



# Living Between Two Worlds: Communication and Cultural Identity in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club

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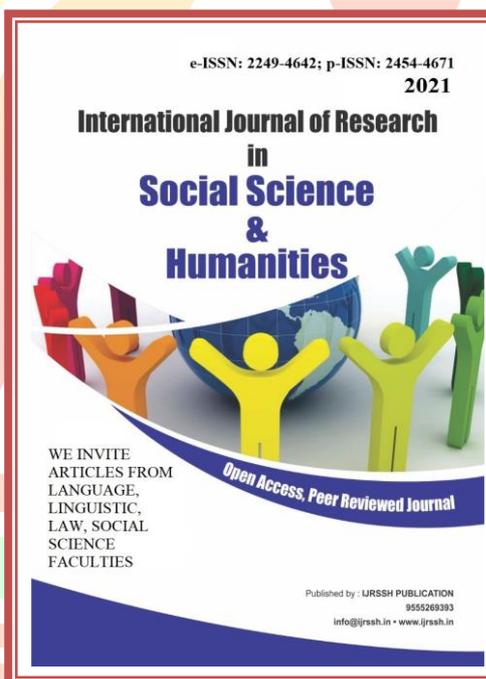
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## ABSTRACT

One of the central themes in the writings of Asian-Americans is the search for self-definition and individual acceptance in American society. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is an attempt to synthesize Asian heritage and culture with American aspirations as it presents a group portrait of four mother-daughter relationships that have to endure and bridge not only a generational gap but a cultural one. In the novel, Tan gives both the mothers and daughters a voice to gain insight into the cultural differences between America and China. Though Tan focuses on the different cultural patterns of Eastern and Western thinking, she also suggests the importance of creating an identity that will link the best of both worlds.

**Keywords:** identity, culture, Eurasians, self-definition, ethnicity, language, cultural heritage



## INTRODUCTION

Due to war, economic, social or family problems, many immigrants who have to run away from their countries live in a state of in-betweenness. They are stuck between their cultural identity and that of the new land. On one hand, they try to protect their cultural heritage; on the other hand they need to adjust themselves to survive in a multicultural variety within the new society. Sometimes, they believe that they should change their real identity to have place and not to get lost in that foreign culture. However, they may reject the cultural values of that country and see their own culture as inseparable from who they really are. This double existence produces in the immigrants the sense of belonging to two distinct entities/cultures, yet not feeling comfortable in either one.

The issue of identity has been studied widely in the American literature. The ethnic pluralism has begun as a result of immigration. The waves of migration have started from Europe, Latin America, China and Japan. Since America is the central point of that wave, this ethnic diversity is reflected in the American literature. The writers, who are from different ethnic cultures, have written many works in the American literature in order to have a place with their identity and history. Native- American, African- American and Asian-American writers all have written

about the crisis of identity and the problem of being trapped between two opposing cultures. Themes such as, language, Otherness, ethnicity and cultural as well as generational clashing are the main subjects of their works. Asian-American literature is the creative field of writers of Asian descent who view their own experiences through the dual lenses of their American identities and ethnic roots. Among these writers is Amy Tan who examines the conflict of living in America with Chinese heritage.

One of the central themes in the writings of Asian-Americans is the search for self-definition and individual acceptance in American society. In the last few decades, many Asian-Americans have entered an era of increased awareness of their social and cultural identity built on their need to establish their uniquely American identity. Elaine Kim has declared that the main task of these writers is that of

claiming America for the Asian-Americans. That does not mean disappearing like raindrops in the ocean of white America, fighting to become normal, losing ourselves in the process. It means inventing a new reality, defining ourselves according to the truth instead of a racial fantasy, so that we can be

reconciled with one another in order to celebrate our marginality (as cited in Davis, 1994, p.90)

In other words, these writers attempt to "claim America" for Asian-Americans by demonstrating Asian roots in American society and culture. They turn their interest away from the ethnic community that perpetuates the relegation of Asian-Americans to marginal status, and question individual Asian-American identity within the context of a larger society.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) continues the tradition that the pioneer writers of Asian-American literature have launched. The novel is another attempt to "synthesize Asian heritage with American aspirations as it presents a group of four mother-daughter relationships that have to endure and bridge not only a generational gap but that created by the waning influence of an older culture and the overwhelming presence of another" (Davis, 1994, p. 90). In the novel we hear the voices of four Chinese mothers, immigrants to the United States, and their four daughters, born and raised Americans. The novel is divided into four parts; each part is further subdivided into four sections. The only exception is the late Suyuan Woo whose story is told by her daughter Jing-Mei. With this structure, Tan manages to solve what Linda Hunt

describes as a basic problem for Chinese-American woman:" being simultaneously insider (a person who identifies strongly with her cultural group) and outsider (deviant and rebel against that tradition), she cannot figure out from which perspective to speak" (as cited in Shear, 1993, p. 18).

Born to Chinese immigrant parents in Okland, California in 1952, Tan had usually experienced the conflict between generations and cultures. Tan revealed how she grew up thinking that she would never please her parents and that her intense relationship with her mother always unsettled her emotions. At the early age, Tan was bilingual, but she stopped speaking Chinese when she was five. Due to parental expectations and criticisms, she had a gloomy childhood and even tried suicide. After her father and brother's death, and her complete break up with the mother, Tan came to resent the Chinese values she grew up with and decided to disclaim her ethnicity: "I'm not going to have anything to do with anything Chinese when I leave home. I'm going to be completely American. None of that Chinese torture or guilt ever again in my life. None of that responsibility crap" (Tan, 1993). Tan took no pride in her cultural origin during adolescence. Maintaining a strained relationship with her mother, she resisted "Chineseness" her parents tried to

acquaint her generation with. Despite her denial of ethnic identity, Tan enjoyed hearing the family history because of her personal favor on stories. She confessed how she grew up with inspiration from overhearing the family talk: "There was a lot of storytelling going on in our house, family stories, gossip, what happened to the people left behind in China" (Tan, 1993). Tan knew more about the family history after her visit to China with her mother in 1987. She considered her trip to China as a revelation for it gave her a new perspective on her relationship with the mother and her connection with the ancestral country:

So it was a chance for me to really see what was inside of me and my mother. Most importantly, I wanted to know about her past... I discovered how American I was. I also discovered how Chinese I was... It was wonderful going to a country where suddenly the landscape, the geography, the history was relevant. That was enormously important to me. (Tan, 1993)

The trip not only represented a turning point in her relationship with her mother, but also helped her writing her first novel. As she revealed in her personal talks, had not she been to China and had not she felt

the spiritual sense of geography, she could not have written *The Joy Luck Club*.

*The Joy Luck Club* focuses on the four pairs of intercultural mothers and daughters: Suyuan Woo and Jing-Me "June Woo", An-Mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan, Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong, and Ying-Ying St. Clair and Lena St. Clair. The novel depicts the conflict between the four Chinese immigrant mothers, who have formed a club of the same name where they used to play mah jong, a Chinese game, and their four American-born daughters who believe in American individuality and independence. In fact the club, which was founded by the mothers, is a symbol of their cultural heritage. The mothers feel that they have lost their identity after coming to American, and that is why they create a special circle in order to relive their Chinese identity which is thought to be lost. All of the mothers want to raise their daughters in the traditional Chinese way and still allow them to embrace American thinking. This causes many conflicts. Each mother shows love to her daughter, yet the daughter usually responds to it in a negative manner. There is a lack of communication between the mothers and daughters due to cultural barriers.

The ethnic struggle manifested in the relationship between the Chinese

mothers and American daughters is the dilemma which many immigrants are faced with, that is, living "between worlds". The young generation is often split by two different cultures as Patricia Lin notes:

The polarity between traditional Chinese and American values is felt with particular keenness by American-born Chinese women. Unlike their mothers, such women face conflicting demands from two opposing cultures. While American-born daughters are familiar with cultural nuances of Chinese life, their dilemmas frequently stem from having to vacillate between "Chineseness" and "Americanness". Their Chinese-born mothers, in contrast, are less plagued by the complexities of being Chinese, American, and women. (as cited in Zeng, 2003)

#### **I. Suyuan Woo & June Woo: The Problem of disobedience:**

It is in the friction relationships between the mothers and daughters that one can see most clearly the interaction between generations and cultures. Throughout their narratives, the mothers are constantly aware of the widening gap between their daughters and themselves. The mothers have all lived painful and tragic

experiences in China, which have made them long for America and the opportunities it would provide them and their families. From the very first prologue, Tan presents a Chinese woman, Suyuan Woo, coming from old China to America with a swan:" This bird...was once a duck that stretched its neck in hope of becoming a goose" (Tan, 1989, p. 17). This swan symbolizes "the hopes and cultural resources of the immigrant mother" (Yang & Linton, n.d. p, 159). She tells the bird on her trip to America:

In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow!... because I will give her this swan- a creature that became more than what was hoped for. (Tan, 1989, p. 17)

Once she arrives the new country, the immigration officials take her swan away from her, leaving the mother with "only one swan feather for a memory" (Tan, 1989, p. 17). What is left, the swan feather, is "a token of the cultural heritage she can no longer make present to her daughter"(Yang & Linton, p, 159). Ironically, all the mother's hopes for her

daughter result in the alienation of both for the daughter, too busy "speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow" (Tan,1989,p.17), entirely embraces the values and language of the new land while the mother still holds on to those of the old.

Suyuan Woo is a strong, secretive woman who does everything for the success of her daughter June. She fits well the model of a typical Chinese- American mother who sacrifices her life for the well-being of her offspring. The stories of Suyuan Woo are told by her daughter, June, as the mother has just passed away. The novel's first story tells how June Woo is invited to replace her late mother in the mah jong table. Suyuan thus passes on the obligations to her daughter who will complete the mother's aspiration and fulfill her hidden hopes. During that evening, June learns some hidden truths of her mother's past: She learns that her mother's lost Chinese twin daughters are found. When escaping from the war town Kweilin, Suyuan had to leave behind her twin daughters in order to save herself. She not only lost her twin daughters, but she also lost her husband, a soldier killed in a war. During her immigration life in the USA and her second marriage, she had continued to look for the girls who were finally found when she died.

In the novel, Chinese mothers are persistent, critical and hard to please. They were born in China and that is why they want their daughters to grow up like Chinese. However, they miss the fact that their daughters have never been to China or experienced the Chinese values. Suyuan Woo has high expectations for her American daughter as traditionally Chinese mothers do. She does everything for her daughter's success and expects hard work for it in return. She used to think that June does not try hard enough. In a way, it is the "Americanized" daughter's way of choosing her own life. As for Suyuan, she most likely is even more demanding and hopeful on June than Chinese parents traditionally are. She puts all her efforts and hopes on June in compensation of losing her two Chinese daughters. She tries every means possible to make her American daughter a prodigy," a Chinese Shirley Temple" because she "believed that you could be anything you wanted to be in America" (Tan, 1989, p. 132) since America is a land of opportunity for them. June, in return, tries to please her mother and fulfill her wish by making herself a genius. First, she willingly partakes in the piano lessons her mother has planned and imagines her excellent performance would eventually win her parental affection:" In all of my imaginings, I was filled with a sense that I would soon become perfect.

My mother and father would adore me. I would be beyond reproach. I would never feel the need to sulk for anything" (Tan, 1998, p. 133). Yet June is pushed to taste the bitterness of shame and humiliation after giving an awful performance in the talent show: "My mother's expression was what devastated me: a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything" (Tan, 1989, p. 140). Though June falls short of maternal expectations, her strong will to disobey her mother's wishes continues:

And then I decided. I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China... "You want me to be someone that I'm not. I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be" [June sobbed].

"Only two kinds of daughters. Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!" [Suyuan] shouted.

"Then I wish I'd never been born. I wish I were dead. Like them" [June] shouted (Tan, 1989, p. 142)

The conflict between Suyuan and her daughter results from their upholding of sharply different cultural values. In traditional Chinese culture, family is the

unit upon which society is based. Parents are expected not only to protect and take care of their children, but to make sacrifices for them. And what they expect from their children in return is respect and obedience. This is the way the joy luck mothers were brought up and taught by their mothers in old China- to sacrifice their autonomy, individuality and independence for their families and to desire nothing for themselves. It is not surprising that their daughters, who have been brought up and educated in America which highlights independence, individuality and freedom of choice no longer hold on to this cultural code and fight against this patriarchal family hierarchy.

In an attempt to assert her own headstrong "Americanized" identity, June continues to fail her mother's expectations as if showing she has her own will, yet she is still tortured by her mother's continuous criticism. In her twenties, June protests: "There is a school of thought... that parents should not criticize children. They should encourage instead. You know, people rise to other people's expectations. And when you criticize, it just means you're expecting failure" (Tan, 1989, p.31). Born, brought up and educated in America, the daughter gets used to encouragement, compliment and applause rather than criticism, finding faults and

discouragement. But her mother does not think so: " That's the trouble...You never rise. Lazy to get up. Lazy to rise to expectations" (Tan, 1989, p. 31).

Even though the mother and daughter constantly fail to understand each other, June feels that they have " an unspoken understanding about things: that she didn't really mean that I was a failure, and I really meant I would try to respect her opinions more" (Tan, 1989, p. 37). Yet June is convinced that "my mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (Tan, 1989, p.37). June frequently feels that she and her mother speak different languages as the mother expects her to understand things with little explanations:" These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, and she answered back in Chinese" (Tan, 1989, pp. 33-34). Apart from misunderstanding owing to cultural differences between mothers and daughters, the inability to communicate between the two generations is due to language barrier. As the daughters speak English exclusively, the use of Chinese dialect by the mothers, as a way to preserve Chinese heritage, intensifies the sense of alienation and weakens the

mother-daughter bond. In this respect, Yuan (1999) argues that "the bilingual conversation turns into a game of translation, and in that translation, meaning is transfigured, displaced and occasionally lost" (p. 152).

After Suyuan's death, June feels lost and suffers from deep grief. She undergoes realization and appreciation for the mother who has tried to instill valuable Chinese principles in her daughter. When she makes her final trip back to China to meet her twin sisters, June finally understands the true meaning of the lessons her mother has taught her. These lessons teach her" an attitude, a habit of mind with which to value herself...and to realize her own connection to her Chinese heritage" (Yang &Linton, p. 162). When the train enters the borders of China, June feels that she is "becoming Chinese": " Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese" (Tan, 1989, p.267). June's trip to China is symbolic of her inner journey "to discover her own identity and genealogical ties" (Mistri, 1998, p. 252).

The assurance of self-definition through connecting with her cultural roots is June's resolution to her ethnic dilemma:" 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, 1989, p. 288). The transformation is complete and she, along

with the other daughters later, has completed the journey of "cultural healing" (Lee, 2007) to find their true identities: American-born girls with strong Chinese roots.

## II. An-Mei Hsu & Rose Hsu Jordan: The problem of divorce

Each of the mothers in her childhood comes to realization about the harsh realities of her Chinese life that she later tries to pass on to her daughter. As a child, An-Mei Hsu was raised by her uncle's family as she belonged to her father's family after her mother became a widow. Her mother did not exist to the family; she was referred to as a ghost, a forbidden topic as she had dishonored the family by becoming a concubine, the fourth wife of a rich man after he raped her. An-Mei Hsu was clearly brought up in a traditional way through silent obedience: "I was a child. I could only watch and listen. I could not cry if I was disappointed. I had to be silent and listen to my elders" (Tan, 1989, p. 217). At her uncle's house, An-Mei was accustomed to hearing talk-stories: they were mainly stories of warning which told what happened to children who disobeyed their elders: "When you lose your face, it is like dropping your necklace down a well. The only way you can get it back is to fall in after it" (Tan, 1989, p. 44). Of course the story referred to her own

mother. Whenever An-Mei wanted to know about her mother, her grandmother, Pop said: "Never say her name. To say her name is to spit on your father's grave" (Tan, 1989, p. 43). Though she didn't know her mother personally except some stories of her disgraceful past, An-Mei loved her mother: "This is how a daughter honors her mother...it is in your bones" (Tan, 1989, p. 48). Later An-Mei decided to leave with her real mother. Living with her mother, An-Mei saw how much her mother hated her life: she had to live in a polygamous relationship, obey the other wives and give up her only son to be raised by the first wife. In the end she committed suicide:

My mother, she suffered. She lost her face and tried to hide it. She found only greater misery and finally could not hide that. There is nothing more to understand. That was China. That was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away. That was their fate. (Tan, 1989, p. 241)

Through her mother's suicide, An-Mei acquires a strong spirit. She realizes that her mother's suicide is an act of will: "She would rather kill her own weak spirit so she could give me a strong one" (Tan, 1989, p. 240). Her mother's death creates uncountable impacts on her, strengthens her spirit and pushes her to shout: "On that

day I learned to shout" (Tan, 1989, p. 240). She learns to defy traditional obedience rules of the Chinese society.

As a daughter of Chinese mother, Rose was an obedient child that became later a submissive adult: "I used to believe everything my mother said...The power of her words was that strong...More than thirty years, my mother was still trying to make me listen" (Tan, 1989, pp.185-187). The turning point in Rose's childhood was the death of her little brother, Bing, whom she was responsible for looking after. The guilt of causing Bing's death made Rose vulnerable and indecisive. She failed to follow her mother's wish. She no longer managed to take responsibility for anything. Rose thought that "it was because she was raised with Chinese humility, because she was Chinese, [she is] supposed to accept anything"(Tan, 1989, p. 156). Therefore, she accepted a submissive role in her relationships. In her marriage with Ted Jordan, an American man, Rose used to be the one whose weakness needed protection. She married Ted because he was different from Chinese. Her mother never accepted him. She was a typical Chinese mother who thought that Chinese should not mix with Americans. When Rose started dating him, An-Mei said: "He is American", and Rose protested: "I'm American too"(Tan, 1989, p. 117). After marriage, Ted acted like a

hero to protect Rose:" I was victim to his hero. I was always in danger and he was always rescuing me. I would fall and he would lift me up"(Tan, 1989, pp.118-119).

Though Rose fight for having American identity, she behaves like a traditional Chinese woman in her marriage to Ted. Like all Chinese women, she has no freedom of expressing her ideas and depends on her husband in taking decisions. In spite of ignoring the idea of being Chinese, Rose is Chinese in her mind just like her mother. About her marriage she says: "we used to discuss some matters, but we both knew the question would boil down to my saying 'Ted, you decide'. After a while, there were no more discussions. Ted simply decided. And I never thought of objecting" (Tan, 1989, p. 119). However, Ted no longer accepted Rose's indecisiveness and their marriage broke.

Moreover, Ted's desire to get divorced helps Rose, later, to find her true identity. Rose has always underestimated her desires in her marriage with Ted, and acted according to his rules. In this sense, Ted, being American, stands for everything Rose wishes to assimilate with. While Ted resembles the superior America which is dominant, Rose matches the inferior Chinese culture which is being dominated. However, Rose, who has

adopted the American lifestyle, has tried hard to convince herself that she is all American. Later, she realizes how mistaken she was. Rose, who once underestimated being a Chinese, finds that her power lies in her Chinese roots, a power that enables her to reject living by her husband's American standards.

The divorce is a turning point in the mother-daughter relationship. First, Rose blames the Chinese cultural heritage that her mother has passed to her for the failure of her marriage. Since childhood, Rose thinks that her mother has tried to instill the Chinese values of obedience and humility in her daughter. This makes Rose undetermined, confused and indecisive, hence the failure of her marriage. Brought up in America, Rose seems the most confused daughter among others by the cross cultural influence:

Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. 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 up the wrong thing. (Tan, 1989, p. 191)

Indeed, Rose is confused by the choices she has made. A great part of this confusion stems from her rejection of the Chinese "version", as an American daughter, in the person of her mother.

In Tan's novel, not all Chinese mothers try to teach their American daughters the Chinese ways they were taught by their mothers in old China as they want the best for their daughters. These mothers have come to America with the intention of making a better life in which their daughters would get acquainted with myth of the American Dream. An-Mei says: "I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness"(Tan, 1989, p. 215). Having such miserable experiences in old China, An-Mei encourages her daughter to fight for her marriage and to speak for herself as a way of reclaiming her autonomy and dignity. The result, however, disappoints the mother:" And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way".

Yet Rose relives the old frustration of being controlled and complains that her "mother was still trying to make [her] listen"(Tan, 1989, p. 187) and she has to obey in return. She fails to understand her mother's need to see in her American dignity combined with Chinese wisdom. Later, after hearing the story of her

grandmother's painful silence in China, she begins to notice how her inherited silence lay at the bottom of her affliction. Therefore, she decides to empower herself by asserting her own will. When her husband comes to the house to demand the divorce paper signed, she speaks of her mind with ferocity:" 'You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away'. I saw what I wanted: his eyes, confused, then scared...The power of my words was that strong" (Tan, 1989, p. 196). Rose finally understands that swallowing one's sorrow and keeping silent hinder her development and expression of her true self. It's the "Chinese opinion" that brings Rose's strength to speak out; realizing that is what her mother has been trying to teach her all along. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the American daughters approach their mothers for "explanations, validations, and identity reinforcement and definition" (as cited in Lee, 2007). Yet, the daughters are unable to fully connect until they are willing to attach to their cultural roots and accept a compromise of both philosophies and cultures. Their awareness of these roots brings out the best understanding of their existence.

### **III. Lindo Jong & Waverly Jong: The lack of respect to the elders**

In Chinese culture, woman was submitted to authorities through her whole life: her

own parents, her husband's parents and her husband. Absolute piety and obedience were demanded of Chinese women, they were in the same class as slaves (Kristeva, 1977, p.75). In her story, Lindo Jong was, like most Chinese girls, doomed to marriage at the age of two to the Huang family's son as this tradition of arranged marriages existed in old China. Since then her own family started to treat her "as if [she] belonged to somebody else" (Tan, 1989, P. 51). Her childhood was spent to raise her into an obedient, model wife. And she was an obedient child, but sometimes she showed a sour look on her face to which her mother would say:" Such an ugly face. The Huangs won't want you and our whole family will be disgraced. We have made a contract. It cannot be broken" (Tan, 1989, p. 52). At the age of twelve, her life changed as she had to move in with her future husband's family:" I once sacrificed my life to keep my parent's promise" (Tan, 1989, p. 49). Once she arrived to the Huangs family's household, she was led to a place for cooks and servants, and she immediately realized "her standing" in the new family: a slave. As family hierarchy and filial piety were predominant in Chinese culture, Lindo managed to honor her parents' wishes and follow orders. Being Chinese, Lindo's status is subservient. Once she turned sixteen, the marriage date was set. She was

horrified that she had no choice, yet she recognized her "true self" behind her bridal veil. And the brutality of a forced marriage is transformed, later, into a celebration of courage and resistance:

I wiped my eyes and looked in the mirror. I was surprised at what I saw. I had on a beautiful red dress, but what I saw was even more valuable. I was strong. I was pure. I had genuine thoughts that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind. I threw my head back and smiled proudly to myself. 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. (Tan, 1989, p. 58)

After she walked out of her marriage, Lindo continued to exercise her tact to obtain what she wanted after migrating to the United States. Thinking that "it's hard to keep your Chinese face in America", Lindo paid a high price to hire a Chinese girl to teach her how to "hide her true self" (Tan, 1989, p. 258): how to lose her Chinese face and think like an American. Finding an American citizen for a husband

was also considered a necessity. She got married to Tin Jong and though it was not the best option, but at least she had the choice this time. After getting married, Lindo had two sons and a daughter. When naming her children, Lindo believed in the power of names. For her daughter, she chose Waverly, the street name of their home, because she wanted her to get the best circumstances possible. She wanted Waverly to grow up with the feeling of belonging.

As a typical Chinese mother, Lindo is demanding and controlling. She uses her power with her children even when they are adults. So an obedient, silenced Chinese girl develops into a manipulative, powerful woman. This has an influence on her American daughter's personality as well as their relationship. Lindo is always bragging about her daughter's success whether it is for her talent in playing chess in her childhood or her career as a law-attorney. Waverly becomes a strong-willed American woman and a single mother, but when she is with her mother, she fails her:

You don't know my mother, she never thinks anybody is enough for anything. She is a Horse born in 1918, destined to be obstinate and frank to the point of tactlessness. She and I make a bad combination, because I'm a rabbit, born in 1951,

supposedly sensitive, with tendencies toward being thin-skinned and skitter at the first sign of criticism (Tan, 1989, p. 167)

Yet both Lindo and her daughter resemble each other. Both are winners at the game of life through learning the "art of invisible strength" (Tan, 1989, p. 89). This resemblance encourages in Lindo the mistaken assumption that character is independent of cultural circumstances. Lindo commits the error of treating her American-born daughter as an extension of her Chinese self. She blames herself when Waverly reacts in an American way by openly showing her anger at her mother's controlling power:

I taught her how American circumstances work...but I couldn't teach her about Chinese character. How to obey your parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you could take advantage of hidden opportunities... why Chinese thinking is best. This kind of thinking didn't stick to her (Tan, 1989, p. 254)

Embracing her American circumstances is the means by which the daughter escapes the influence of her too powerful Chinese mother. It is no accident, then, that among the four daughters in the novel, Waverly should be most fully assimilated into the

mainstream of American society. Although "her skin and hair are Chinese, inside she is all American-made" (Tan, 1989, p. 254)

The cultural gap between Waverly and her mother is seen in Waverly's fear of confronting her mother even in her adult life: "you can't even tell a Chinese mother to shut up. You should be charged as an accessory to your own murder" (Tan, 1989, p. 173). In addition, Waverly makes persistent efforts to Americanize herself in order to lessen her mother's dominating influence. This results in misunderstanding as well as insulting her mother. She complains that her mother refuses to visit her "unless I issue an official invitation" because "one day I suggested she should call ahead of time" (Tan, 1989, p. 168) instead of dropping by "unannounced". The mother takes her daughter's American way of privacy as disrespect and even humiliation in comparison with Chinese values of respect and hospitality. This cultural gap is poignantly evident in Waverly's inability to get along with the mother concerning her marriage. Lindo is always critical of Waverly's first marriage. She also does not accept Rich, her new American fiancé. In doing so, Lindo, like the other Chinese mothers, seems to practice the traditional Chinese customs which give the parents the right to choose their daughter's spouses. Unlike Americans who are free to choose whoever they want

to marry with and the parents have no right to interfere in their children's choice of their future partners. When Waverly and Rich are invited to have dinner, Lindo disapproves of his "Americanized" behavior as he is ignorant of some Chinese customs. Defeated and powerless, Waverly cries in despair: "My mother was doing it again, making me see black where I once saw white. In her hands, I always became the pawn. I could only run away. And she was the queen, able to move in all directions, relentless in her pursuit, always able to find my weakest spots" (Tan, 1989, pp. 179-180). Yet Lindo does not approve of the fact that her daughter criticizes her since Chinese children should always respect their elders' opinions. Another example of the cultural difference between Lindo and her daughter is seen at the beauty parlor. Lindo notices that her daughter is "ashamed of [her] looks. What will her husband's parents and his important lawyer friends think of this backward old Chinese woman?" (Tan, 1989, pp. 254-255). Annoyed by her hairdresser's remarks that "it's uncanny how much you two look alike!" (p. 255), Waverly "is frowning at herself in the mirror" (p. 256), probably because the mirror reminds her of her Chinese side, her Chinese identity that she has tried to discard. She may despise her Chinese face that resembles so much her mother's. She

may wish that she is one hundred percent white since she has been born in America. As a result, Waverly always keeps a distance from her mother, ignoring her existence as Lindo says:

Then my daughter criticizes me as if I were not there (Waverly gives orders to the hairdresser about how to cut mother's hair)... "How does she want it?" asked Mr. Roy. He thinks I do not understand English... I smile. I used my American face. But inside I am becoming ashamed. I am shamed she is ashamed. Because she is my daughter and I am proud of her, and I am her mother but she is not proud of me. (Tan, 1989. P. 255)

Lindo accuses herself of being responsible for Waverly's attitude: "It's my fault she is this way. 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, 1989, p. 254). Though all mothers are eager to stuff the Chinese culture into their daughters' heads, they do not totally reject the American values. Actually all the mothers long for daughters "with a Chinese mind/ character like theirs but in new circumstances" (Ho, 1999, p. 156). However, their attempt to combine the two different cultures does not seem to

be successful as Lindo admits. Lindo overlooks the fact that the commitment to a family of Chinese culture sometimes goes against the individualism of American culture.

Despite their tense and evasive relationship, both Lindo and Waverly make move to bridge their cultural differences. While looking in the mirror at the beauty parlor, both the mother and daughter recognize their facial resemblance that sparks a momentary bonding between them. Commenting on their crooked nose, Waverly states that this shows they are "two-faced" or "devious": "It's your nose. You gave me this one...our nose is not so bad. It makes us look devious" (Tan, 1989. P. 266). Despite Lindo's worry of "which face is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other" (266), she secretly hopes that Waverly can blend these two faces to create her own individual face that carries traces of the best of both worlds. The story of Lindo and Waverly ends with a hope of finding a personal and cultural connection by visiting China together on Waverly's honeymoon as an opportunity to leave their differences behind.

#### **IV. Ying-Ying St. Clair and Lena St. Clair: The status of woman in the family**

One of the fundamental problems of cultural differences is the mother's inability to speak for herself. In Ying-Ying's case, the problem begins since her childhood. Ying-Ying St. Clair came from a wealthy family and used to be a wild and stubborn girl: "I wore a smirk on my face. Too good to listen. I was small and pretty. I had tiny feet which made me very vain. If a pair of silk slippers became dusty, I threw them away" (Tan, 1989, p. 243). Even though Ying-Ying was a rather disobedient child, she, like the other mothers, was raised in a traditional way that girls should follow orders quietly: "A boy can run. A girl should stand still" (Tan, 1989, p, 72). Her nurse, Amah, used to tell her that "it is wrong to think of your own needs. A girl can never ask only listen" (Tan, 1989, p. 70). As long as the needs or wishes fell out of her mouth, they became "selfish desires" (Tan, 1989, p. 67). On a trip to the lake, the little Ying-Ying ran off from her family, fell into the water and was saved later to find her family missing. Afraid and abandoned, she came to believe that she was punished for her wild, disobedient manners. Therefore, she was forced to obey the patriarchal code, learning to keep silent since. She was, unfortunately, born a girl. As a daughter of wealthy family, she was spoiled, but as a female, she was controlled by the patriarchal society.

Among the Joy Luck mothers, Ying-Ying was the only who gave in to her fate. Like Lindo, her marriage was decided by her parents and she obediently accepted it without question. But unlike Lindo, she started learning to love her husband after marriage though he was a vulgar man who abandoned her and had affairs with other women:" I became a stranger to myself. I did everything to please him. I was pretty for him...It is because I had so much joy then that I came to have so much hate" (Tan, 1989, p, 247). Being dumped by her husband made her stronger, a "Tiger". She managed to keep her face and felt proud by aborting their son as a sign of disobedience to her husband. Compared to traditional, obedient Chinese women/ wives, Ying-Ying became a more strong-willed, rebellious woman:

I became abandoned goods...At eighteen the prettiness drained from my cheeks. That I thought of throwing myself in the lake like the other ladies of shame... I took the baby from my womb before it could be born. When the nurses asked what they should do with the lifeless boy, I hurled a newspaper at them and said to wrap it like a fish and throw it in the lake (Tan, 1989, p. 248)

After ten years spent at a cousin's house recovering from the shock, Ying-Ying moved to work as a shop girl. With time she managed to overcome grief. Once her husband died, she was free to immigrate to the USA where she accepted a marriage proposal of an American man, Clifford St. Clair with English-Irish origins, who saved her from the hard conditions in China, but disregarded her Chinese identity:

So I decided to let Saint marry me. So easy for me. I was the daughter of my father's wife. I spoke in a trembly voice. I became pale, ill, and more thin. I let myself become a wounded animal. I let the hunter come to me and turn me into a tiger ghost. I willingly gave up my *chi*, the spirit that caused me so much pain. I became an unseen spirit (Tan, 1989, p. 251)

But she was no longer able to feel passion nor joy in life. She was possessed by the traumatic memories and consequently turned herself into a "living ghost". She had lost herself as well as her racial identity. In her immigration papers, she changed her Chinese name into an English one, Betty St. Clair, as well as her birth date: "I wore American clothes. 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. With all these things, I

did not care. I had no spirit" (Tan, 1989, p. 251)

When Ying-Ying's second child died, she was devastated and broke down. She felt guilty of causing the child's death and became a "living ghost". This has an influence on her daughter, Lena St. Clair who feels her mother's instability and grows up as a very undetermined, anxious woman. Lena's inability to understand her mother stems from her ignorance of the mother's past as well as her American upbringing: "When my daughter looks at me, she sees a small old lady. That is because she sees only with her outside eyes. She has no chuming, no inside knowing of things"(Tan, 1989. P. 248). Yet Ying-Ying loves her daughter, but it is "the love of a ghost": "When she [Lena] was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since" (Tan, 1989, p. 242). For years, Lena perceives her mother's life as a life of a "ghost": one who cannot be seen or understood.

Like the other mothers of the joy luck club, Ying-Ying suffers from the same linguistic predicament. The language barrier between Ying-Ying and her daughter intensifies her silence, hence widens the gap between them. When together, Ying often talks to her daughter in Chinese. Brought up in America, Lena

can understand the words, but not the meanings:" ...when we were alone, my mother would speak in Chinese, saying things my father could not possibly imagine. I could understand the words perfectly, but not the meanings. One thought led to another without connection" (Tan, 1989, p. 106). Lena takes a passive approach to the difference between her and the mother. Like her mother, who makes unexplainable Chinese lines in order to protect and teach her daughter, Lena reacts to this by making up her own lies when translating for her mother:

...when a man at a grocery store yelled at her for opening jars to smell the insides, I was so embarrassed I told her that Chinese people were not allowed to shop here. When the school sent a notice home about a polio vaccination, I told her the time and place, and added that all students were not required to use metal lunch, since they had discovered old paper bags can carry polio germs (Tan, 1989, pp. 106-107)

This avoidance of direct confrontation shows the differences between the two and yet also shows the similarity in how they avoid the truth to prevent a troublesome situation. Ultimately this avoidance stems from misunderstandings between the two generations as well as their cultural lifestyles. Ying does not realize that etiquette in America disallows her to open

up the grocery market jar, but instead of directly stating the difference, Lena chooses to use the Chinese heritage excuse in a way even brushing aside her own cultural roots as inferior.

As a daughter of a "ghost" and a woman of mixed blood, Lena's quest for selfhood- an Eurasian identity- is sometimes problematic. She is aware that she is different from either Chinese girls or Caucasian girls at her school:" Most people didn't know I was half Chinese ...When people first saw me, they thought I looked like my father, English-Irish, big-boned...But if they looked really close... they could see the Chinese parts"(Tan, 1989, p. 104). This cultural conflict results in self-hatred. All her life, Lena is haunted by the sense of being unlovable and looks for recognition in her relationships. Lena's marriage is as problematic as her mother's, in a different way though. Marrying a man who insists on equality to every detail and claims the share of money, Lena used to believe that "Harold and [she] are equals in many respects"(Tan, 1989, p. 156). For this equality, Lena has to pay half of the bills according to a balance sheet taped to the refrigerator door that lists out how each of their money is shared, even though Harold earns and consumes seven times more than Lena. Living an American way of life, Lena does not want to be like her Chinese mother who is saved by her father

and wants her relationship to be based on complete fairness. Yet she realizes that the fairness she has been seeking is only an illusion. She begins to see how unbalanced she stands in their financial and marital relationship. With the "Feeling of surrendering everything to him, with abandon, without caring what [she] got in return"(Tan, 1989, p. 160), Lena begins to feel lost. Like Rose, She lacks the words to speak up and tell about her dissatisfaction in her marriage. When a black vase falls down and breaks in half, Lena tells her mother:" I knew it would happen" to which the mother asks, "then why don't you stop it?". The image of the broken vase serves as a metaphor to indicate the future break up of Lena's marriage. Yet Lena does not want to follow in her mother's footsteps as she thinks that her mother, being Chinese, is destined to suffering and failure in her life. She thinks that she can be happy and successful in life by following her American standards. Besides, Lena does not want her mother to interfere in her marriage as she thinks that her mother still holds her traditional Chinese beliefs concerning marital partnership. In her mother's views, man is the head of the family and, therefore, he should be responsible for all the expenses. Here, again, arises the difference between Chinese principles and American lifestyle.

Lamenting Lena's failure in marriage as well as her unfamiliarity with the Chinese ways of thinking, Ying-Ying's maternal instinct to save her daughter wakes her up from the world of a ghost. She sees that her daughter is lost, too, in the danger of not knowing her true self. Therefore, the mother realizes that the only way to save Lena is by speaking out about her own past life- how she has been victimized by Chinese patriarch ideology and cultural expectations:" 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 penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved" (Tan, 1989, p. 242). Xu (1994) states that in our memories," we have stories and narratives to tell about the past which both shape and convey our sense of self" (p.2). All the mothers' narratives help to give their daughters a sense of identity, something the daughters need in order to deal with the present ideology of the new culture they are raised in. The mother decides to pass her knowledge on to her daughter to help her recognize her individual identity:

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? 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 (Tan, 1989, p. 252)

The image of two fighting tigers indicates the differences in the way of thinking between the mother and daughter. Whereas Ying's ways of thinking are traditionally Chinese, Lina's attitudes are American. Being a daughter of a "tiger" mother helps Lena reject living according to her husband's American standards:" I am so tired of adding things up, subtracting, making it come out even. I'm sick of it. I just think we have to change things" (Tan, 1989, p. 164). In a crisis situation, the mother manages to help her daughter to see the problems in her marriage and confront them; at the same time she helps herself to face her own painful past. In a way, Lena learns to speak up for herself. She becomes more determined through her

acceptance of her mother's Chinese wisdom, hence bridging the cultural gap that always hinders the communication between them.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the pre-1970 setting of Tan's novels, the themes conveyed within are timeless. Just like the daughters of the novel, Chinese-American girls nowadays still face the same struggle of identity. Mothers attempt to instill Eastern morals in the daughters who are constantly caught up in the whirlwind of American lifestyle. This, of course, causes hardships and conflicts between the mothers and daughters. Not until the daughters depart on their journey into life that they will come to realize the goodness and truth seeped into their mothers' endless lectures and teachings. It is then that they all realize that their heritage lies not in the American world they are submerged in, but the ancestry that dictates a sense of hope, courage and pride to every descendant of China. These American-born Chinese girls are given the privilege of a wonderful combination between Eastern and Western thinking, creating a new philosophy that welds together the old

wisdom with new experiences. Though mothers and daughters may be separated by two different cultures, it is possible to find some timeless lessons that will forever link those of one generation to another. By seeking this desire to understand and gain from past wisdom, Chinese-Americans (and those of other cultures as well) can utilize this connection to their cultural roots to enhance their lives and establish an identity for themselves that unites the best of both worlds. Though different cultures may clash, they can also peacefully coexist.

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