

## Unveiling Women's Struggle: A Study Of Female Perceptions In Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club

Sweetey Lavanya. L<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr.M. Madhavan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University,

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University,

### Abstract

Amy Tan is a renowned American writer who has written several best-selling novels focussing on the struggles of Chinese American women especially in an ever-changing world. In her works, Tan has explored a range of feminist perspectives, examining the challenges and opportunities faced by the women of her generation. Tan's depiction of feminist issues is often subtle yet powerful. Tan's masterpiece, *The Joy Luck Club*, considers the lives of four Chinese-American immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. Tan appraises the power dynamics between mothers and daughters and how they struggle to find balance and understanding within. Tan's works often explore the complexities of identity, particularly for Chinese-American women.

**Keywords:** Roles, Feminism, Patriarchal Oppression, Immigrant Struggles, and Female Empowerment

### Introduction

*The Joy Luck Club* published in 1989, a popular piece of fiction by the Chinese-American female writer Amy Tan, is one such woman's voice that reveals the shame and hardships women suffer in a patriarchal society. The novel's cultural and generational issues, family, and identity have resonated with readers and have been the subject of various adaptations, including a 1993 Film, a Play, and an Opera. Tan's novel is a tale of four Chinese-American women who have immigrated to the United States, and the struggles their daughters face as they navigate their place in both their parent's culture and the new world they inhabit.

*The Joy Luck Club* travels through four Chinese-American immigrant families in San Francisco who started *The Joy Club* for, playing the Chinese game while gorging on an assortment of cuisines and playing Mah-jong for cash. Four Asian mothers who emigrated to China in the 1940s and their four highly Americanized offspring are the subjects of *The Joy Luck Club*. Jing-Mei "June" Woo, a daughter of thirty-six years, is the protagonist of the novel. Following the passing of her mother, she assumed the role of chairperson of *The Joy Luck Club*, a social organisation. The elderly women reminisce about the divisions that still exist between themselves and their daughters as the group plays "Mah Jong" and visitors partake in Chinese delicacies. Jing-Mei develops an appreciation for the profundity of her heritage as a result of their mutual narratives. Through sixteen interconnected stories told by four immigrants from China and their American-born daughters. *The Joy Luck Club* illuminates the nature of Mother-daughter relationships in both cultures. An important theme in the novel is the impact of past generations on the present. Amy's blockbuster novel presents sixteen interrelated stories centring on the mother-daughter relationships of four Chinese-raised mothers Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, An-Mei Hsu, and Ying-Ying St. Clair, and their four American-raised daughters Jing-Mei Woo, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu and Lena St. Clair. It also describes the tensions in their life struggles. These women from the Mah-jong group, *The Joy Luck Club*, through which their stories- and those of their American-born daughters are told. The book was a finalist for several awards, including the National Book Award, the National Book Cities Circle Award, and the Los Angeles Times Fiction Award.

Chinese American female writer, Amy Tan feels the legacy of traditional repression of women, she was taught to be obedient to her parents, from her family history, she learnt sexism is the cause of women's silence and suffering, as well as of her mother's fatalism. Tan's novels offer their own fragmented but carefully organized structure as one means to illustrate the interdependence of the individual and the community. The novel takes the form of individual stories that enter into dialogue and depend on each other based on spatial proximity. In San Francisco *The Joy Luck Club* created by the mothers and experienced by the daughters serves as an innovative form of individual agency dependent on the community. More than a mere club, the *Joy Luck Club* becomes an emblem of the mother's fierce will to survive physically and psychically in a land that is foreign to them, and control over their destinies in America requires communal support.

In particular, Amy Tan suggests that women's angst as a result of being oppressed has caused them to break their silence and reveal their painful, yet assertive past as an invaluable life lesson for their descendants who unavoidably fall into similar situations even though in a different context-generation, time, culture and place. In this respect, women hope for "herstory" to make a change in society where women find their voice and happiness. Tan can explore the complexities of

cultural identity and the various ways in which Chinese-American women can find their autonomy and success by venturing through her female characters. The mothers in this narration feel the strength of their bonds and fight to transcend the chasm of conflict and misunderstanding with their daughters.

The Joy Luck Club delves into feminist perspectives from the point of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. There is a strong controversy in feminist theory over the idea that there is an inherent female expression in language. The feminist perspective is a branch of feminist narrative literature which mainly serves to examine women's subjective consciousness that reflects male chauvinism's impact on women, expose inequality in reality, and sublimate their feminist thoughts through a female perspective. The mothers all suffered terrible events in China, which prevented them from receiving from America and the opportunities it could offer to them and their children. Here the author portrays the life of a woman who travelled from China with a beautiful swan, which she wanted to give her daughters as a present. These immigrant mothers set off with great hopes to give a better life to their daughters. But that is not only a kind of immigration but also it means a new culture. Because life is so difficult in China, mothers are unable to accomplish very much. In that way; America is a land of opportunity for them. "Women struggle to fashion a voice for themselves."(Foster, 2010: 18)

Tan portrays the mothers as powerful women who have faced many struggles in their lives and have overcome them, while the daughters grapple with their Chinese heritage and their place in the world. Through the stories of these two generations of women, Tan draws attention to the disparities between the sexes and how these disparities have affected their lives. Suyuan Woo, the founder of the Joy Luck Club, barely escaped being born in China her life and was forced to leave her twin infant daughters behind. Her American-born daughter, Jing-Mei "June" Woo, works as a copywriter for a small advertising firm. She lacks her mother's drive and self-confidence but finds her identity after her mother's death when she meets her half-sisters in China. Suyuan disliked the person's habits. There would be plenty of fighting to break out among these different people. Shanghai people with north-water peasants, bankers with rickshaw pullers, and barbers with Burma refugees.

Everybody shares the same sidewalk to spit on it. Suyuan suffered severe diarrhoea and Kweilin was full of bad smells. Everyone complained it smelled bad, "I Packed my things and my two babies, into this wheelbarrow and began pushing to Chung's king, four days before the Japanese marched into Kweilin. Men and women never lose hope" (JLC 16). Then she loaded everything, including her twin kids, onto a cart on the side of the road after hearing about the destruction from people fleeing. Men and women have never given up hope. When Suyuan got the news, she hurried out with the twin kids. The wheelbarrow was shattered during that terrible period of time. She didn't have enough feeling in her body to weep at the time.

"I tied scarves into slings and put a baby on each side of my shoulder. I carried these bags in each hand, one with clothes, the other with food. I carried these things until deep groves grew in my hands". (JLC 16). She carried her babies with her each side sling on the shoulder, and carried a bag in each hand, one with clothes and another with food. "The babies in Kweilin, I think. I was not those babies. The babies in a sling on her shoulder now I feel as if I were in Kweilin amidst the bombing and I can see these babies lying on the side of the road" (JLC 33). Each and every one of the women had horrible and excruciating experiences when they were in China. Those individuals have a strong emotional connection to their homeland as a whole as well as the possibilities that the country may provide for them and their families.

Kweilin was in the thick of the blast when she noticed her twin infants. Twin new-borns lie on the side of the road, their red thumbs protruding from their lips, begging to be returned. She had lost everything yet three beautiful silk clothes when she arrived at Chung King. During the Japanese War, Kweilin's beauty was lost. Suyuan's assertions indicate that she wants to migrate to a different region to live a better life free of oppression. She finally moves to America. Jing-Mei remembers that America was the ultimate goal of my mother's hopes. She settled in America in 1949 after losing everything in China. But she never looked back with regret. There were many opportunities for things to be improved.

Jing-Mei explains that her mother moved to America with many hopes for getting better. She believes that America would give her a better life, freedom, and no oppression, she states that the typical Chinese wife had more power in the United States than she could have achieved in her native village. Also, their children enjoy more rights in America. She also asserts that women who live tragic lives in China have become self-directed women in the United States, where they have learned to rely on and trust only themselves.

The conflict that Jing-Mei faces is one of self-discovery and accepting her Chinese ancestry. Growing up in America, she often feels disconnected from her Chinese roots and sees herself as different from her mother and her mother's friends. Jing-Mei's journey begins when she is asked to take her mother's place at The Joy Luck Club, leading her to reconnect with her Chinese heritage and learn more about her mother's experiences. Her internal conflict revolves around feelings of inadequacy and the fear of not living up to her mother's expectations. Her ultimate realisation of the depth of her mother's love and sacrifice helps her bridge the gap between her American identity and her Chinese heritage.

Flanigan examines the representation of Chinese women in Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. The themes of identity and cultural difference are discussed in the novel, noting how the mother's and daughter's stories are intertwined and how their relationships are shaped by their experiences of living in both Chinese and American cultures. "Millions of people died during that war, and the Japanese army invaded China and wanted to take advantage of the disorder in China. The

two parties allied with and combined their power against Japan. When America joined World War II, they separated their powers again. That chaos and political disorder caused Chinese people to emigrate” (Flanigan, 2006: 9).

An-Mei Hsu is one of the mothers in the story whose relationship with her mother was strangled. Her mother was a concubine and suffered mistreatment. An-Mei’s struggle revolves around her longing for her mother’s love and the difficulties she faces due to her mother’s position. She later gains a deeper understanding of her mother’s choices and the importance of inner strength. Rose Hsu Jordan, daughter of An-Mei Hsu, on the other hand, faces challenges in her marriage and asserts her voice as,

“And when I say that it is certainly true that our marriage is over. I know what else she will say: Then you must save it and even Though I know it’s hopeless –there’s absolutely nothing left to save—I’m afraid if I tell her, she’ll still. Persuade me to try. I think it’s that my mother wants me to fight the divorce”. (JLC 132).

She struggles to communicate effectively with her husband, Ted, leading to misunderstandings and a growing distance between them. Rose’s journey involves finding her own identity and learning to stand up for herself. Both An-Mei and Rose Hsu’s stories reflect the broader themes of the novel, including the complex dynamics between mothers and daughters, the clash between traditional and modern values, and the search for identity and self-expression.

Mary Ellen Snodgrass’s role of silence in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* Mary argues that Tan’s novel is a complex narrative of self-creation revolving around the themes of silence and speech. He contends that the silence of the mothers in the novel signifies their subjugation to traditional gender roles. Furthermore, she explains that the daughters in the novel utilise their speech to challenge these traditional gender roles, thereby creating a space for both themselves and their mothers to express individuality also highlights the novel’s use of silence as a form of dialectic, enabling two parties to communicate without words. The existing scholarly analyses of the novel concerning feminism include Mary Ellen Snodgrass’s critique as she lambasted Tan for “a common feminist failing, the elevation of female characters and the vilification, abasement, or dismissal of males” (Snodgrass 112). However, she argues that Tan’s mothers are also seen as examples of how females, even in traditional cultural frameworks, can subvert dominant patriarchal power structures and gain power from doing so. (Snodgrass 112)

Its point of view shifts from narrator to narrator. Each narrates in the first person and sometimes one event is narrated twice. Hence, readers frequently get more than one perspective of a mother’s and a daughter’s narratives. The narrators are highly subjective and tend to focus mostly on their feelings. The tone of the novel is bemused and sorrowful, speculative and respectful. The impact of generations on the present is an important theme. The structure in which the daughter’s stories are interwoven with those of the mother implies that the older resolves the problems of the young. Tense in the novel shifts from past to present; each character reflects on her past and relates it to her present life. The novel’s events come within four general time frames: the childhood years of the mother narrators in China, and the childhood years of the daughter narrators in the United States; each of the narrators serves as a protagonist in her own stories. But Jing Mei, because she tells two more stories than each of the older characters, could be said to be the main character. *The Joy Luck Club* features seven narrations: Jing-Mei Woo (who also tells her mother Suyuan Woo’s story) Lena and Ying- Ying St. Clair, Mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan; and Lindo and Waverly Jong.

I wiped my eyes and looked in the mirror. I was surprised at what I saw.

had on a beautiful red dress, but what I saw was even more valuable.

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. . . . And then I draped the large embroidered red scarf over my face and covered these thoughts up. (JLC58)

One of the mothers, Lindo Jong, was forced into an unwanted arranged marriage when she was just a teenager. This experience teaches her daughter Waverly how to be a strong and independent woman and to stand up for herself. Waverly later reflects on her mother’s advice, saying that she realized that she had been set free by her mother’s courage.

The story of Lindo and Waverly is one of generational differences, as Waverly struggles to reconcile her mother’s traditional Chinese values with her desire for autonomy and success. Lindo’s story is the one determined to give her daughter the freedom of choice that she was denied by Chinese custom, even if that means allowing Waverly to make mistakes and experience failure. This is exemplified in the scene where Lindo tells Waverly that she must learn to make her own mistakes. Lindo’s determination to ensure that her daughter has the freedom to make her own choices is an example of a feminist view of motherhood. The story of Suyuan and June is one of identity and acceptance.

Suyuan’s story is the one to allow her daughter to find her place in the world and be accepted by her peers. June’s story is about struggling to accept her Chinese heritage while also finding her place in the white, American culture. This tension is illustrated in the scene where June is confronted by her white peers who mock her Chinese name. June’s struggle to accept her identity and find her place in the world exemplifies a feminist view of identity.

In the novel, Chinese mothers are persistent, critical and hard to please. (Shen, 2010: 8). *The Joy Luck Club* explores the theme of female empowerment too. Tan’s characters are presented as strong, determined women who can overcome their struggles and find success in their ways. This is exemplified in the story of Ying-Ying St. Clair, who can overcome her struggles with depression and find solace in the traditional Chinese customs she was taught as a child. Ying-Ying’s story is of a woman who can find her strength and success in her way, and this is an example of a feminist view of female

empowerment. Ying-Ying's struggle is rooted in her past experiences and the complex emotions they evoke. Having come from a wealthy and privileged family in China, she fell in love with a charming man who turned out to be abusive.

"My fault, my fault. I knew this before it happened," she babbled. "I did nothing to prevent it". Betty darling, Betty darling said my father frantically. But my mother kept shouting these accusations to herself. She grabbed my hand and I realized her whole body was shaking.....

Lena, what is she saying?" cried, my father. For once he had no words to put in my mother's mouth." (JLC 124-25).

She suffered a tragic miscarriage while pregnant with her child, and she was unable to prevent her daughter from facing the consequences of her father's actions. This traumatic past leads to a sense of loss, guilt, and shame that haunts her throughout her life. Her struggle is a battle to reclaim her voice, identity, and agency, as she has become passive and almost invisible due to her past pain. Ying-Ying's journey involves learning to speak up, embracing her worth, and helping her daughter, Lena's journey involves discovering her voice and understanding her needs. As Lena's marriage with Harold faces challenges, their emotional distance grows.

I know Harold hates it. It always makes him uncomfortable, and angry. He thinks it's manipulative. Because I realize now that I don't know what the point of this argument is. Am I asking Harold to support me? Should we stop everything? Maybe Harold is an evil man. Nothing makes sense. I can admit to nothing and I am in complete despair. "We need to think about what our marriage is based on, not this balance sheet, who owes who what." (193)

Lena's struggle is not only about their immediate issues but also about her internal battle to address those problems without sacrificing her sense of self. Her struggles are intertwined with her search for empowerment and the confidence to stand up for herself in her marriage and her life. Lena's struggles contribute to the novel's exploration of themes such as mother-daughter relationships, cultural identity, and the challenges of communication and connection. Her character's growth throughout the story showcases her resilience and the journey toward finding her strength and identity.

Tina Suyong Om claims that *The Joy Luck Club* is "about the journey of second-generation Asian American women as they attempt to claim their identity through the critical understanding of their dual cultural makeup" (Om 14). In relation to this, Leslie Bow argues that it is "not through the character's confrontation with the contrasting cultural values but through their recognition that matrilineal heritage transcends the generation gap caused by the daughter's integration into American culture" (Bow 236).

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the critical nature of cultural transmission and generational continuity among women. Tan's works are on women and the constructions of femininity in motherhood and daughterhood discourses. It is an attempt to reclaim the mothers' and the daughter's act of speaking for her and to establish conditions in which mother and daughter can talk for and with one another. Women's plurality is most pronounced in the figure of the mother, who is perpetually both mother and daughter.

Women in Tan's works have lived lives that contradict the widespread idea that women were the weaker sex and lacked courage, choice, and power. In her stories, the grandmothers have endured adversity at the hands of society and husbands. The majority of them were victims of abusive marriages over which they had no control.

They were even betrothed when they were two years old and were afterwards believed to be the groom's family's property. They were aware that their husbands were seeing other women, but they were powerless to intervene; it was an open knowledge, and at times they felt relieved that the spouse would cease to bother them. They had to be content with being a husband's second, third, or fourth wife. The men they married lacked morals, and women were viewed solely as property. Due to this circumstance, the woman did not crumble.

Through her characters, Tan can explore the complexities of cultural identity, the dynamics between mothers and daughters, and the struggles of Chinese-American women to find their own identities and successes. The novel is an exploration of the various ways in which women can find their autonomy and success, and it serves as an essential reminder of the need for female autonomy and empowerment in society.

*The Joy Luck Club* is also available to offer a vivid exploration into how it can be viewed for a method to combat the negative effects of alienation for those who share similar problems as the characters. From the theoretical base, it is a shortstop to struggle and recognize the validity of women's experiences as well as whatever mode women use to convey their originality, their uniqueness, and their genuine thoughts.

Tan's first book comes together to make a powerful statement about the stresses of a mother-daughter relationship the rewards of working through the trouble and the essential bond between them. These women face the hassle that fills their lives to reconcile the differences in their relationships as mothers and daughters demonstrating the strength that has carried ages of pain and oppression.

In this novel, *The Joy Luck Club* mothers came to understand that recognizing and accepting the struggles of their relationships. The viewpoints of female characters have been honed by their estrangement from American culture both in a patriarchal society and Chinese-American in a Caucasian society. Mothers were also willing to wait patiently for their daughters to come to them, despite their frustration at seeing their daughters fight against themselves for no reason,

refusing to accept their identity and heritage, fighting the battle of life alone, and refusing to accept mother's vast experience and succour.

**References:**

1. Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. Vintage books, 1989.
2. Bow, Leslie. "Cultural Conflict/ Feminist Resolution in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." Ed. Ng Franklin. *New Visions in Asian American Studies. Diversity, Community, Power*. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1994.
3. Flanigan Maryrose (2006). *Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club: Reader's Guide*. Washington, DC.: National Endowment for The Arts.
4. Foster, M. Marie Booth, Robert C. Evans. "Voice, Mind, Self, Mother- Daughter Relationships in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *Critical Insights: The Joy Luck Club*". University of Texas Press, 1996.
5. SHEN, Gloria. "Born of A Stranger: Mother-Daughter Relationships and Storytelling", *Critical Insights: The Joy Luck Club*, Ed. 2010.
6. Om, Tina Suyong. *Creating Identity: An Exploration of Second-generation Asian Americans in The Joy Luck Club, Mona in The Promised Land, and Native Speaker*. Long Beach: California State University, 1999.
7. Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Amy Tan: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004.
8. Manimozhi R and Umamaheswari V. 'Githa Hariharan's Fugitive Histories: A Silent Quest for Identity' *Journal of Engineering, Computing and Architecture* ISSN No.: 1934- 7197, Volume 10, Issue 5, 2020 (266-273). <http://www.journaleca.com/Web>
9. Sujatha, Mrs U., M. Madhavan, and R. Manimozhi. "Quest for Self and Identity: A Study of Sherwood Anderson's *Windy Mcpherson's Son*." *Specialusis Ugdymas* 1.43 (2022): 10815-10823.