

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND CULTURAL VALUES IN AMY TAN'S "THE JOY LUCK CLUB"

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Abstract

Amy Tan portrays the image of Chinese-American women who are crushed under the forces of the society and men and how these women react against this double pression. The novel "The Joy Luck Club" is a proof of this description. Author illustrates the events through the life of people around her. The issues about the role of women in society are depicted by the gradual change of generations. Culture elements were used as a "tool" by the author to introducing such problems to the readers.

Keywords: diaspora, feminism, patriarchy, cultural aspects, postcolonialism.

Introduction

Amy Tan was one of the best representations of Chinese American Diaspora literature in 20th century as she created her atmosphere of writing with her unique writing style among other diaspora writers. She illustrated her Chinese background and new American life in her works. Immigration, postcolonialism, family relationships were main problems in her novels like "The Joy Luck Club", "The Bonesetter's Daughter", "Kitchen God's Wife". The notion of womanhood is the main perspective in such novels as she described this issue in old Chinese traditional way, she approached to cover not only especially Chinese womanhood problems but also it belongs to the whole east women life. While reading these novels readers can feel the troubles, sorrows, unhappiness, as well as luck, fortune of real eastern women. However, culture also the main key perspective in her novels to help to reveal such problems.

Feminist perspectives

In an article entitled "Analysis the Gender conflict of The Joy Luck Club" in the journal of "literature and language" (2015) feminism is defined as liberation which means that the role of the movement is to help women to comprehend the importance of freedom and liberation in a patriarchal society. As to overcome the second wave feminism dilemma the third wave feminism appears. This wave is interested in analyzing the internal complex relationship between the individual and feminism. The article also tackles the issue of gender in The Joy Luck Club. Gender is divided into two parts nature and society. Both men and women born with biological differences and later on the differences are deeply acquired through social experiences.¹

¹ Marwa MOKRANI. Chinese-American Women between East and West in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club. 2018. Pp. 3-4

The Joy Luck Club portrays the writer's feminist point of views through the stories of different women characters. Throughout the novel, Amy Tan discusses many problems that women have faced, including marginalized roles, social gender, family, domestic violence, sexuality and the lack of power. This thesis will interpret the novel from the perspective of feminism while focusing on two issues. First, women are powerless to obtain their self-actualization. Chinese Americans often felt invisible within the dominant white culture so they seek for more acceptances and share their fascinating stories to build new lives for themselves and their daughters who are born in the US. Both mothers and daughters of The Joy Luck Club have a common goals and interests which are to overcome their pain and marginalization for better future. Second, the domestic violence is a major source of women's painful life. This thesis aims at describing all women's suffering within their family. Hopefully, all the women of the novel experience segregation and violence. This study explains the domestic violence against women and it is highly presented by Lindo Jong who is abused by her husband and mother in-law.²

In China, men under the power of patriarchy perceive women as property because they can be bartered or sold in an arranged marriage as if they are just commodity for exchange. As seen in Lindo's arranged marriage, a Chinese woman "is expected to bring money and goods in the form of dowry to help offset the expenses associated with her upkeep. All daughters add to the financial burden" (Lindsey, 2016: 92).

Concubinage seen in The Joy Luck Club is also a practice in marriage that supports Chinese women as property. According to Chinese old traditions, a man with the special rights to conduct polygamy can have several women in legal marriage. Despite other minor reasons, the practice of polygamy is mostly done to have sexual pleasure and to produce a child, particularly a son to continue the generation.³ Besides in this part the woman, An mei Hsu's mother was said as a prostitute, bad woman by her own family, even though she was raped by the man, she couldn't prove that she was loyal to her family, to her husband died several month ago. And this woman's granddaughter Rose in the part named "Without wood" was described very calm, easily bent to her husband, Ted, cannot defense her opinion. As a result this man didn't appreciate his obedient wife and even was going to divorce.

In this novel we can see the elements of feministic perspectives in every generation of the heroines. The women were looked down by their husband's family. Here we can see the attitude of Lindo Jong's mother-in-law to her. "Bad wife!" she cried. "If you refuse to sleep with my son, I refuse to feed you or clothe you." So that's how I knew what my husband had

² Marwa MOKRANI. Chinese-American Women between East and West in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club. 2018. P.5

³ Mujad Didien Afandi. The Shift in Gender Roles in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club and Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner. Vol. 8 No. 1 <http://jurnal.unimus.ac.id/index.php/lensa> Pp.10-11

said to avoid his mother's anger. I was also boiling with anger, but I said nothing, remembering my promise to my parents to be an obedient wife.⁴

Cultural aspects

The mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* are the same by genetics and heritage, but they vary greatly in viewing their cultural identity. The mothers, all born in China to Chinese parents, consider themselves Chinese. The daughters, who all have at least one Chinese parent, were born in the United States. They consider themselves to be American, and indeed their mothers want them to have the better life they believe the country affords them. It is a difficult balance to keep the Chinese traditions alive by passing them down to the offspring while also allowing the children to embrace the new culture. Often the old culture is neglected in favor of the new. The daughters in the novel are often ignorant about or contemptuous of their mothers' heritage or their lives in China. In this novel there are a lot of old Chinese traditions were highlighted by Chinese mothers. All the traditions belong to Chinese culture. Every tradition in this novel has a great history, mythological background and connected to ceremonies, festive.

Oral story telling is the main of all traditions in this novel. Mothers and grandmothers bring up, teach something to their children under telling mythological, national, traditional Chinese stories. Because they knew showing examples is much more effective than just advising, saying some manners. In this novel the stories in the book named "Twenty six malignant gates" was the best handout for mothers. They always told stories from this book to their daughters. Red candle tradition is the one of the interesting ones among others. In this ceremony in the wedding night the candle in red colour with two sides is lighted, one side was for bride, the other side was for bridegroom. And one person was supposed to watching this candle till it burned till the end. And in the morning that person should announce the result.

National manners

National manners are the main parts in this novel that show the culture aspects widely. In each narration we can see Chinese and American manners both being compared.

Believing in religious dogmas. Chinese people today and in history are well known, famous for their special customs, eating habits, they are very inventive. Amy Tan also wanted to show these aspects. For choosing brides, having child, for important decisions, having ceremonies they believe in matchmakers with Chinese lunar calendars.

Giving a dowry. It is also one of the important manners in this nation. In this book even a very poor family had a dowry for their daughter's new family.

⁴ Amy Tan. *The Joy Luck Club*. P. 41

Chinese elements. It came from Chinese chemistry. The five elements water, wood, metal, fire and earth were very important elements in Chinese manners to maintain human character. According to this theory it was described in this book like that:

“Too much fire and you had a bad temper. That was like my father, whom my mother always criticized for his cigarette habit and who always shouted back that she should keep her thoughts to herself. I think he now feels guilty that he didn't let my mother speak her mind.

Too little wood and you bent too quickly to listen to other people's ideas, unable to stand on your own. This was like my Auntie An-mei.

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 then finishing neither when I went off to work for a small ad agency as a secretary, later becoming a copywriter”.⁵

Eating rules, food manners. According to Chinese nation their food manners are very important, they choose menus very specifically, almost every food, meal mean something special, and historical.

“She said the two soups were almost the same, *chabudwo*. Or maybe she said butong, not the same thing at all. It was one of those Chinese expressions that means the better half of mixed intentions”.⁶

In Chinese New Year they always prepare meals from scrab. Scrab is the symbolic special food of New Year table according to their nation. Moreover, when they buying scrabs from markets, they try to choose alive ones, the scrabs should be boiled in hot water lively.

The Chinese people pay much special attention to their daughters upbringing. We know that it is natural to East countries. Girls manners are important in their morality.

East and West representation

In *The Joy Luck Club* in a vivid and fluid style, Amy Tan interweaves the clashes between two cultures, two languages and two generations with humor, fairy-tales, horoscopes, etc. and narrates sixteen wonderful stories shuttling between the past and the present, fiction and non-fiction, east and west. “The four American-born daughters Jing mei, Waverly, Rose and Lena are unable to understand the purpose of mothers’ repeatedly narrative misery in the past, the cultural implications behind mothers’ words and the Chinese elements like mahjong, the Five Elements, Yin-yang, fengshui and so on. They even try to resist the import of the “other culture”, which causes a gap between both sides. Lost in double ethnic identities, they fail to move forward in their relationships and careers by abandoning the Chinese culture deeply infused into their blood. Tan focuses on practices that allow the four daughters to reconcile

⁵ Amy Tan. *The Joy Luck Club*. P 15

⁶ Amy Tan. *The Joy Luck Club*. P. 5

with their mothers to recognize the importance of preserving and perpetuating their Chinese identities”.⁷

Brought up in China, mothers find it hard to accept American values and ways of life. Conversely, daughters who never lived in China cannot fully comprehend their mothers’ views and consider them obsolete. The generational differences are deeply interrelated with the cultural ones in all these conflicts because it is normal for children to have opinions that differ from their parents’ views. However, daughters in the novel disobeyed their mothers also because these dissimilarities in the worldviews were profound and rooted in culture.

The most striking evidence is the Chinese elements. The first Chinese element Tan employs in *The Joy Luck Club* is mahjong. In the beginning of the book, Jing-mei becomes the fourth corner to replace her dead mother at the mahjong table, which marks the beginning of the connecting between two generations, the West and the East, more importantly, the quest for and transmit of the Chinese identity. Suyuan holds the party to have a gathering of four women, one for each corner of the mahjong table to raise money and to raise their spirits. The gathering helps to add happiness through winning and bring hope for good luck for the sake of forgetting their past wrongs and miseries. Suyuan as a strong believer is challenged by her daughter under instruction of Science and Psychology. Jing-mei regards it as her mother’s “own version of organic chemistry” and “superstition” Moreover, Lindo, like Suyuan, believes the impact of Five Elements in character traits: water, wood, fire, earth and metal. A third element is yin-yang. "For woman is yin," she cried sadly, "the darkness within, where untampered passions lie. And man is yang, bright truth lighting our minds."⁸The four Chinese mothers bring up the word “balance” multiple times. Three corners at the table will be out of balance. The Five Elements in one’s body are not balanced. Sometimes it is not overtly used. But the balancing theory dominates the value of Chinese people invisibly. The obscure perception of these elements is hard to understand for the four daughters, who are lack of traditional Chinese cultural background. So their deprecating behaviors appear to resonates with foreign readers and be understandable for Chinese readers. “A woman can have sons only if she is deficient in one of the elements. Your daughter-in-law was born with enough wood, fire, water, and earth, and she was deficient in metal, which was a good sign. But when she was married, you loaded her down with gold bracelets and decorations and now she has all the elements, including metal. She's too balanced to have babies.”⁹

The writer compared Chinese traditions, manners to American ones by showing the American-born daughters’ manners, their attitude toward their parents, husbands, children. She was not going to discriminate the American nation, but her approach was to show to the

⁷ Zheng Gao. Chinese Elements in *The Joy Luck Club* and Conceptual Blending. Open Access Library Journal. 2021, Volume 8. School of Humanities, Tiangong University, Tianjin, China p.2

⁸ Amy Tan. *The Joy Luck Club*. 1989. P. 59

⁹ Amy Tan. *The Joy Luck Club*. 1989. P. 42

readers the reason for the conflict between mothers and daughters by comparing these two national manners. "This American rules," she concluded at last. "Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, Don't know why, you find out yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself." She tossed her head back with a satisfied smile.¹⁰ Mothers Lindo Jong and Suyuan Woo tried to bring up their daughter in the American way, strong, confident, independent. But when they were independent and always behaved in American way, the mothers felt that they should also have teach them Chinese customs, manners in order to absorb them their nationality. The daughters felt themselves the real Americans, they sometimes couldn't admit they have Chinese blood in their root.

"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. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation"¹¹

Conclusion

While The Joy Luck Club is especially applicable to a student of Chinese origin, the story deals with issues that any ESL or EFL learner might relate to and emphasize with. The text is not only cultural in the sense that it is an English novel and language is cultural, but also in that it deals directly with cultural issues. The second reason that The Joy Luck Club is an excellent textbook for ESL students is because the author intended the book to be comprehensible by her mother, herself an immigrant to America, in other words, an ESL student (Tan, p. 309). Its diction and syntax is just simple enough to still be authentic without being overwhelming¹²

In this book there the problems of feminism, mother daughter relationships, Chinese culture, tradition, folklore, customs, manners widely written. She informed both positive and negative sides of cultural aspects of China. Her aim was not to exaggerate or blame this culture, she just wanted to make the readers felt the other nation immigrants life through diaspora literature. This is not only for history but today we can also see this problems in this fiction. All these social, political, cultural points were hidden under the relationship of mother and daughter. It is the skill of Amy Tan's writing. She wrote in English language, about Chinese culture.

¹⁰ Amy Tan. The Joy Luck Club. 1989. P. 65

¹¹ Mrs. Nancy Thamby. East West Encounters in Amy Tan's the Joy Luck Club. Journal of Humanities and Social Science. P.51

¹² MICHAEL KUPERMAN. THE LEAVES, THE TREES, THE FOREST: LANGUAGE, TEXT, AND CULTURE IN THE JOY LUCK CLUB
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