

# Mother - Daughter Duo in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*

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## Abstract:

The study intends to focus on the relationship between mother and daughter which is at times healthier and weak as well. This affects the mind and causes different kinds of conflict between them. This paper will examine the contribution of the Chinese – American novelist, Amy Tan in her select novels, “*The Joy Luck Club*” and “*The Kitchen God's Wife*”. It is a brief survey of Amy Tan's novels from the entire canon of Chinese – American Literature. The nucleus of this survey is the causes and its effect on the psychological turmoil that occurs in the mother – daughter relationship. Tan's novels generally focuses on kinship under which the recurrently occurring theme is the mother – daughter bond. This seems to be one of the closest bonds, but Tan has depicted the real love between them and the conflicts as well. Has the chaos in the relationship been solved eradicating the psychological pressure?

**Keywords:** mother – daughter, relationship, Chinese – American, turmoil, real love, conflicts

## About the Novelist –Amy Tan:

Amy Tan was born on 19th Feb 1952 (age 67) 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). 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 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.

## Introduction:

### An Insight to the novels:

In, *"The Joy Luck Club"*(1989), 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 are Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, Ying- Ying St. Clair, An-Mei Hsu and their daughters are Jing- Mei Woo, Waverly Jong, Lena St. Clair, Rose Hsu respectively. 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.

In, *"The Kitchen God's Wife"*, the protagonist, Winnie Louie (Jiang Weilli) undergoes a lot of topsy-turvy path which becomes the moral for her daughter's life (Pearl Louie). This novel has got two narrators, Pearl Louie Brandt begins with the narration but the maximum narration is by Winnie Louie. There seems to be a breach between them due to the cultural clash wherein Winnie is an immigrant Chinese mother of an American born daughter, Pearl Louie. They feel reluctant to share their secrets to each other and the rupture between them gets expanded. Pearl's auntie, Helen (Hulan) play a significant role in helping them share their secrets. Winnie Louie has overcome the ebb and flow in her life from childhood until her second marriage. Her first husband Wen Fu has horribly been abusive to her through which she has undergone physical and mental pressure. Later, Pearl reveals about her sickness (multiple sclerosis). At the end, there are a lot of hidden secrets being revealed. Then, mother and daughter get to know about each other better and understands the others' ideas and beliefs. This novel has the shift from past and present throughout.

Mother- daughter relationship appears to be complex and versatile no matter what the position or location it may be. At times, the true bond between them could be interrupted with barriers which

interpolate generation gap, varied cultural background, language and so on. In spite of all these complications, a true handcuff could be created through love and hope. This is evident in Amy Tan's "*The Joy Luck Club*" and "*The Kitchen God's Wife*". In common, both the novels incorporate the clash between mother and daughter and also the challenges and struggles that they have undergone which later gets solved due to their own spirit.

### **Relationship in *The Joy Luck Club*:**

"*The Joy Luck Club*" (1989) being Tan's debut novel has successfully gained popularity and critical responses from critics and authors. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong proposes "*The Joy Luck Club*" a "crossover hit" and comments it as "Straddling the world of 'mass' literature and 'respectable' literature, stocking the shelf of airport newsstands as well as university book stores, generating coffee table conversations as well as conference purpose" (175). The novelist has dedicated this novel to her mother- "my mother and the memory of her mother". Amy Tan, in an interview with New York Times explains her relationship with her mother and its influence: "When I was writing, it was so much for my mother and for myself...I wanted her to know what I thought about China and what I thought about China and what I thought about growing up in this country". Her life has a great leverage on her novels wherein her major theme is on mother- daughter relationship and the quest for their identity.

### **Suyuan Woo and Jing-Mei Woo:**

From misunderstanding to understanding, the daughters' characters are changed by knowing their mothers' past. Jing- Mei (June), daughter of Suyuan is asked to take the place of her mother, after Suyuan's death, in the Joy Luck Club where Suyuan and her friends play mahjong. They also suggest her to go to China to meet her lost twin sisters. June replies that she doesn't know anything about her mother. "What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything" (JLC 40). In spite of this, she decides to meet her sisters. Later, she gets to know about her mother's past. "I lay awake thinking about my mother's story, realizing how much I have never known about her, grieving that my sisters and I had lost her" (JLC 286). She also adds, "The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different... And I think, my mother was right. I am becoming Chinese" (JLC 325). Here, she has become her mother's true daughter by fulfilling her dreams.

### **An-Mei Hsu and Rose Hsu:**

Mothers are always the mentors and well- wishers to their daughters. Rose Hsu who finds it hard to take decisions on her own, feels to be dependent on her husband's views. Due to the rift between them, there were a lot of struggles in their life. An- Mei Hsu, Rose Hsu's mother tells her past and encourages her to have self- perception by saying "You must think of yourself, what you must do. If someone tells you, then you are not trying" (JLC 130). The courage that her mother gave, made her self- assured.

**Ying-Ying St.Clair and Lena St.Clair:**

“She and I have shared the same body...But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to...pull her to where she can be saved.” (JLC 293).

These words were uttered by Ying- Ying St. Clair. She doesn't want her daughter being suffered by a dysfunctional marriage. She wants her daughter, Lena St. Clair to acknowledge the Chinese way of thinking which Lena ignores and rejects. Ying- Ying accepts the fact that she has been so submissive to fate and to the will of others. Consequently, she lived a life with discontentment and distress. This way of leading a life by her daughter is even more an affliction for Ying- Ying. She feels that Lena has become like a slippery fish who has sprung away from her and resides in a distant shore. “Her wisdom is like a bottomless pond” (JLC 293). And so she decides to narrate her past from which Lena could rectify her mistakes.

**Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong:**

Lindo Jong wishes Waverly Jong to have mixed cultural identity “I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?” (JLC 308). Lindo blames herself for her asymmetrical dualism of Waverly Jong as she seems to be influenced by Chinese identity merely exterior, but the American identity dominates her interior self. The fear of Lindo is that, she doesn't want her daughter, Waverly to suffer as she did. And so she creates a lot of space for her to exhibit her talents. But Waverly sees it to be forceful as she longs to be on her own. So, the conflict between them arises, regarding culture. Later, Waverly realises the happiness that she gave her mother through her achievements.

Mothers not only guide and protect their daughters from pain, they also guard and preserve their memories, hopes and culture.

**Relationship in *The Kitchen God's Wife*:**

“*The Kitchen God's Wife*” (1991), being Amy Tan's second novel has reached the readers heart inculcating in them, determination, courage and endurance. Here again, the mother- daughter relationship prevails, portraying the importance of love and endurance from mother to daughter.

**Winnie Louie and her mother:**

Winnie Louie, the mother of Pearl Louie, has lived a tormented life with the bitter past. The complexity in her life has made her to quest for self- security. Being molested and brutally hurt by her husband, Wen Fu, she says, “What an evil man! How could I have known such an evil man existed on this earth” (KGW 259). These words of hers tell us the reason for her hunt of endurance path.

Marie Booth Foster affirms, “It takes determination to achieve voice and selfhood to take control of one’s mind and one’s life from another, making one’s self heard, overcoming silence” (419).

### **Winnie Louie and Pearl Louie:**

In the beginning of the novel, Pearl feels the distant relationship between her mother and herself. The major reason is that Pearl is linked to America and Winnie is linked to China. The only thing that is common between them and that which connects them is loneliness.

“Mostly I see my mother sitting one table away, and I feel as lonely as I imagine her to be. I think of the enormous distance that separates us and makes us unable to share the most important matters of our life”. (KGW 34).

Winnie’s relationship with her daughter, Pearl seems to be a distant one until they decide to converse with each other revealing their secrets to one another. Unlike theirs, relationship between Winnie and her mother was much more a secluded one. This is evident from an incident when Winnie was trying to remove the little spot on the image of her mother.

“I washed harder and harder. And soon I saw what I had done: rubbed half her face completely! I cried, as if I had killed her. And after that, I could not look at that picture without feeling a terrible grief. So you see, I did not even have a painting anymore to call my mother” (KGW 89)

Winnie’s mother has abandoned her years back and when she recollects her mother through the image, she finds that her mother disappears from her mind slowly. Though her mother wasn’t with Winnie for so long, just image of hers has made an impact in Winnie’s life.

### **Conclusion:**

In both the novels, “*The Joy Luck Club*” and “*The Kitchen God’s Wife*”, the mother- daughter relationship has portrayed them with some kind of psychological pain. In the psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud, he has said that, “the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Freud 3). In a book, “*Unclaimed Experience* by Catty Caruth, she explains that “... trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event of this in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that is in very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4).

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. Their togetherness is affirmed by overcoming their barriers of culture, geography and their ethnic identity. “One must still cope with the actual barriers of geography, politics and cultural distinctions” (Kim 5).

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