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The Concept of American Dream in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract:

The notion of American Dream, which gave a clarion call for a better world, rejuvenated the consciousness of the times and influenced all walks of life. Intellectuals and thinkers fascinated by the ideals of American Dream enriched its worth and value by their endeavours. Writers including poets, novelists and playwrights, creative writers in America evinced keen interest in disseminating the long-cherished ideals of freedom, individuality, self-respect and independent thinking. At the same time without qualms, its failure has also been denounced. Amy Tan, an Asian American, who carved a niche for herself by the virtue of her broad novelistic vision and bicultural perception, lent a special charm to the world of American fiction. Her novels primary deal with subtle human relationships, self-dignity and equality and intensely nourish individual's freedom and dignity.

The paper entitled "The Concept of American Dream in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* – A Critical Perspective" touches upon the perspectives on the American Dream in general and explores in particular the creative illustration of the concept in Amy Tan's maiden novel *The Joy Luck Club*.

Keywords: American Dream, freedom, Individuality, Liberty, Independent thinking.

The popular term the *American Dream* is coined by James Truslow Adams in his illustrious work *The Epic of America* published in the year 1931. Adams in his monumental work emphasises the need to dismantle the social barriers created by older civilizations paving the way for everyone to lead a blessed and dignified life on the American soil.

The concept of American Dream fascinated not merely creative writers, intellectuals and thinkers, but it became a source of inspiration for the people across the world. American Dream has no materialistic dimension. It has an implicit universal appeal to shun selfish, personal, patriarchal and narrow-minded thoughts and work for the progress of the mankind. The dream calls for toil and passion to make this world a better place to live in. The success tale of Tei Fu Chen, hailing from Taiwan who rose to heights of glory from humble beginnings and who went on to become the czar of a billion-dollar herbal foods empire, bears testimony to the fact that American Dream can be accomplished by those who believe in hard work and respect their individual worth.

Before making an earnest attempt to draw insights on American Dream in the selected novel of Amy Tan *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), it is not out of the place to trace the evolution of American Dream which in due course of time emerged as a valuable and precious sentiment of the Americans. The United States of America became free from the clutches of colonial rule, a major outcome following the war during 1775-82. The Americans craved for freedom and self-dignity which were deprived during the colonial rule. Thomas Paine's observation about the idea of a free state and about the obligation of the democratic set up which will ensure the rights, dignity and well-being of the people is worth quoting here:

No country can be called free which is governed by an absolute power; and it matters not whether it be an absolute royal power or an absolute legislative power, as the consequences will be the same to the people (Kaminski 81).

Thomas Jefferson's *The Declaration of Independence* marks a new beginning in annals of history and America eventually developed its own value system based on the ideals such as right to life and right to liberty. Henceforth America became a land of opportunities beckoning people across the world and assimilating into its fold varied cultures and traditions.

Legendary literary artists such as R.W. Emerson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Norman Mailer, W.H. Auden and Saul Bellow in their creative writings have glorified the most cherished ideals of the American Dream. A close examination of their selected works demonstrates their sense of admiration for American values which formed the basis for the evolution of American Dream.

Emerson's *The American Scholar* (1837) speaks volumes about independent and courageous thinking which ensures the progress of the individual and determines the destiny of the nation. The ideals of American Dream are conspicuously present not merely in the fictional works of American writers but also in the poetical works of eminent American poets such as Robert Frost, W.H. Auden and Walt Whitman. Frost's poetry promotes the values of freedom and liberal democracy. Frost in his poems was vocal about liberal values. It is pertinent to mention Frost's urge for freedom, happiness and civilised thinking in his *Mending Wall* (1914) and *Stopping on Woods by a Snowy Evening* (1923). Robert Frost makes a sincere appeal in this poem to shun the man-made barriers by patronising human values essential for peaceful co-existence. One finds in Robert Frost a progressive thinker when he denounces rigid and narrow ideologies which separate people from each other. Similarly, *The Road Not taken* (1916) articulates Frost's desire to make choices by mustering courage.

In *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening* (1923) though he is thoroughly impressed by the splendid sights of nature which provide solace and comfort to him he becomes aware of his own obligations to be fulfilled. He gathers the audacity to accept the realities of life and to move on with a pragmatic approach to life.

Frost intends to enjoy the raptures of nature for ever, but the responsibilities as an individual and as a citizen bring him back to the world of reality. The idea of enlightened citizenship surfaces in the poem. In *The Road Not Taken* (1916) Frost deals with the choices before him and reveals his determination to traverse the road less travelled, thereby expressing his willingness to confront unforeseen challenges.

Mending Wall (1914) pleads for liberal thinking and the shunning of man-made barriers. His appeal is for the pervasive presence of human values for peaceful coexistence. The poet and the farmer represent varied ideologies and they are poles apart in their attitudes. The poem sends a message about civilised, rational and progressive thinking by lambasting primitive, conventional and rigid ideas that hamper human progress.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) places individuality on the highest pedestal and visualises the realisation of American Dream. On the other hand, Fitzgerald makes an appeal through the characters in his novel about the realisation of American Dream by adopting fair means and not by nurturing greedy ambition and following foul methods to achieve prosperity. Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965) is vocal about personal

freedom which is quintessential for one's own existence. Mailer's views may sound radical as Rojack, the central character in the novel, stands as a spokesperson for Mailer's agenda of individual freedom and rebellious self.

Not merely mainstream American writers, even immigrant writers who used American landscape in their works were impressed by the American values of freedom and individuality. A host of Asian American writers including Justin Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Alexander Chee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Haniya Yana Ginara in their literary works have endeavoured to patronize the rich and emulating values that in a certain sense hold mirror to the American Dream. Amy Tan (1952) mirrors the American dream through the characters of her novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). The only daughter of the Chinese immigrants Daisy and John Tan, Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California. The consecutive deaths of her father and brother who succumbed to brain tumours dislocated the family.

In 1985, she authored the story *Rules of the Game* almost a curtain raiser, for her best seller *The Joy Luck Club*. The novel portrays the mother-daughter relationship among four Chinese migrated mothers and their American born daughters. The novel was translated into 17 languages including Chinese and movie version was also released for which Tan was a co-screenplay writer. It received the *Los Angeles Times Book Award*. Some of her other fictional works are *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), *The Opposite of Fate* (2003), *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) and *Where the Past Begins* (2017).

Amy Tan exemplifies human relationships (socio-cultural and familial) in all her novels, especially the mother-daughter relationship. She elevates the mother-daughter bond among our Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*. The novel begins with the mother's good intentions about the welfare and success of her child. Tan reposes faith of Chinese mother's belief in America's opportunities and freedom for women in all aspects and presents the challenges in the raising of their American born daughters who are very passionate about American culture rather than Chinese heredity.

The novel centres around the theme of mother-daughter relationship which of course is a motif in almost all Amy Tan's fictional works. And this theme of mother-daughter relationship is intertwined with the idea of the American dream and its ideals. The four migrated Chinese mothers have great aspirations for their daughters and want to bring them up in a way that assures American prosperity and inculcates Chinese obedience. Here is an

attempt to explore the values of the American Dream which get exemplified in the situations confronted by the characters in *The Joy Luck Club*. America in the novel is presented as a land of wide-ranging pursuits and opportunities.

Suyuan Woo, interestingly, is the inventor of *The Joy Luck Club* both in China and in America and it symbolises a little joy and luck. Though she encounters sorrowful situations in China, especially in Kweilin, an unrest-ridden locality, following the Japanese aggression on the place and the loss of her twin babies, she never becomes diffident. She starts a new life in the United States of America by marrying a Chinese American and giving birth to baby girl Jing-Mei. Suyuan Woo wants her daughter to be a silhouette of her true nature.

She recognises her daughter's natural talent as well as her impatience with practising piano too. Despite disappointment caused by her daughter's deeds at the Church consulate while playing piano, Suyuan Woo, as a mother, always cares for her prosperity. She extends all possible help to her husband in running the family and dutifully performs the domestic chores. In the sense of freedom in working she experiences, a characteristic of American Dream surfaces. When her daughter was nine years old, she shared the following views on America which speak volumes about fortunes in America:

You could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become instantly rich (Tan 132).

To substantiate the view point that America offers fortune for those who embrace democratic ideals, the following comments by Tara Fickle are worth mentioning:

Assuming, in other words, that Mahjongg functions akin to what many critics have interpreted as Tan's idealized depiction of an "enlightened, rational, secular" (Wong 186) America that has none of China's social and cultural failings, Xu and others have neglected to consider that it is competition, not cooperation, that motivates and defines the aunties and their daughters as Asian Americans and as Mahjongg players, just as it is the "equality" of perfect competition that underwrites the democratic ideal of the American Dream (Fickle 71).

Here the concept of self-reliance and self-sustenance, the hallmarks of American Dream, become evident.

Suyuan Woo is a very confident woman and puts in strenuous efforts to brighten her daughter's future, but in vain. She is the best player in Mah-jong, an age-old Chinese traditional game. On the other hand, Jing-Mei stands as a symbol of individuality. An American-born daughter of Suyuan Woo, she apes the American culture and dislikes her Chinese heritage initially. Jing-Mei continues the legacy of the Joy Luck Club and fulfils her mother's fond wish only after her mother's demise. However, she never respects her mother's efforts in promoting her talent and instead insults her. Self-respect and individuality which are the fostered values of American Dream become distinctly evident in her following remarks:

You want me to be someone that I'm not!" I sobbed. I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be...I wish I wasn't your daughter (Tan 142).

Her mother comforts her by saying that she is trying to nourish her talent. Here, Jing-Mei's thoughts of liberty and self-identity are evident, the very key points of American Dream.

Another American-born daughter Waverly Jong is a friend as well as a critic of Jing-Mei. On the Chinese New Year's Eve Suyuan Woo, Jing-Mei's mother, arranges a dinner at her home and invites Waverly's family too. During the dinner Waverly deliberately passes outrageous comments on Jing-Mei's job as a copy writer. Jing-Mei promptly retorts to Waverly's silly comment by saying that she will have a decent bank balance in the event of her advertisement company settling her dues.

In Jing-Mei's standpoint her self-respect is evident. She is moved by her mother's pathetic story in China and decides to fulfil her wish which is revealed by the members of the Joy Luck Club. She travels to China along with her father with the financial support of the club members, meets her half-sisters, shares her mother's love and affection towards them, and demonstrates her obedience.

Her introspection about her Chinese heritage is vivid in the following lines:

My sisters look at me, proudly. "Meimei jandale," says one sister proudly to the other. "Little sister has grown up." I look at their faces again and I see no trace of my mother in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go (Tan 287).

Her struggle to exist against odds and march ahead reflects her courage, which is one of the distinguishing ideals of American Dream.

Another prominent character in the novel, Waverly Jong, is the American-born daughter of a migrated Chinese woman Lindo Jong, who is very tricky and intelligent. Stubborn and disobedient as a child, she considers her mother as her opponent. She is a chess prodigy and inherits the art of invisible strength from her mother which is her winning strategy in chess tournaments. She is a hardworking girl and learns the techniques and rules of the game by consulting relevant books from Chinese libraries. Eventually she masters the game and gains tremendous self- confidence, which is distinctly evident from the following lines:

I found out about all the “whys” later. I read the rules and looked up all the big words in dictionary. I borrowed books from China town library. I studied each chess piece, trying to absorb the power each contained (Tan 94).

She embarrasses her mother when she tries to share her magazine printed photos with the public. But her mother always showers true love, despite her cynical attitudes.

Waverly Jong is (matured) endowed with independent thinking and she takes her own decisions in professional pursuits as well as in her personal life. She endeavours to maintain her own advertisement company and fulfils her ambition. She accomplishes one of her mother’s wishes of living in American prosperity. She admires individual freedom and exercises for choices in the matrimonial aspect. She waits for her mother’s appreciation than her approval in the matter of her new fiancée. Independent thinking and freedom, the true characteristics of American Dream, can be visualised in this character. The virtues of hard work, endurance and free- thinking can also be seen in this character.

Lena St. Clair, the American born daughter of Ying Ying St. Clair, is capable of anticipating problems, but owing to circumstances, she is incapable of preventing them. Lena has been raised up in crises caused by her mother’s irrational acts. She acts as an interpreter between her White father and Chinese mother, as her father can’t understand the Chinese language. At times she pretends to be disloyal only to strengthen the familial bond. She is not fortunate enough to receive maternal love till her marriage.

Lena St. Clair is an obedient and lovable child for her parents. She tries to protect the marital bond of her parents and deals with grave situations with wisdom. The following lines establish her concern for her father and her sense of responsibility:

I could not tell my father what she has said. He was so sad already with this empty crib in his mind. How could I tell him she was crazy? (Tan 112).

She exhibits her merit in academics and becomes a professional as an architect. She helps her husband Harold, who is specialised in restaurant designing, in building his own architectural firm. She is an intelligent woman and gives him ideas of attaining success in his business.

Here is an illustration which indicates her positivity and creative thinking:

And may be.....may be you could do a novel-menu restaurant.....foods from fiction.....sandwiches from Lawrence Sanders murders mysteries, just desserts from Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*. And something else with a magic theme, or jokes and gags, or..... (Tan 158).

She longs for her identity and success both in business and in the domestic forefront.

Yet another character who displays true American spirit is Rose Hsu Jordan, the daughter of the migrated Chinese woman An-Mei Hsu Jordan. The guilt of her brother's tragic death at the beach haunts her. Henceforth she never dares to take decisions and becomes passive. She carries the American spirit in her mind rather than her Chinese heritage and it is evident when her mother warns about her boyfriend Ted's nationality. He is American," warned my mother, as if I had been too blind to notice. A waigoren. "I'm American too," I said. "And it's not as if I'm going to marry him or something (Tan 117).

The American psyche can be observed in the conversation between Mrs. Jordan, Ted's mother, and Rose at Ted's family party when Mrs. Jordan insults her as a Vietnamese.

Mrs. Jordan, I am not Vietnamese," I said softly, even though I was on the verge of shouting. "And I have no intention of marrying your son" (Tan 118).

Tamara S. Wagner makes a valid observation in this regard:

Tan frequently draws analogies between the preoccupation with tradition, heirlooms, genealogies, and family values of the Jewish and the Chinese families that she

depicts. At the same time, her American Jews often stand for” the typical American “as opposed to the hybrid Chinese American. That her non-Chinese Americans happen to be Jewish is meant to underline the multiplicities of ethnicities of ethnic mixing. Yet their role introduces more far reaching problematics of American politics of identity and the definitions of nationhood (Wagner 436)

Eventually, Rose and Ted get married and start a new life. She launches a studio with the support of her husband but in course of time faces turmoil in her marital relationship. An-Mei dispels her daughter Rose’s disillusionment. Her mother’s guidance enables her to strengthen her psyche and eventually succeeds to alter her husband ‘s intention of divorce by winning his heart.

In Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, the characters pursue their dreams and aspirations facing a variety of vicissitude and challenges. Implicitly, the situations they face in life reveal the need for individuality, liberty, freedom and courage that prove themselves to be the guiding spirits in their pursuit of the American Dream. Amy Tan skilfully weaves the contexts in the novel wherein both mothers and daughters invariably confront predicaments that demand courage and liberal thinking. In one of her interviews, Amy Tan makes a mention of the fond wish of immigrants who seek a ‘new version of American Dream.’ Amy Tan believes that the immigrants condition their psyche which enables them to strive for joy and success through luck and hard work. The quintessence of American Dream lies in fulfilling one’s aspiration and accomplishing success by pursuing opportunities besides strengthening familial relations and social mobility. Precisely, the characters in *The Joy Luck Club* aspire for prosperity in their lives despite vicissitudes. Jing-Mei’s craving for respect; Waverly Jong’s diligent efforts to taste success and Suyuan Woo’s resolve to overcome life’s challenges demonstrate the traits that reflect the perspectives of American Dream which remains the pride of one of the largest democracies.

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