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## **From Repudiation to Reconciliation: Mothers and Daughters in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

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### **Abstract:**

Chinese- American Literature incorporates the works of the descendants of China. There are a number of talented and gifted writers who, through their works, present before us China, Chinese- American women and their families, the mystery of the mother-daughter relationship etc. in a manner quite novel to us. Amy tan's debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club* is one of the best known Chinese- American texts that extends her fame beyond ethnic and gender labels. It documents the hardships faced by the Chinese immigrants in America and fairly exposes the convolutions of Chinese -American life. The text chronicles sixteen interconnected stories, structured as personal narratives, of four mother- daughter pairs. The Chinese mothers find it challenging to raise their American daughters in a vastly diverse culture. As the novel ends, the metamorphosis of the daughters is over and they complete the journey of cultural healing to locate their true selves. Now they are American- born girls with firm Chinese roots. Though the daughters are different from their mothers in philosophy, they too unveil the same longing to comprehend and be understood. The life experiences ultimately teach them that the American ways of thinking can in no way help them. They happen to realise their cultural consanguinity and comprehend that their heritage lies not in America where they are engulfed in, but in China that inculcates a sense of optimism, valour and pride to the Chinese immigrants in America.

### **Keywords: Ethnic, cultural healing, immigrants, consanguinity**

Chinese American Literature incorporates the works of the descendants of China. There are a number of talented and gifted writers who, through their works, present before us China, Chinese- American women and their families, the mystery of the mother- daughter relationship in a manner quite novel to us. The cultural conflicts, identity clashes especially amid the Chinese mothers and their American daughters form the leitmotif in the works of the writers such as Sui Sin Far, Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Mother-daughter plot is one of the recurrent themes in Chinese- American women's writings. The concept of motherhood and daughterhood is reiterated as something substantial across cultures. The mother- daughter bond is best conveyed by female writers as they are at once personal and universal.

Amy tan's debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club* is one of the best known Chinese- American texts that extends her fame beyond ethnic and gender labels. It documents the hardships faced by the Chinese immigrants in America and fairly exposes the convolutions of Chinese -American life. The novel is divided into four sections that reveal the episodic nature of the text. The entire text is divided into four sections entitled, "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," "The Twenty-six Malignant Gates," "American Translation," and "Queen Mother of the Western Skies."

The prologue to each section announces the running theme that ties all stories together. “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away” details the story of a woman who attempts to bring a swan to America, expecting a new and better life. The immigration officials take her swan away and what remains with her is only a feather which she decides to give to her daughter when she is old enough to be described its importance. Similar to the prologue, the section centres on the mothers who hope to pass on their culture and customs to their daughters. The American circumstances initially hinder all possibilities for a psychological union. As the daughters realise their mother’s past experiences, they headway towards their mothers and apprehends the significance of their cultural roots. “The Twenty –Six Malignant Gates” attempts to explain the daughter’s difficulties in accepting their mother’s Chinese methods to attempt to teach their children virtues. “American Translation” elaborates the Americanized lifestyles that the daughters lead along with the conversion of their Chinese selves to American and vice versa. The last and the final section, “Queen Mother of the Western Skies”, carries a note of inspiration for the future. This section is significant as it takes the daughters back to their roots.

The text chronicles sixteen interconnected stories, structured as personal narratives, of four mother- daughter pairs, Suyuan Woo and Jing- Mei Woo( June), An- mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan, Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair and Lena St. Clair. The four mothers, on different occasions, emigrate from China to America in order to escape war and poverty. The horror and disgust of war urges the inhabitants to leave their home land:

Outside I could hear the bombing. Boom! Boom! And then the sound of raining rocks. And inside I was no longer hungry for the cabbage or the turnips of the hanging rock garden. I could only see the dripping bowels of an ancient hill that might collapse on top of me. Can you imagine how it is, to want to be neither inside nor outside, to want to be nowhere and disappear? (*The Joy Luck Club* 22)

The Chinese mothers find it challenging to raise their American daughters in a vastly diverse culture. The four mothers settle in San Francisco’s China town where they hope to have daughters just like them. But the life style and ambience of America influence the daughters who consider their mothers as “Old world Fossils”. The American daughters fail to appreciate the Chinese customs and manners and they consider China as a mysterious place where people are more prone to superstitious beliefs that fit the circumstances. They merely think China as unreal and can in no way influence their life. June reflects:

These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties. In those days, before my mother told me her Kweilin story, I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom- tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war (28).

June’s mother, Suyuan founded the Joy Luck Club in China which she later revived in San Francisco. Suyuan flee from Kweilin to escape Japanese invasion and she is forced to abandon her kids on the road. These lost babies haunted her always and she continued to search for them through correspondence with her friends in China. After Suyuan’s death, June takes her mother’s place at the east side of the club’s mah jong table. The first narrative itself exposes the cultural and generational clashes which is evident from the conversation between June and the other mothers at the table. June’s thwarted relationship with her mother is explicit at the very beginning:

When I shyly told my mother this, she seemed insulted and said, “You don’t even know little percent of me! How can you be me?” And she’s right. How can I be my mother at Joy Luck? (27)

In the end as June stands on the ancestral land, she realises the meaning of her mother’s words: “You don’t know even little percent of me” (27). Her visit to China transcends the generational gap and geographical boundary. Her meeting with the twin sisters is complete as they feel the presence of their dead mother. The final meeting thus marks the beginning:

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....Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last her long-cherished wish (288).

Tan mixes subtle irony when she makes the mothers simply criticise the daughters for not knowing them, as their indifference is out of generational and cultural differences and not that they don’t love them. The mothers consider their daughters as “ignorant” and the daughters find their mothers as “stupid.” The daughter’s stories frequently offer a confused replication of their mother’s past experiences. Each mother- daughter pair speaks of the other and articulates uneasiness over their disturbed relationship. The daughters are torn between the Eastern and Western ways of thinking. Initially they embrace the Western culture that they have been born into, which generates a detachment from their mothers and creates conflicts and confusions. They are confined in an identity crisis, facing divorce and other troubles with their Americanized ways of thinking. Though the daughters are different from their mothers in philosophy, they too unveil the same desire to appreciate and be understood. The life experiences ultimately teach them that the American ways of thinking can in no way help them. This shift in thought is explicit when Rose says:

It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing. That’s how I felt about my situation with Ted. There was so much to think about, so much to decide. Each decision meant a turn in another direction. (191)

The mothers hesitate to reveal their past to their daughters that widens the split between them. It is only later that Ying- ying decides to reveal the secrets to her daughter in order to support her:

Now I must tell my daughter everything. That she is the daughter of a ghost. She has no *chi*. This is my greatest shame. How can I leave this world without leaving her my spirit? So this is what I will do. I will gather together my past and look. I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose. I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear. And then my fierceness can come back, my golden side, my black side. I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter’s tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter (252).

Reunion follows after a series of setbacks and recognitions. The daughters understand that the mothers are delicate as they are and they are their mother’s shadows: Waverly echoes: Oh, her strength! Her weakness!—both pulling me apart. My mind was flying one way, my heart another. I sat down on the sofa next to her, the two of us stricken by the other (181). Though the daughters approach their mothers for justifications, confirmations, and self-reinforcement;

they are inept to fully connect until they try to listen to their cultural roots and accept an appeasement of both attitudes and values.

The foremost reason for the rift is that both mothers and daughters speak two different languages: “These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese” (33-34). Language acts as the literal representation of the communication barrier between both mothers and daughters. The mothers attempt to speak broken English but falter and relapse into Chinese, whereas the daughters unable to comprehend the Chinese idioms answer back in English. Later June insists her father for a retelling of her mother’s story in Chinese after he starts in broken English. This reversal in attitude symbolizes the unity between the daughters and the mothers.

June’s recognition of herself and her mother is an important moment as it clarifies the long held anxieties and confusions. It entails a long voyage back to her maternal origin, her home land China, to undertake a search for her lost sisters. As the novel ends, the metamorphosis of the daughters is over and they have finished the journey of cultural healing to locate their true selves. Now they are American- born girls with solid Chinese roots. They happen to realise that their legacy lies not in America where they are engulfed in, but in China that inculcates a sense of optimism, valour and pride to the Chinese immigrants in America.

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