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**Cultural Schism and Discontent in Amy Tan's *The Joy Lucky Club***

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**Abstract:**

Culture comprises the customs, ideas, and values of a particular civilization or social group in a specific period. Most cultural practices in a patriarchal society are solely to serve the interests of men and secure their superior position in society. Women suffer abuse and alienation and are expected to fulfill their domestic roles as wives and mothers. The dilemma of women is manifested differently in different societies and countries, but exploitation and subordination are seen as common factors. Patriarchy as an ideology and the racism of the mainstream culture are incorporated into the ethnic identity of the immigrant communities in American society. The women of these communities are often seen to use them as weapons to defend their culture and identity. In the novel, *The Joy Lucky Club*, Amy Tan tells the stories of the mothers' and daughters' struggles and conflicts in accepting diverse cultural values. Amy Tan describes the perplexing observation of female oppression in contemporary society by exploring the characters' tensions in their life struggles.

**Keywords:** Amy Tan, Alienation, Culture, Conflicts, Daughter, Mother.

**Introduction**

The cultural traditions and customs of Americans and Chinese differ in various ways. In the novel, *The Joy Lucky Club*, Amy Tan tells the stories of the mothers' and daughters' struggles and conflicts in accepting diverse cultural values. Through her works, Amy Tan advocates the emancipation of women in society and one can identify the different forms of oppression, exploitation, and domination that constrict women. Culture and social ethos continue to restrict women. They are doubtful of being able to live up to the expectations of their children. Even though they spend most of their time with their children, mothers live a disturbed life and nurture eternal feelings of guilt and dissatisfaction. But the hard reality strikes when women get shattered by the realization that they are unable to sustain a good relationship with their children despite the pains and efforts taken.

**Cultural Conflicts and Alienation**

The four mothers in the novel *The Joy Lucky Club* struggle to teach their daughters Chinese cultural traditions as they have almost adapted to American culture. Due to the different cultural backgrounds of China and America, there are different views regarding marriage. In the novel, the four mothers had been married at a very young age. As per tradition, their connubial purpose is to perform domestic chores, form a family, and give birth to babies, especially sons which they believed was

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inevitable to continue their legacy. In China, there is no tolerance for women who are not loyal in marriage because Chinese society is more patriarchal than America. For example, Lindo is coerced into a strange marriage because her husband is a little boy and she has no choice. Her mother-in-law chooses her only because of her good looks, with the expectation that she would give their family a grandson. Unlike Lindo, Waverly chooses Rich because they love each other. So, Lindo's opinion about Waverly's marriage influences her daughter's final decision as she was brought up in America. Lindo Jong says sadly like any other mother who dreams of giving her child the better of the two heritages she shares. "I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?" (Tan 308). While the daughters consider China as a foreign country that they have never seen, the mothers are not emotionally disconnected from China. But at the end of the novel, the reader is impressed that the daughters at least accepted the Chinese culture as their heritage.

Throughout the novel, American-born daughters have remained peripheral to the Joy Lucky Club's long existence. Though they attended the meetings with their parents and tasted Chinese dishes, they were always in conflict with their mothers for their Chinese way of thinking. The daughters blamed them for their attempt to retain their Chinese heritage in a different place like the United States. For instance, when mothers wear traditional Chinese attire, the daughters feel strange and uncomfortable: "... dressed up in funny Chinese dress with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people...and too strange for American parties" (Tan 19). The daughters who are desperately trying to cultivate an American identity cannot accept their mothers speaking English in an accent strange to Americans outside and the Chinese language they cannot comprehend at home. The problems are openly discussed in a place called The Joy Club, where both mothers and daughters feel commonly comfortable.

The novel begins with the three surviving mothers inviting Suyuan's daughter Jing-Mei to join the Club which is the artifice that allows a second-generation member to integrate with the older generation. Her introduction in the novel paves the way for the other daughters to appear. Each mother is depicted as a "good mother" (Tan39). But after moving to America, they suffer the effects of alienation when their daughters find it difficult to understand them. Amy Tan effectively expresses the mother's state of mind when An-Mei Hsu sees her daughter's struggles and says: "I know this because I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my bitterness. And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she comes out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl" (Tan 25). This expresses An-Mei's astonishment that her daughter eventually becomes an oppressed wife though she does not purposefully teach her daughter the Chinese way. Wendy Ho argues in *In Her Mother's House-The Politics of Asian American Mother Daughter Writing* that:

Tan's interest is not in resurrecting imperialist nostalgia or exotica, rather, she amplifies each woman's story and enriches the stories of mother-daughter pairs by finding their social and emotional resonances in the past and present legacies...her multiple pairings suggest the affiliative links between the mother-daughter pairs as well as among a broader community of women. (150)

Tan's female characters vividly correspond to the concept of alienation and exploitation. When Ying-Ying moves to the United States as St. Clair's bride, she realizes that her life in America is not better than that in China: "... I lived in houses smaller than one in the country, I wore large American clothes. I did servants' 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" (Tan 305). When they set out to the promised land, their belief was "you could be anything you wanted to be in America" (Tan 132). But the reality turned out to be entirely different for Ying-Ying. Lack of money alters the vision and survival comes first. So, they find menial jobs that demand long hours of work and poor pay. Suyuan finds a cleaning job and An-Mei and Lindo get to work in a cookie factory. Wendy Ho states that "as working-class women of color in American society, many of the Joy Lucky Club mothers do not often

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have the money, energy, and leisure to spend 'quality time' with their young children, because they speak little or no English and have few marketable skills, several Joy Lucky mothers find themselves in "low paying, dead-end jobs for long hours" (167). Women are forced to do daily domestic household work also after a hectic day of working outside. The absence of maids, grandmothers, aunts, etc. places the burden of the entire household on the mother, which makes them fall into a state of depression.

The childrearing experience in the absence of fathers in the novel makes the mother-daughter relationship more complex than ever with the unimaginable familial conflicts resulting in cultural clashes. To make matters worse, the daughters find difficulty in accepting their mothers, which results in tension, misunderstanding, and estrangement. Mothers expect high of their daughters and become depressed when the daughters fail to live up to their expectations. The mothers themselves find their mutual friendship strained as they compare their daughters with those of their friends. This evokes a sense of rejection and hatred, resulting in envy and alienation. In reality, the mothers are seen to impose their expectations on their daughters in the hope of bringing up perfect daughters, which in turn would make them feel successful as mothers. This unbridgeable mother-daughter generation gap and the unconsciously imposed expectations result in alienation which is portrayed in Suyuan and Jing-Mei's story. "My mother and I speak two languages" (Tan 27). But Jing-Mei's inability to translate her mother's language culminates in estrangement and alienation which leads to a conflict between the mother and daughter. Suyuan says "Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient one!" (Tan 142). When she faces her daughter's rebellion against the pressure to succeed as a pianist, it becomes too much for Suyuan to endure. Her sacrifice turns out to be futile when Jing-Mei refuses to respect her and Suyuan is left with "disappointment" which makes her feel like "a small brown leaf, thin brittle, lifeless" (Tan 142). In Jing-Mei's narration, from the time we were babies, our mothers compared the creases in our belly buttons, how shapely our earlobes were, how fast we healed when we scraped our knees, how thick and dark our hair, how many shoes we wore out in one year and later, how smart Waverly was at playing chess, how many trophies she had won last month, how many newspapers had printed her name how many cities she had visited. (Tan 31)

The lack of support and appreciation from their mothers causes these daughters to feel detached from them. Ying-Ying recalls: "...all these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me" (Tan 69). The mothers who asserted their opinions more suffer the greatest estrangement in relationships. Alienation creates both physical and emotional bruises in the mothers which makes it very difficult for them as they are unable to control certain vital factors within the parenting process, thus leading to distress and depression.

Although the four American-born daughters are economically independent, they suffer from failed marriages and unhappy married lives. In *The Joy Lucky Club*, fear is immanent in the narration of daughters. The most economically successful among the daughters, Lena, daughter of Ying-Ying, has a boyfriend whom she considers nice, but at the same time, she suffers severe insecurities as she is afraid of not being able to please him:

When I fantasized about moving in with him, I also dredged up my deepest fears: that he would tell me I smelled bad, that I had terrible bathroom habits, and that my taste in music and television was appalling. I worried Harold would someday get a new prescription for his glasses and he'd put them on one morning, look me up and down, and say: 'Why, gosh, you aren't the girl I thought you were, are you?' (Tan 182)

She believes that her Chinese self would never satisfy Harold and that she would never be able to live up to his expectations. This suggests that Lena accepts the concept of Amanda Frankel that "a woman's potential is judged by how well she fits the fantasy projected onto her" (47). Lena allows Harold to exercise control over her appearance and behavior, which eventually changes her into a mere object without convictions or preferences. She even describes her sexual relationship with him as "this feeling of surrendering everything to him, with abandon, without caring what I got in return" (Tan 186). An-Mei's daughter Rose confesses to Lena: "... your thoughts of worries are commonplace in women

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like us" (Tan 182). This implies that sexual alienation is universal to women. Lena becomes more alienated after her marriage as they follow rigid rules to share expenses and to detail their daily expenditure, they even use balance sheets. Harold views the balance sheet as the base of their marriage instead of love. Harold refuses to change despite Lena's questioning. Karl Marx argues about alienated relationships in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* as "what they are material relations between person and social relations between things" (668). Marriage becomes a source of alienation for Lena. Rose, the daughter of An-Mei also suffers similar marital alienation to Lena. Ted, Rose's controlling husband holds absolute power over Rose. She narrates: "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 neighborhood before having children. We used to discuss some of these matters, but we knew the question would boil down to my saying, 'Ted, you decide'" (Tan 135). Ted alienates her from the initial transition to motherhood by forcing his decisions upon Rose without considering her feelings and thoughts. Gender differences also influenced their relationship. Ted seizes all the opportunities for decision-making and autonomy from Rose. Therefore, the family becomes a site of oppression. Rose is left to bear the consequences of marriage life: "When something that violent hits you, you can't help but lose your balance and fall" (Tan 121).

### Conclusion

Many people migrate to foreign lands in pursuit of better living conditions. The major challenges they have to undergo are the ones related to multiculturalism and racism. *The Joy Lucky Club* by Amy Tan can be analyzed as one that effectively illustrates the oppression of mothers' which results in a sense of extreme alienation in motherhood and marriage. All of her characters are powerful and also offer a vivid exploration of how migrants can look for methods to combat the negative effects of alienation in a foreign land. Mothers are alienated from themselves, their daughters, their family members, and society. Estrangement leads to mothers' oppression, resulting in strained relationships. Oppression is addressed and rejected by the mothers and daughters with their suggestions to relieve them from the effects of intolerable conditions of alienation and hope for a change in society.

Culturally, women were regarded as weak, submissive, and emotional social entities, who needed protection and guidance from men. They were established as meek and inferior to men. This long-established position for women has turned into angst, leading them to question their tradition and culture, breaking silence by revealing their painful experiences to the world. Amy Tan reclaims women's marginal positions and shows them as a space of strength with which they rise and fall. She shows the interwoven nature of oppression through colonialism, and patriarchy and how cultural dynamics play at individual levels in their protagonists.

Amy Tan believes that a mixture of one's native culture and the adopted country's order is necessary to understand the mother-daughter relationship. To define the dominant and receding cultures, Tan has deconstructed and reconstructed myths. In the novel, *The Joy Lucky Club*, all four myths depict the strained relationships between mothers and daughters. There are different kinds of conflicts between Chinese mothers and American daughters. They have different viewpoints of their individuality which relate to their cultural backgrounds. These conflicts and arguments between them do not end up breaking their relationship. They have disagreements on certain cultural values, but ultimately, they come to a consensus by understanding and respecting the values of their native culture. In the novel, they do not blindly believe or follow the other's attitude or belief. What each generation does is to keep silent after voicing their ideas. Moreover, they look over the disagreements or problems to be eventually reconciled.

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