four Chinese immigrants in order to forget their tragedies that happened in their lives. The novel takes place in 1980's, one of the members of the club is no more and in the game of mahjong her daughter June is expected to play in her mother's place. The feelings of the Americanized daughter reveal the distance that has come up between the two generations that of the mothers and daughters. The aunts reveal a secret to June that her mother had borne two more daughters whom unfortunately she had to abandon and now their whereabouts are known but before she could do anything the mother passed away and June determines to go to China to find her sibling. The book is divided into four sections, comprising four chapters each. June is the only narrator appearing in all four sections; the mothers speak in the first and fourth sections, while the daughters narrate the second and third.

Acceptance of a new culture by an immigrant necessitates conversion at all levels including the ethical and the emotional, and change in life style, dress code, habits and language which leads to a total alteration of personality. Moreover, modern man is distressed due to the spiritual malaise of contemporary life which alienates him not just from the outside world but also from his own self and the search for identity has been one of his chief concerns. A practicable identity, according to Sudhir Kakar, requires a compatible family structure and a corresponding set of cultural values and benefits. Displacement can be in varied forms: corporeal, emotional or political marginalization, alienation, self-alienation, social ostracism or an exclusion from known environments of family kinship and culture. Yet no dislocation is ever absolute or permanent in itself as there is always a looking back in some way or the other through memory and recollection. Cultural memories have a propensity to surface again and again and establish a connection with the future. They do not allow the individual to cut off ties with the past. The individual has to contend with many apparitions to establish his identity. (J 157,159) AJ Khan opines that man's search of his identity, in a world of rootlessness and uncertainty, takes him back to history or past, which gives him a base to hold on to. Writers often renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man and engaged themselves in 'a search for the essence of human living' and the greatest challenge before them is to seek and assert identity.

Tradition continues its hold on the middle-class woman's mind in that she views domestic and maternal obligations as central to her identity. This is true of a house wife as well as a high-profile career woman. (Kakar xv)

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan shows how Jing Mei has high expectations for her daughter as she believed that her daughter could do anything in America but unfortunately the daughter rejects her mother as she feels that her mother represents Chinese culture and identity. She ignores her mother to find herself and she says, "I didn't budge. And then I decided. I didn't have to do what mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before, and look what happened. She was the stupid one!" (TJLC139).

In the story of “Waiting Between Trees”, Ying Ying St. Clair’s husband altered her name as Betty St. Clair thus he effectively obliterates her Chinese identity and thus aid her acquire a new status in society. Yet this imposition of the new American culture and language didn’t guarantee happiness to Ying Ying. On the contrary she is plagued by loneliness and felt that she belonged nowhere and this is evident when she avers:

Saint took me to America, where I lived in houses smaller than the one in the country. I wore large American clothes. I did servant's tasks. I learned the Western ways. I tried to speak with a thick tongue. I raised a daughter, watching her from another shore. I accepted her American ways.” (TJLC251)

The daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* are rude to their mothers and are unable to discern their mother’s past and the difficulties they underwent in China. They resent the fact that their mothers try to control them and try to gain a distinct identity which is different from their mothers. Waverly Jong feels ashamed for being a Chinese and tries to alter her mother’s appearance and thus her identity whereas her Mother Lindo wants her daughter to be like a Chinese and is confident that Chinese thinking is the best. She believes that easy things are not worth pursuing and one should realise one’s worth and should never indulge in show off.

Chinese identity and culture are the “other” for the daughters (Guillary, 133). Waverly Jong has never given importance to her mother Lindo’s, words. For her America and being an American is ‘superior’ hence she feels humiliated for being a Chinese and is ashamed of her Chinese mother. She takes her mother to the hairdresser to alter her hair as well as her identity. Mother Lindo attempts to teach her about Chinese character such as how to obey parents and listen to a mother's mind. She advises:

How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities. Why easy things are not worth pursuing. How to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring. Why Chinese thinking is best.” (TJLC254).

About her marriage, Rose avers:

Over the years, Ted decided where we went on vacation. He decided what new furniture we should buy. He decided we should wait until we moved into a better neighbourhood before having children. We used to discuss some of these matters, but we both knew the question would boil down to my saying, "Ted, you decide. " After a while, there were no more discussions. Ted simply decided. And I never thought of objecting.” (TJLC 119).

In Ted and Rose relationship Rose realises her real identity only when Ted divorces her. Rose has set apart her desires and had always obeyed Ted. But eventually Rose realises her Chinese identity and heeds her mother’s advice thus she becomes more powerful and confident.

She says, “And the answer, one that was important above everything else, ran through my body and fell from my lips: “you can’t just pull me out of your life and throw me away”” (TJLC196).

All the daughters in the novel reject their Chinese identity and tried to erase any trace of Chinese identity in them. At that beginning of the story, we see that not only Rose but also the other girls don’t want to be thought as a Chinese person. They want to be considered as American ones. They are educated like Americans; they have the characteristics of Americans. Although the mothers tried to convince them to accept the Chinese characteristics the girls choose American identity. Waverly’s mother expresses her ideas about her daughter:

My daughter did not look pleased when I told her this, that she didn’t look Chinese. She had a sour American look on her face. Oh, maybe ten years ago, she would have clapped her hands – hurray! – as if this were good news. But now she wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable. And I know it is too late. All those years I tried to teach her! She followed my Chinese ways only until she learned how to walk out the door by herself and go to school.” (TJLC253)

The custom of story-telling fascinates us as stories are the conveyers of values and traditions and they mirror the background, relationship and traditions of the family. According to the mothers, these stories are one to remind who they are and where they have been coming from and thus help the daughters comprehend their past. The daughters who have adapted themselves to the American life style; struggle to find meaning to the stories narrated by their Chinese mothers. “-----challenging task is to learn to translate her mother’s narratives in ways that will eventually enable her to cope with the dichotomies of cultures and to develop a hybrid identity which incorporates both cultures.” (Direnc). Thus, the daughters develop a fusion of identities which embraces both cultures. Rose’s mother narrates the story of Mr. Chou when she is a child. Mr. Chou is the guard of the gate that opened into dreams. Many times, Mr. Chou scares Rose in her dream and tells Rose to listen her mother’s words. She says, “I used to believe everything my mother said, even when I didn’t know what she meant”(TJLC185). But when she grew up, she behaves rudely and insults her mother’s Chinese stories. In her adulthood, she insulted her mother and her Chinese stories describing herself as an American. But eventually she decides to follow her mother and she opposes Ted when he cheats her. When she dreams about Mr Chou again then her acceptance of her Chinese identity becomes total.

Although the struggle of identity and the quest for it leads the daughters to Americanness, their mothers refuse to believe that their daughter could deny their Chinese roots and identity. For instance, Jing Mei Woo hardly believes in her Chinese heritage. But her mother says, “Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese” “It is in your blood waiting to be let go (TJLC 267).

Names mirror one’s culture, past of his or her family or gender and hence it is an integral part of a person’s identity. The daughters alter their names Jing-Mei Woo uses an American

name outside her family, she is called as June. Jing Mei wishes to sustain her American identity but she is in a dilemma. June is an American name and although it makes her feel like an American, Chinese identity and name reflects her past. Her name “Jing Mei” means “little sister” and she has two younger sisters in China hence she is unable to move away from her Chinese identity and eventually the journey to meet her sisters gives her a chance to understand her mother. She understands her mother when she realises her mothers’ past, the dwelling where they were born and fully-fledged and grown up. She unravels the past struggle and realises the reality. When the daughters understand and approve what their mothers did for them, they start to feel themselves as having Chinese identity and culture.

In the novel there is a conflict of language between the daughters and mothers. Mothers do not make any effort to learn English and assert that they would converse only in Chinese. Language is an integral part of the mother’s psyche because language is the carrier of their culture, values, and beliefs. In this sense, mothers deliberately refrain from learning English properly in order to protect their Chinese identity. They want their daughters to accept Chinese language and Chinese identity. Jing-Mei avers:

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 daughter, that to these closed American-born minds “joy luck” is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation.” (TJLC40,41)

The Joy Luck Club initiated by the Chinese mothers aims at sustaining and nurturing the Chinese cultural heritage and in this regard, they cook Chinese food and attempt to speak their mother tongue, Chinese language. They deem America as a strange land and have a sense of belonging only with China. In attempting to rediscover their identity considered to be lost they formulate such special circle like *The Joy Luck Club*.

Being Chinese the mothers wished that their daughters should grow up imbibing Chinese culture and wished to direct their daughter’s life but unfortunately, they fail to understand that these daughters have never been to China and they really had to struggle to get an American identity. The American way of life has influenced the daughters hence they have an independent streak in them that is why Waverly rejects her mother’s ideas and elopes with Marvin. But after Waverly divorces Marvin, she decides to marry another American man but she is scared of her mother’s reactions her mother has strict rules due to adherence to Chinese traditions consequently neither could Waverly become a Chinese nor an American. The mothers reject to the marriages with the men who are from America so as not to lose and forget their Chinese cultural heritage. According to the mothers, fusion of American and Chinese identities is

impossible and marriage to Americans will obliterate their Chinese identity as is evident from the fact that Rose's mother resents the marriage of her daughter with Ted as he belongs to a totally different culture. She explains "He is American, A waigoren." (TJLC117). Waverly's mother shows a similar reaction. She does not want Waverly to get married to Rich Shields who is American. Waverly guesses her mother's feeling about Rich and says: "I wasn't so much afraid of my mother as I was afraid for Rich. I already knew what she would do, how she would attack him, how she would criticize him. (TJLC, 173)

In societies where men have an upper hand woman have to struggle to create and sustain an identity of their own, they are expected to obey the rules set by men. In *The Joy Luck Club* as her family promised, Lindo Jong is compelled to get married to an affluent man without any regards to her desire. Having suffered harassment and humiliation by the man's family Lindo finally decides to escape and invents a dream and reported:

Our ancestors came to me and said they wanted to see our wedding. So Tyan-yu and I held the same ceremony for our ancestors. We saw the matchmaker light the candle and give it to the servant to watch. Our ancestors were so pleased, so please...' Huang Taitai looked impatient as I began to cry softly again. 'But then the servant left the room with our candle and a big wind came and blew the candle out. And our ancestors became very angry. They shouted that the marriage was doomed! They said that Tyan-yu's end of the candle had blown out! Our ancestors said Tyan-yu would die if he stayed in this marriage!" (TJLC64).

She further improvised her story "I saw a man with a long beard and a mole on his cheek" ('64) remembering the painting on the wall. Huang Taimtai is convinced that the old man is none other than Tyan Yun 's grandfather. Until now Lindo has been living as per the rules tradition and values stipulated by others but the culmination of this marriage helps Lindo to realise her own identity. She had to show courage to break the shackles of the society to find her identity; An-Mei's mother has also struggled like Lindo. An-Mei's mother was raped by a rich man and as she was rejected by her family hence, she had to get married to him as his fourth wife. She is helpless and unable to defend herself and it is evident when she says

"In the afternoon, my mother spoke of her unhappiness for the first time. We were in a rickshaw going to a store to find embroidery thread. "Do you see how shameful my life is? " She cried Do you see how I have no position? He brought home a new wife, a low-class girl, dark-skinned, no manners! Bought her for a few dollars from a poor village family that makes mud brick tiles. And at night when he can no longer use her, he comes to me, smelling of her mud." (TJLC229)

Anmei you must not forget. I was a first wife, yi tai the wife of a scholar your mother was not always fourth wife, Sz Tai. Throughout her marriage she was tortured and stressed because

of that she committed suicide. Honestly, that suicide is a kind of stand being against the male dominated society. She struggles to escape from what is thought as an identity for her.

Identity is essential for a human being who desires to find a place in the world and to locate his or her roots. The struggle to survive in an alien world is evident in this novel in the fight between daughters and mothers. The first-generation mothers struggle for identity to find their roots in spite of the fact that they have to adopt an alien identity. America makes the mothers feel optimistic and yet they do not disregard the Chinese values in the new country to where they immigrated. Despite the hostile experiences in China, they uphold Chinese culture, values and identity simultaneously trying to transfer their values to their daughters. But the second-generation daughters brought up in America find it tough to comprehend their mothers which gives rise to a lot of misunderstandings and transgressions. They sensed that there is some disinclination between the Chinese identity narrated by their mothers and American identity in which they are raised. But fortunately, this misunderstanding gets cleared after the daughters realise the difficulties the mothers experienced in the light of their own experiences. When they listen to their mothers talk about their life, they can connect between theirs and their mothers' life resulting in acceptance and empathy.

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Abbreviations used:

TJLC- *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*