

Research Article

## An Epithet of Multiculturalism in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club

<sup>1</sup>Ms. Jenifer Vencila C, <sup>2</sup>Dr. S. Susan Nirmala, <sup>3</sup>Ms. Sneka D, <sup>4</sup>Ms. Mizpah Rebekah S,  
<sup>5</sup>Ms. Anitha J

<sup>1</sup>Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science for Women, CBE.

<sup>2</sup>Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, Govt. Arts College, CBE.

<sup>3</sup>Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science for Women, CBE.

<sup>4</sup>Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science for Women, CBE.

<sup>5</sup>Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science for Women, CBE.

### ABSTRACT

Amy Tan, a renowned Chinese American writer, who has made a great contribution to Chinese American literature. *The Joy Luck Club* is Tan's first novel which is considered to be her most successful work; it has gained great popularity among readership as well as critics. Through an overall examination of the criticisms on *The Joy Luck Club*, we find that the exceptional cultural identity is always the focus in Amy Tan's novel from most critics who study the novel from cultural perception. Even though a few critics believe that it is a cultural text, most of them only see cultural conflicts between Chinese and American cultures. Few realize substantiation of cultural communication in the novel, let alone its multiculturalism. The paper stated is intended to justify that *The Joy Luck Club* is an embodiment of multiculturalism.

The United States is the typical example of for the increasingly repeated communication various cultures in modern times, where most of the western world turns into a multicultural society. Many ethnic minorities in America reclaimed their cultural heritage based on this and this includes Chinese Americans too. Being brought up in a multicultural society, the Chinese American writers coalesce their multicultural origin in writings where most of the writers are influenced deeply by the fundamental nature of both Chinese and American cultures and then amalgamate them with each other. Amy Tan is one of the makers. Tan's bicultural personality inspires her writing instead of interfering with her ways of thinking. Different cultures and traditions are seen in her novels.

In the story of Rules of the Game, which was the base of her first novel The Joy Luck Club, Waverly has great gift in playing chess in her early age who defeated many opponents and won a lot of game. In the Chess game, she, "discovered that for the whole game one must gather invisible strengths and see the endgame before the game begins" (94)

"Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, come from South, blow with wind—poom! – North will follow. Strongest wind cannot be seen"(89)

. She has grown up "in a kind of ethnic limbo, belonging by heritage to a culture and homeland in which [she is a] stranger, yet living and maturing in a culture that persisted in viewing [her] as Other, as alien and marginal." (Huntley, 1998:26) In this "paradoxical condition", she is bicultural yet estranged from both cultures. She has a distinctive immigrant experience: "at home, she was an uneasy Americanized teenager at odds with the expectations of her traditional Chinese parents; at school – where she frequently was the only Chinese student in her classes – she was the Asian

outsider who looked different from everyone else in the predominantly white American world.” (Huntley, 1998:26)

While reading the book *The Joy Luck Club*, one can easily find Chinese and American cultures have the one and the same position, without one benefitting over the other. “Commentary is juxtaposed with memory, fable with history, Pidgin English with California-speak, American culture with Chinese tradition, past with present in a collision of stories and voices and personalities.” (Huntley, 1998:19) Such combination confronts the binary opposition which defines the west and the east as superior versus inferior or highly developed versus underdeveloped. There were four mothers in the novel that lives in San Francisco.

They constructed the *Joy Luck Club* since of their desolations in China and their discontent in America. Before they came to America, they have undergone a lot of miseries in China, which made them try hard to come to the United States with all their good wishes. They positioned all their hopes on America, because they believe that “you could be anything you wanted to be in America.” (Tan, 1989:132) However, when they landed in the new country, they encountered various culture shocks in their lives. They are unavoidably made silence by the dominant society and ensnared in “the border”.

The mothers, just as Amy Tan explained in the prelude fable, “[forget] why [they have] come and what [they have] left behind.” (Tan, 1989:17) Because of the immigration policies during that time, the mothers couldn’t open up or share their stories with their brittle English and have to keep their “unspeakable tragedies” to themselves. Due to such wretched occasions, it is too hard for them to live alone, so they built up a club to gain comfort and support from each other. *The Joy Luck Club*, a new form of community, is a kind of shelter for them to help each other to go through between Chinese and American cultures. Through this, Amy Tan propose to build a device for “the making of Chinese American culture,” (Michael, 2006) providing a way of cultural negotiation for both generations of Chinese Americans, and the members’ investment activities.

The traditional Chinese families support Confucians which centers on the hierarchies of power and patrilineage structure. Nevertheless, in the *Joy Luck Club*, the four Chinese immigrant families have no genetic relationship with each other. They join together each week just to play mah jong and talk about investment. The relationship branches from their “similar circumstances, proximity, friendship, support, and nurturance” (Michael, 2006) It is a democratic community. Everyone is equal in the club, and there are no differentiation between men and women. Being American immigrants, they are generally marginalized which encourages a great craving in these immigrants to live physically and mentally.

There is no wonder to see the equal rights among men and women in the club, while in the past men used to be former to women in the country of patrilineage structure. The club offers a place of cultural negotiation for both the first-generation and second-generation of Chinese Americans. For the mothers, the club provides them “a link to the life that [they have] left, with the homeland that [they] will never see again.” (Huntley, 1998: 58) The mothers can hold on to the elements of Chinese culture in the club so that they aren’t culturally rootless after immigration.

They can conserve their Chinese heritage by sticking to Chinese customs and rituals; they can communicate freely and share their past stories with each other; they can share the idea of teaching their American daughters; more importantly, they can provide their daughters with an entity to develop their Chinese character which they believe as the best. The daughters also benefit a lot from the club. The daughters once dislike the Club and that it is only “a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war,” (Tan, 1989: 28) but steadily they are responsive of the good to them.

It suggests them “a familial, familiar, nurturing space within which they can negotiate their difficult positions as Chinese American women.” (Michael, 2006) In the club there are Chinese-born seniors and American-born juniors who are under the similar circumstances with the daughters. All these members can help the daughters bargain their bicultural identities for they are all caught between two

different cultures. As a result, the daughters can get religious support from the community whenever they need help. Another important plot to display the mixture of Chinese and American cultures is their participation in the stock market. They believe the name of the club can bring them a good luck because in the stock market, each investor desires for "joy", namely, profit, which relies on their "luck" to some extent. Within the *Joy Luck Club*, cultural negotiations take place all the time, which endorse the shape of Chinese American culture. By creating the club, Tan empowers the characters to fight back alongside the governing white culture and produce their unique Chinese American culture which contributes to the multicultural society.

As multiculturalism has been an accepted norm in America, Americans have come to grasp the diverse origins of their culture. As a branch of Asian American literature, Chinese American literature has received more consideration in the recent days. Amy Tan can be the representative of the current Chinese American writers in America. Although they were born and brought up in America, got education in the American mainstream culture, it is difficult for them to get rid of Chinese cultural genes. Two different cultures and traditions were carried on by Chinese American writers. In the conflict between Chinese and American cultures, Chinese American literature is the way for them to seek cultural identity. In her novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy starts with the conflicts between mothers and daughters and ends with the reconciliation which, in fact, reflects the compromise between two cultures and two generations. The expectation of Amy Tan for the combination of two cultures expresses her unwillingness to give up and disguise Chinese cultural identity. In her works she just want to express the information of eliminating cultural identity opposition and realizing communication and peaceful coexistence of the global multiculturalism. Changing from collision to combination for Chinese and American cultures is the common wish for most Chinese American writers including Amy Tan.

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