

A Cultural Interpretation of Conflicts in *The Joy Luck Club*

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Abstract: *The Joy Luck Club* is the first novel written by the Chinese American writer Amy Tan, which is controversial since its publication, some people praise its artistic beauty, others belittle it. In any case, the continuous controversy has raised its popularity. From a critically cultural angle, the paper presents the following conflicts such as different ways of sibling education and expressing one's feelings and emotions; different conceptions of marriage and different table etiquette resulting from cultural differences, and probes into the hidden and profound cultural connotation so as to raise the cultural awareness people and enhance the efficient communication and integration of people from different cultures.

1. Introduction to Amy Tan and *The Joy Luck Club*

Amy Tan, who was born February 19, 1952 in Oaktown, California, is a productive American writer and also one of the most highly acclaimed writers in the contemporary Chinese American literature. Her novels mainly include the following: *The Joy Luck Club*; *The Kitchen God's Wife*; *The Hundred Secret Senses*; *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and *Saving Fish From Drowning*. Besides her other works include the children literature category *The Moon Lady* is one of its representatives.

Amy Tan once attended the medical college while got her master's degree in linguistics. When she was thirty three, she began to write novel which became the topical subject of her creative work.

Amy learned about her mother's former marriage to an abusive man in China, and how her mother was forced to leave her children from a previous marriage behind in Shanghai. This incident provided the basis for Tan's first novel, 1989 New York Times bestseller *The Joy Luck Club*. In 1987 Amy traveled with Daisy to China. There, Amy met her three half-sisters.

So it's evident to us that "it is Amy Tan's own experience that makes her more sensible for the mother-daughter relation in the two different cultures, which is mainly manifested in the novel *The Joy Luck Club*."

The novel *The Joy Luck Club* consists of sixteen related stories about the experiences of four Chinese-American mother-daughter pairs of Suyuan Woo and Jing-mei, An-mei Hsu and Rose, Lindo Jong and Waverly, Ying-ying St. Clair and Lena. "The ups and downs in plot not only vividly describe the changes in the relationship between immigration mothers and American daughters but also reflect the bitterness and helplessness under the circumstance of age change. The work leaves a deep impression on readers and audiences." Besides these changes, this novel contains amount of cultural knowledge, and the paper focus on the cultural differences between China and America reflected in the novel.

The Joy Luck Club mainly describes the communication barriers between the Chinese mothers and American daughters, between Chinese wife and American husband, between Chinese mother-in-law and American son-in-law on their beliefs and values of the eastern and western world. According to Edward Hall. All countries of the world culture may differ in thousands of ways, but not be, most culture has a distinct tendency, will coordinate each other in a certain situation, presents the fusion phenomenon.

2. Interpretation of Cultural Conflicts in *The Joy Luck Club*.

There are many conflicts between mothers and daughters and let us take the case of Suyuan-woo

and Jing-mei for example. Our Chinese tradition emphasizes the maternal devotion and children's filial piety. Suyuan Woo is such a mother that showed the maternal devotion to the fullest. Suyuan-woo cast a great expectation on her daughter and think that her daughter is a genius and can be everything if she wants. For the great expectation the mother had for her daughter, she tried her best to make a good condition for the daughter's self-development and the promising future. The mother wants her daughter to be a pianist. In order to invite a good instructor for Jing-mei, she has exchanged her labor for the daughter's classes. We can see the mother's efforts in bringing the daughter to an elite lady. Suyuan is a reflection of the typical Chinese mother who can sacrifice oneself to the family and the children. The selfless devotion of the mother is one of our Chinese cultures.

While the daughter Jing-mei has never been in accordance with Suyuan-woo. She is bored of her mother's plan for her and wants to lead a life of her own, and thus she has never fulfilled her mother's aspiration. Jing-mei says: "I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn't get straight. As I didn't become class president. I didn't get into Stanford. I dropped out of college"(Amy 153-154). Most of the traditional Chinese children tend to try their best to fulfill their parents' wishes while Jing-mei shows her resist towards her mother's love. She intentionally makes mistakes in one performance of big importance. The daughter learns the American cultures which value the spirit of individuality much and thus she tend to focus on her personal feelings and willing.

The conflict can also be seen in Waverly's case. Waverly is a chess winner and a genius. Lindo, Waverly's mother is so proud of her daughter and shows off Waverly to the passerby, which brings disdain in Waverly's heart. She can not bear her mother's action of showing her off for she thinks that the success is belonging to her and nothing more. Waverly wants chess to be strictly her own achievement and part of her own separate identity. When her mother hovers over her during her practice sessions, she feels invaded; as though her mother is somehow taking credit for what Waverly sees her own personal strength. Moreover, Waverly is embarrassed by her mother's bragging and desire to show her off.

It is common in China for the mothers to show their daughters talents off. For in China, we are us-bounded and the daughter's pride is the mother's pride, they are in the same line. While in America, its culture teaches people to be independent and self-sufficient and thus they are me-oriented. In the American mode of thinking, the daughter's success is her own, bearing no relationship with the mother. Because Waverly was raised in America, her mode of thinking is that of American and thus she can not bear her mother's bragging her own talent.

The different concepts of Chinese and American mode of thinking are reflected through the illustration of the conflicts in Rose's and Lena's marriage.

Rose fall in love with and get married with an American rich man Ted, who is a successful dermatologist, regardless of the opposition of Ted's mother and father. Before their marriage, Rose is an independent woman who has her own thought and beliefs, while after their marriage, she lost her independence in the marriage life, or we can see she has lost herself. And their marriage life thus becomes a boring one. Her husband could not see any hope in their marriage and propose to divorce.

After their marriage, Rose helps her husband to handle all trivial matters, pays bills for him, and purchase presents for him and so on. Even when she got her scholarship of University of Idaho, she gave up and continued her trivial things out of her love for her husband. On the contrary, her American husband Ted wishes Rose to be independent and has her own individuality, that is to say, he is a little dissatisfied of Rose's self-lose. And there is some problems in their marriage which makes both Ted and Rose felt uncomfortable thus there must be conflicts on the way. And one night they quarreled about the trivial thing and the conflicts erupted.

The main reason for their discordance lied in the different culture between China and America. Chinese women tend to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of their husbands and their families. Just as Rose said all things she did were for Ted. While the American husband appreciates their wives to keep their personalities and to have their own business and to follow their own heart and different

opinions .

“Conflicts between them vividly tell us cultural clashes between the west and the east .Chinese wife believes that her own sacrifice is out of her love to husband, while her painstaking efforts are unable to gain American husband’s understanding”

Lena’s marriage is a victim of the cultural difference. And her attitude to marriage is tainted by her mother Ying-ying’s attitude of keeping silent and tolerate. While also it is Ying-ying who finally taught her to voice her own needs and be brave when facing predicament.

Ying-ying’s American husband’s name is Clifford St.Clair, he never learned to speak Chinese fluently, and she never learned to speak English fluently. Clifford often puts words into his wife’s mouth.

Harold is Lena St.Clair’s husband. Since the beginning of their relationship, he has insisted that they split the cost of everything they share. He says that keeping their finances separate makes their love purer. However, what he believes will keep them independent and equal fact renders Lena rather powerless.

And maybe influenced by her mother’s attitude of marriage, Lena admits her misfortune is predetermined by God. Lena married Harold Livotny and unwittingly began to follow Ying-ying’s passive example, believing herself incapable of control in her marriage and her career.

In China, there is almost no distinction between you and me for a couple. When people got married they tend to share their property and do not separate into halves while the American tends to be clearer in the household expenses. Or we can use the cross-cultural theory of Individuality and Collectivity to explain the conflict. Our Chinese culture emphasizes the strengthen of collectivity and we tend to work together for a better life let alone for a couple while the American culture is of individuality and they tend to emphasize the individual subjective initiative in the daily life.

The table etiquette is very different in China and in America. There are several modes of behavior that we should follow in China, while it is difficult for the foreigners to grasp. The Chinese pay more attention to their own table manners while the Americans do not have that much etiquette, they tend to be more leisurely when having meals.

The cultural clashes reflected in the table etiquette mainly manifested in the case of Waverly. When Waverly takes her American boyfriend Rich to have a dinner with the Waverly’s family, although Rich had made a lot of preliminary work of the Chinese table etiquette, he still made error during the mealtime.

Lindo excels at doing dainty food but modestly says that this dish is not salty enough and some other modest words, having not listen to the real meaning behind the self-modest words of Lindo, he put some sauce on it, which shocked the people around the table. He never realizes that in the embarrassing situation, he has already offended his mother-in-law. “In China, it is not unusual that the hosts initially belittle their dishes but expect to gain praise from guests like ‘it is the best dish that I have eaten’, etc. On the contrary, Americans are very straight forward, who would directly speak out: ‘it is my best dish’ or ‘it is not good enough’. Thus, there is no doubt that Rich cannot understand implications in Lindo’s words”

Rich’s another faut pas is when Waverly’s father finishes making a toast, the Chinese around the table just had a sip as a politeness while Rich drinks to and pours more by himself . Also when facing his favorite dishes he takes too much to his bowl regardless of others ’thoughts. All these actions were deemed improper in the Chinese table etiquette.

The deep reason for Rich’s improper behavior lied in the different culture. In America, people’s need is the most important; they pay little attention to the harmonious relationship among people. While in China, the relationship between people is of great importance. And in order to keep this harmonious relation, the Chinese developed a unwittingly common sense in many field and people follow the standard for the breaking of the standard is regarded as a misbehavior.

3. Conclusion

In this thesis, it mainly shows about the conflicts that were aroused by the cultural clashes and the reasons that caused these conflicts. And the conflicts are that of the different ways of education

and expression of the Chinese and the Americans. In such conflicts, we can see that our Chinese parents have a proud love for their while they lack the right way to lead their children. We all know that the foreigners are good at expressing their love and thoughts, thus there is a relatively democratic relationship in their family. While in China, children are more like the affiliation of their parents.

In the collision embedded in conjugal relationship, the cases of Rose makes us think more about the typical Chinese wives who is like a slave in the family. More lamentable, they are not aware of their condition, or we can see, even when they had recognized that, they do not want to change, to live for themselves. Chinese mothers transplant their own wishes to their children spontaneously, so they put more hope on their children' development. While in America, women tend to lead their life independently and there is little constraint from the aspect of their family. The case of Lena makes us think of that there is a closer connection among the Chinese people. While in America even being a couple, they tend to be clear in the expenditure, which is a rare case in China.

In the case of Rich, we can see the table etiquette of our Chinese people. In China, this etiquette is very important in keeping a good and polite conduct. The deficiency of these manners will lead one to a embarrassing situation. While in America, people put emphasis on the initiative in one's own hand, so there is a saying in the western countries "Help Yourself", from which we can see the spirit of individuality.

The Joy Luck Club is such a complex novel that the stories of four pairs of mothers and daughters are woven with the different cultures behind. The culture clashes that manifested in the novel is just a drop in the bucket, so the grasp of the knowledge of the culture is a must in the cross-cultural communication. And the nescience of the different culture will give rise to the inevitable awkward moments, thus enriching our knowledge of the diverse cultures and improving our ability of cross-cultural community is a necessity in nowadays.

The great success in The Joy Luck Club is its cross-cultural character to a large extent. Herskovits (1973) says behaviors must be understand "relative to the cultural background out of which they arise". The only way we can understand the behavior of others is in the context of their culture. And different two cultures will have the mutual understanding.

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