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Transcendence of Transnational Female hood in *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan

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Abstract:

“Like mother like daughter. Now I understand why you are the way you are” (11). The transformation of womanhood from a daughter to a mother cannot be taken physical instead spatial. And what if a Chinese mothered a daughter in US and what if the daughter found her mother alien in her native only to find that it's not the mother who is alienated but she who swings between the transnational identities. Amy Tan spreads before us tiles of Mahjong in guise of Jing-mei and her mother's friends. The characters tied in between the dilemma of transnational identity stages a puppet show reined by their present and past.

Keywords: transcend, cultural disparity, dual identity.

The Joy Luck Club.

Amy Tan being a Chinese-American in her novel com short story collection *The Joy Luck Club* puts forth the cultural and identity conflict between four Chinese mothers and their American born daughters through the perspectives of seven narrators putting the reader in a dilemma on who the real protagonist is. Ever since the birth of man on earth telling and listening to stories has not changed, but in forms and Amy Tan too does the same relentlessly shifting the reader from China to San Francisco and then back to Shanghai and to Oakland with the echoes of different mothers and their daughters there by transcending the cultural threshold of China and America.

Harmony and Culture

The female characters in *The Joy Luck Club* represent individuals but also epitomise their birth place and culture. They are caught in between an unreal space, a gap or a margin between a mother and daughter, China and America or the two different generations. But since the margin lies on the same white sheet of female hood and the major characters are female, succeeds in transcending these diversities. Edward Soja describes his theory of Third space as:

Everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (51)

In the novel the characters are frequently involved in psychological as well as external conflict, the reason being their dual identity. But what results in the end is as said by Soja, the coming together of transdisciplinary culture. The mothers who are Chinese in nature try to nurture their culture in their American born daughters. It's this spatial disparity that puts these women in dilemma and the daughters' life caught in chaos. However, there is harmony established between mothers and daughters.

"What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything . . ." The aunties are looking at me as if I had become crazy right before their eyes . . . And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant . . . They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese . . . who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation. (34)

Here Jing-mei Woo is established as a representative of the book's younger generation, the American-born daughter who too feels out of touch with her Chinese identities and her Chinese mother. Even though Jing-mei acknowledges her disparity in attitude towards her mother she also shows a deep sympathy with the older generation. She even identifies the stress and apprehensions of her mother about her daughter growing up in America in spite of her struggles to imbibe in her Chinese culture.

Mother daughter conflict is never a new theme to be discussed as it exists beyond ages, generations, cultures and nations. But the ground of the conflict may differ if mother and daughter being insisted to follow and live under dissimilar circumstances like migration. It brings a tremendous internal conflict between the two as adding fuel to fire.

It was the story she would always tell me when she was bored, when there was nothing to do, when every bowl had been washed and the Formica table had been wiped down twice, when my father sat reading the newspaper and smoking one Pall Mall cigarette after another, a warning not to disturb him (9).

Here Jing-mei, one of the narrators and the daughter of Suyuan Woo is annoyed with her mother's repetition of the same story and comparison of Chinese and American culture that she reminiscence after her mother's departure. "Over the years, she told me the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine" (9).

But by the end of the story Jing-mei, transcending all the disparities takes her mother's dream as hers and journeys to China from San Francisco for the reconciliation with her long lost twin sisters.

I think about this. My mother's long cherished wish. Me, the younger sister who was supposed to be the essence of others. I feed myself with the gold grief, wondering how disappointed my mother must have been. (343)

Jing-mei is in a dilemma when the story begins as her mother's friend in the club asks her to take her mother's position in the Mahjong game. "They must wonder now how

someone like me can take my mother's place" (17). Once her friend tells that she and her mother are alike in their gestures and side way looks which picked on the nerves of her mother and she never agreed with the same.

And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! May be it's because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to mu mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way. (215)

Language is indeed means of communication that keep relationships in force irrespective of human kind or non-human. There no need of a single language for true relationship to move on. "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 in Chinese" (26). Suyuan felt ease with Mandarin where as Jing-mei as American born not only uses English but at the same time wants her mother too, to be well versed in the foreign tongue. "I think my mother's English was the worst, but she always thought her Chinese was the best. She spoke Mandarin slightly blurred with a Shangai dialect" (20).

Lindo Jong and Waverly are portrayed as arch rivals of Jing-mei and her mother. Waverly is looked upon for her genius in chess. But through the perspective of Lindo Jong who was 'sold' to her husband's family before she came to know what marriage is, even pathetic. "Not so, not so. She is a strong horse. She will grow up to a hard worker who serves you well in your old age" (48). The match maker comments thus as he proposes Lindo Jong for her hand in marriage with the son of Huang Taitai. Even a house in her own native seems alien to her which makes her think, "I asked myself, what is true about a person? Would I change in the same way the river changes the colour but still be the same person?"(58).

Lindo is made to swing in between her selfhood and wifehood unaware of her true self. This phenomenon is recurrent in the life of every woman once she gets married. Here disparity in nationality is not the real cause, but marriage. "'Teach her to wash rice properly so that water runs clear. Her husband cannot eat muddy rice', she would say to the cook servant" (55). Tatai orders thus to Lindo in her very little age of marriage, living in China. Lindo at the same time leading an intolerable circumstance after marriage changed her way towards her daughter especially after her winning chess regional tournament. "Soon after that a flower shop, headstone engraver and funeral parlour offered me in national tournaments. That's when my mother decided I no longer had to do dishes. Winston and Vincent had to do my chores" (106). Winston and Vincent being her brothers were not considered privileged in American unlike in China. Waverly was considered by her mother for her talent in chess and was not discriminated for being a woman in America. The acculturation results in transcendence of practices and beliefs. "A boy can run and chase dragonflies because that is nature...but a girl should stand still" (76) was denied in Waverly's life instead Lindo was too elevated that Waverly had to curb her mother and caution thus "Why do you have to use me to show off? If you want to show off, then why don't you play chess?"(76) Waverly is independent and self reliant that she hates the presence of Lindo while she practises the game.

At the same time she accepts her mother's faith in the wind blowing from a specific direction showing a good omen which she remembers to follow in her tournament match.

I . . . looked in the mirror . . . I was strong. I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind . . . And then I draped the large embroidered red scarf over my face and covered these thoughts up. But underneath the scarf I still knew who I was. I made a promise to myself: I would always remember my parents' wishes, but I would never forget myself. (58)

Lindo after facing all the hardships in marriage now identifies a link between her and her daughter Waverly and recognizes her inner invisible strength, a strength that her daughter will inherit and come to use in her chess matches. The strength that will not only help her to win the chess match but also endure the oppressions she might suffer in the patriarchal society.

She was staring at the mirror getting ready for a marriage with the one who she does not like but only to keep her promise with her parents. She tries to balance her duty to her parents, oneself and her daughter at the same time wishes to inherit her tradition to her daughter that the daughter in turn fulfils without becoming passive, without giving up their own desires and aspirations. While the struggle for this balance often alienates mothers and daughters, it also brings them closer together, for all of them have faced this challenge at some point in their lives, whether or not the mothers choose to recollect it.

I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix? I taught [my daughter] how American circumstances work. If you are born poor here, it's no lasting shame . . . In America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gives you. She learned these things, but I couldn't teach her about Chinese character . . . How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities . . . Why Chinese thinking is best.(200)

Here Lindo Jong questions the feasibility of the mixed cultural identity she once wished for her daughter. She fears that Chinese identity has come to constitute merely Waverly's exterior, while American identity dominates her interior self and blames herself for Waverly's duality. But from Waverly's own narrative, we come to know that Lindo's fears shall remain fear since Waverly exhibits a deep respect and concern for her Chinese identity and attribute much of her early talent in chess to her mother's lessons in how "not to show [her] thoughts,"(200) and she seems to have brought this skill to her adulthood.

Chinese culture is not wholly about passivity, obedience, and self-restraint. Nonetheless, the challenge of finding a way to combine aspects of both into one's own unique personality is a challenge faced not only by Waverly, but all of the novel's daughter characters—even, to some extent, by the mother characters, as they become increasingly accustomed to their lives in the United States.

Ying-ying, another representative mother is apprehensive with her daughter Lena's life. It's stereotypical for a mother to be cautious of her daughter's life as stuck between dual cultures. She even fears if her daughter shall slither away from her clutch and act as if an alien to her own mother and her nationality. She at the same time envisages rescuing her from the clutches of modern life.

Her wisdom is like a bottomless pond. You throw stones in and they sink into the darkness and dissolve. Her eyes looking back do not reflect anything. I think this to myself even though I love my daughter. She and I have shared the same body . . . But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to . . . pull her to where she can be saved. (302)

Seeing her daughter Lena in a painful marriage, Ying-ying blames her daughter's stubborn refusal to learn from her the Chinese ways of thinking, that is regarded as wiser than the American ways. Yet she feels sorry for her own passivity that led to her daughter's unsuccessful married life. Thus, she decides to guide her telling her own story to stand against fate and oppression. It's here that a Chinese mother sorts and filters both the cultures whose effective mixture shall pave way for her daughter's fruitful life.

So I will tell Lena of my shame. That I was rich and pretty. I was too good for any one man. That I became abandoned goods. I will tell her that at eighteen the prettiness drained from my cheeks. That I thought of throwing myself in the lake like the other ladies of shame. And I will tell her of the baby I killed because I came to hate this man so much. (300)

When there comes disparity in the opinion between Lena and Harold, Ying-ying kept silent in the beginning but was not patient enough to find her daughter in such a misery. Whatever the nationality be womanhood are preordained to be stereotypical, but what matters is the approach towards such a life. If a mother is for sure that she could establish a true relationship with her daughter irrespective of where she is nurtured, she opted to reveal her own life story before Lena by which daughter shall be taught not to give in but rejuvenate and come up in life. Ying-ying's notion that the telling of a story can "save" her daughter is not unique in *The Joy Luck Club*. Throughout the book, the mothers insist on the importance of stories not only in guiding their daughters and protecting them from pain, but also in preserving their own memories and hopes, keeping their culture alive.

An-mei led her life with her grandmother Popo from whose words she learned her mother is not a virtuous lady and is one of the several wives of a rich man that she later experiences. She is not ready to follow that sort of life at the same time not too open enough to adhere to the American culture and people. She at the very first sight apprehends Ted, the prospective husband of Rose. "He is Amerian" warned my mother as if I had been too blind to notice. "I am too an American and it's not as if I am going to marry him or something" (135). Eventually she marries him and ends breaking up as her mother warned.

My mother had a superstition, in fact, that children were predisposed to certain dangers on certain days, all depending on Chinese birth date . . . In the corners was a description written in Chinese and since I could not read the characters, I could only see what the picture meant. (142)

China is famous for its beliefs moreover superstitions. They consider the numbers four, thirteen and fourteen as unlucky numbers and it's not uncommon to find these numbers missing in the elevator buttons. Even since there is vast disparity in the cultures of China and America, considering the number thirteen as unlucky is common. Similarly the dissimilar attitudes of Chinese mother and American daughter find unity eventually.

"A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you," she said . . . "A psyche-attricks will only make you hulihudu, make you see heimongmong." Back home, I thought about what she said . . . [These] were words I had never thought about in English terms. I suppose the closest in meaning would be "confused" and "dark fog." But really, the words mean much more than that. Maybe they can't be easily translated because they refer to a sensation that only Chinese people have . . . (224)

Rose and her mother An-mei sit in church and speak about Rose's visits to the psychiatrist. Challenging her daughter's adherence to what she feels is an odd Western convention; An-mei asks Rose why she feels she must tell a psychiatrist—a complete stranger—about her marital woes, when she refuses to confide to her mother about them.

Now talking about Chinese beliefs, An-mei tells Rose that she was "without wood so that (she) listened to too many people". "A girl is like a tree . . . you must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That's the only way to grow . . . (227). But Rose had a swinging attitude towards her mother's words that which she regrets later.

I still listened to my mother, but I also learned how to let her words blow through me. And sometimes I filled my mind with other people's thoughts—all English—so that when she looked at me inside out, she would confused by what she saw. (228)

Rose later learned to choose the best opinion from Chinese and American concluding that American choices are better. To her despair Rose later confesses that "I discovered there was a serious flaw with American version" (228). In all these mother daughter relationship though disparities and conflicts are found it concludes in such a way that they are able to transcend these diversities and the end product is a mixture of both the cultures, Chinese as well as American

All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity that displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives... The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (Rutherford 211)

American born daughters of Chinese mothers tries to get rid of or deny the fact that that they Chinese in outlook and psyche. But in the end of all they are to reach the truth that

they are anyhow related to their mothers in belief, culture and that they can't be deprived of the same.

The gray-green surface changes to the bright colors of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at once. And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish. (352)

However, even while Jing-mei perceives the mother-daughter gap from both sides, this double perception ultimately serves not to accentuate the gap, but to bridge it. Throughout the novel, Jing-mei provides the connecting voice between the generations. She tells both the story of an American-born daughter longing for independence and the story of her mother, who fought hard to give her daughters the freedoms that she never had. Thus, by the last chapter of the book, Jing-mei will come to represent a figure of hope for both generations, that they might understand each other better than they had thought, that they might share in a discourse of love that often transcends linguistic and cultural barriers identifying the uniformity in multiformity and symphony in polyphony transcending the transnational cultural disparity.

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