



**CONNENTION BETWEEN AMY TAN’S CHINESE
BACKGROUND AND LIFE EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA IN “THE
JOY LUCK CLUB”**

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ABSTRACT

The success of concepts in the social sciences is often measured by the number of academic publications referring to them, by their capacity to cross the boundaries of disciplines and by their penetration into mass media and wider public discourses. If, however, we take qualitative criteria such as the explanatory power of a concept and its precision in distinguishing different social phenomena as indicators for its usefulness in social theory and research, then successful proliferation may diminish academic value. This diagnosis seems to apply to the concepts of diaspora and dispora literature.

KEYWORDS

Diaspora Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Basically Diaspora is a minority community living in exile. The Oxford English Dictionary 1989 Edition traces the etymology of the word 'Diaspora' back to its Greek root and to its appearance in the Old Testament¹ as such it references.

However, the 1993 Edition of Shorter Oxford's definition of Diaspora can be found. While still insisting on capitalization of the first letter, 'Diaspora' now also refers to 'anybody of people living outside their traditional homeland. In the tradition of Indo-Christian the fall of Satan from the heaven and humankind's separation from the Garden of Eden, metaphorically the separation from God constitute diasporic situations. Etymologically, “Diaspora' with its connotative political weight is drawn from Greek meaning to disperse and signifies a voluntary or forcible movement of the people from the homeland into new regions”.²

¹ Jacob Shai. Diaspora Literature and Stereotypes Concerning Contemporary Art in Africa. P. 34

² Jacob Shai. Diaspora Literature and Stereotypes Concerning Contemporary Art in Africa. P. 35

Readings of the development of Chinese American literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have taken into account the relationship that exists between two cultural/political projects—that of “claiming America” and that of “claiming diaspora”. Generally speaking, the literary, cultural, and political project of “claiming America” centers on the implicit and explicit premise that America is home and the controlling basis for all consideration of cultural identity and belonging. It is associated with an earlier phase in the struggle of Chinese America for proper recognition of its place in American society.³

Where the project of “claiming America” supports the conventional narrative of Asian American immigrant desire that presents the East as seeking the promise of the New World, the other project of “claiming diaspora” disrupts the cultural logic of this narrative by fracturing the symbolic hold exercised by the nation-state over the lives of its citizens. Diaspora is a fluid and contested concept, historically and conventionally associated with the experience of homelessness, dislocation, and exile. Chinese American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of Chinese descent. The genre began in the 19th century and flowered in the 20th. Chinese American literature deals with many topics and themes. A common topic is the challenges of assimilation in mainstream, white American society by Chinese Americans. Another common theme is that of interaction between generations, particularly older, Chinese-born and younger, American-born generations. Identity and gender issues are often dealt with as well.

Amy Tan is one of the best Chinese American writers. Her famous novels, short stories, children’s books have been inspiring the writers till today. She wrote a lot of fiction, non-fiction books. She is in the line of famous Chinese American writers such as Sui Sin Far, Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, creating her best works. Amy Tan's writing style is about the Chinese-American culture integrated with life stories. She gives the reader an opportunity to gain knowledge about the way of life her family, friends, and even herself have had. Tan's main purpose of writing is to educate people about growing up as a minority.

Amy Tan was born on 19th Feb 1952 in Oakland, California, U.S. She is a Chinese American. An-Mei is her Chinese name which refers to 'Blessing from America'. She is a contemporary American writer who explores mother daughter relationships and the Chinese American experience. Her major works are *The Joy Luck Club* (later adapted into a movie) its prologue is catchy and significant because it outlines Tan's ideas of Chinese Diaspora. *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (adapted into an animated TV show).⁴

Some of the common themes which are evident in her works are bond between mother and daughter, love, abandonment (husband and wife; mother and daughter), forgiveness, difference between generations, culture clash between old customs and Western civilization. She has won several awards for her works and she has also received criticism for her complexity in perpetuating racial stereotypes and the inaccurate misinterpretation of details regarding the Chinese cultural heritage. Her novels fight against cultural conflict and to an extent is a product of multiple displacements and relocation felt over the loss of tradition, the loss of language and the displacement that she experienced as a woman. Tan has the ability to delve deep into the consciousness and to create female images, characteristic of hers

³ Walter S. H. Lim. *Narratives of Diaspora Representations of Asia in Chinese American Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan. United States, St. Martin’s Press, New York. 2013, p.2

⁴ Ms. Jane Austen I., Dr. Avinash Mro Mother - Daughter Duo in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. P 339

and that of other women. As she uses her personal voice to speak on behalf of others, it results in the identification of her 'self with the persona in her writing. The main focus in Amy Tan's novels is the pull of two cultures. Her novels present beautifully the age and culture of diaspora with the history of both East and West. The novels of Tan are a melting pot of styles, trying to depict the chaotic facets of cultural clashes on multiple levels. Set in America and China, her novels have different locations and stories about the past to underline the generational conflicts among Chinese - born mothers and their American – born daughters. It can also be treated as feminist novels and the depiction of post-colonial life style. Her writings concentrate on women and their problems with women's sensibilities. When reading about characters' past lives in China, the reader of Amy Tan's novels becomes acquainted with important events of nineteenth and twentieth century Chinese history. Tan's novels are preoccupied with beginnings, tied to a history and land to which Chinese American subjects born in the United States encounter general difficulties gaining easy access.

“The Joy Luck Club” is a novel written by the Chinese American writer Amy Tan in 1989. It is about half Chinese and half American families, about the women who migrated to America and their American born daughters. The novel in its outer directed idea describes the Chinese immigrants’ difficulties in the new society, new life, among new people. And in its inner directed idea it focuses on the family relationship problems especially between mothers and daughters.

The Joy Luck Club consists of sixteen interlocking stories about the lives of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their four American-born daughters.^[1] In 1949, the four mothers meet at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco and agree to continue to meet to play mahjong. They call their mahjong group the Joy Luck Club. The stories told in this novel revolve around the Joy Luck Club women and their daughters. Structurally, the novel is divided into four major sections, with two sections focusing on the stories of the mothers and two sections on the stories of the daughters.

In this novel there are sixteen interwoven stories which concentrates on the conflicts between the Chinese immigrant mothers and their American raised daughters. Four mothers who organise the Joy Luck Club and their daughters. There is always a rift between the mothers and daughters throughout the novel. The clash between them was due to the different cultural background wherein the mothers were from China and their daughters with American lifestyles. The composition of the novel is of four sections. The first section deals with the mothers and their relationship with their own mothers and doesn't want their daughters to have a tough recollections of the past in their daughter's future. The second section deals with the childhood of the daughters and their relationship with their mothers, which proves their mothers' fears. The third section focuses on the daughters' trouble in their married life and career. Later, they return to their mothers for solution. The fourth section concentrates on inevitable role played by mothers in finding the solution for their daughters' problems. The United State of America is a country composed of immigrants from all over the world, however, for historical reasons; English became the official language and definitely represents the dominant culture. Every new immigrant has to manage English to a certain extent in order to fit in or at least to pass the naturalization interview. It is also a carrier of culture. A lack of proper understanding of each other's perceptions results in a communication gap in Joy Luck Club. Jing-mei in the short story “The Joy Luck Club” says, “My mother and I never really understand 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) The daughters in these stories are concerned only with American attitudes and habits. First generations children all go by their American names and not Chinese. For instance Jing-mei is known as June and

this name is American and not Chinese. Amy Tan agrees that different languages come with different thinking system. Since Amy was raised in a Chinese speaking family and living in America, she found that she is a kind of “two minds” due to richness of her linguistic experiences. She found she was forced to speak modest and polite when she speaks in Chinese. Language enforces the culture behind it implicitly. People who live in a society, which is dominated by certain culture, have to adapt that dominant language. In **The Joy Luck Club**, the female characters speak dual language and live in a dual cultures. The ethnic dissatisfaction manifested in the relationship between the Chinese mothers and the American daughters is the dilemma which many immigrants, especially their descendants, are faced with that is living between two worlds i.e native world and the immigrant world. The young generation is often spilt between the two worlds. As Rudyard Kipling wrote, “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” The daughters had a difficult time juggling racial and cultural identities. As Lindo Jong lament, “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).⁵

Even though daughters are proud of their mothers’s strength and ingenuity and are moved by their tragic stories and touched by their fierce love but at the same time the daughter’s are exasperated by their mothers impossible demands. They are resented of their mother’s intrusions on their lives and sometimes humiliated and ashamed of their stubborn, superstitious out-of- place ways.

Sheffer (2002) says, “All diasporas have in common significant characteristics. They result from both voluntary and imposed migration; their members wish to and are able to mairntain their own cultural and national identity, which is the basis for continued solidarity. Core members establish in their host countries intricate organizations that are intended to protect the rights of their members and to encourage participation in the cultural, political, social, and economice spheres,” In the novel June travelling to China and meeting her sisters identifies the bridging of two cultures. Harold Bloom says, “The trip to China becomes the way in which June Woo claims her name and the other part of herself, Jing-Woo, that she has never understood.”⁶

According to Jade Snow Wong, Tan (American daughter) to achieve a balance in the between world condition then, one cannot cling solely to the new American ways and reject the old Chinese ways, for that is the way of the child. One must reconcile the two and make one’s peace with the old. Jing- mei may not know her mother even though she stays most of her time with her unlike her two sisters. They all carried their mother in their face and gestures. The togetherness of the family suggests crossing the barriers of geography, politics and cultural distinction and highlighting the ethnic identity. As Walter puts, “The return to the mainland certainly suggests a larger symbolic possibility, one, however, that must still cope with the actual barriers of geography, politics and cultural distinctness.”(Kim 1982).⁷

⁵ Nomita Loktongbam, Chinese Diaspora: A Study of Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). P. 58

⁶ Bloom, Harold. Harold’s Modern Critical Interpretation: Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club. New York. Infobase Publishing. 2009

⁷ Kim, Alaine. Asian American Literature: An introduction to the Writing and their Social Context. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982.

The occurrences of connection between Amy Tan's Chinese background and her life experience in America that are poured in *The Joy Luck Club* shows that there is a big influence on the novelist's background with her literary works.

At the same time the use of Chinese when the characters of this novel talk about Chinese culture also shows how mind style works. The way Chinese perceived life is pictured by Amy Tan as not as simple as American and thus the Chinese words is the perfect words to explain about the Chinese values in the novel.⁸

The Americanized daughters, in the novels of Amy Tan, from their childhood to adolescents reveal us how they distinguish themselves from their powerful immigrant Chinese mothers. Throughout their living, the daughters are being encouraged by their mothers. They seem to hate their mothers but their real love and understanding is being revealed later.

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⁸ Mardliya Pratiwi Zamruddin. *The Representation of Amy Tan's Background in Her Novel the Joy Luck Club*. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies on Humanities*. 2019, p. 643