

# Resolution and reconciliation in "the joy luck club"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, published in 1989, is a challenge to the novel as a narrative paradigm. The book is a collection of first-person monologues of four mother-daughter pairs, which delves into the generational divide. In it, the conflicts between mother and daughter and the differences between traditional Chinese values and American values come to life in vivid vignettes. However, *The Joy Luck Club* is not essentially a discussion of the generation gap. Instead, the book demonstrates how the two generations come to resolution and reconciliation through the mother-daughter pairs' negotiation of their identities as Chinese Americans. By examining the stories of two of these mother daughter pairs, mothers Suyuan Woo and Lindo Jong with daughters Jing-mei Woo and Waverly Jong, we will see highlighted generational differences and misunderstandings, and the grounds upon which reconciliation is finally achieved.

The separate story sections are divided into four parts: the mothers telling two stories of their "unspeakable tragedies left in China" (Tan, 20), and the daughters tell one about growing up and one about a current family/marriage situation. The structure presents a two-fold impression, dramatizing the critical transition in cultural values. The mothers grow up in pre-1949 China, where the society deprived women of their speech and shackled them with Confucian ethics. They had to behave silently and follow all the rules. In the contrast, as American-born and English-speaking, the daughters tend to think and act in the American way as they were hugely impacted by the mainstream American culture. They are alienated to Chinese culture which is only a composite gathered from stories, legends, books and the movies to them. Due to the generational differences, the

confrontation appears when the mothers try to use their past experience to teach their daughters, but the daughters reject the waning influence of the old culture as they get more and more aware of their American identity. In the eyes of the daughters, mothers are “ the source of authority for her and the most single powerful influence from China” (Wang, 30).

In the mother-daughter relationship of Lindo and Waverly, it is generational differences which lead to the misunderstandings, but the reconciliation is reached when Waverly realizes her mother - a linguistically and culturally poor speaker - has always had her own best interests at heart. From Waverly's perspective, Lindo always keeps in the dominant place and plays the role of authority in their relationship; thus, Waverly always sees her mother as an invincible opponent in life since childhood. Waverly showed extraordinary talent in chess when she was a child: she won championship after championship. However, she was very uncomfortable with Lindo's constant bragging in public. She intended to attack Lindo by giving up chess, but she even forgot she was meant to fight for her independence in the battle. When Waverly returned to chess, she found her prodigy had all gone, and what had sustained her was her mother's love and support. Now, as a mother herself, Waverly finally understands Lindo's unspoken love.

Furthermore, Waverly anticipates Lindo will not like her white boyfriend, Rich, but surprisingly, Lindo does not criticize at Rich's culturally ignorant behavior on table. That makes Waverly puzzled, because her mother is always finding fault with her. When she talks to her mother openly about Rich, she realizes that Lindo's criticism only comes out of her deep concern

for Waverly's well-being, and her desire for her daughter to reap the happiness of marriage which she was deprived for so many years in China.

The relationship has been examined in another different perspective from the side of Lindo. She questions the feasibility of the mixed cultural identity in the chapter " Double Face":

It's my fault she is this way. I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix? I taught her how American circumstances work...She learned these things, but I couldn't teach her about Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities... Why Chinese thinking is best. (The Joy Luck Club, 289)

From the above quote, we can see Lindo fears that her daughter is dominated by American identity, and she blames herself for Waverly's lopsided duality. However, Lindo's fear is not justified by Waverly's narrative. Waverly claims she learnt some invisible strengths from her mother at the age of six, for example, how to not show her thoughts, and she has not only benefited from them at chess games but also brought them to her adulthood. Therefore, Lindo is unduly panic because her daughter has done a good job with incorporating her Chinese thinking into her American life. Moreover, Lindo herself – along with other mother figures – are examining at their identity as well, looking for a way to combine their Chinese background with the American cultural aspects.

The Woos' story is an exception to the monologue pattern, as the daughter, Jing-mei examines the mother-daughter gap from both sides. The mother figure, Suyuan, who is the founder of the Joy Luck Club, does not take narration in the book. Instead, her daughter, Jing-mei, narrates four stories including the first and last section which add additional continuity to the book. In the beginning, Jing-mei's narration shows that she barely knew her mother. According to her impression of her mother's experience in China: " I never thought my mother's Kweilin story was anything but a Chinese fairy tale" (Tan, 12). Similar to Waverly's story, a clash between the mother's strong expectations versus the daughter's inner sense of futility was formed during Jing-mei's childhood. Partially due to Suyuan's loss of two children in China, she strongly believed that Jing-mei must have some inner talents and expected her to be a prodigy. She forced Jing-mei to take piano lessons, but Jing-mei purposely fell short of Suyuan's expectations because she felt being twisted into what she was not. In an aggressive confrontation with her mother, Jing-mei shouted out: " You want me to be some one that I'm not! ... I wish I'd never been born! ... I wish I were dead, like them!" (Tan, 142). Seemingly, the conflict takes place where the rigid East meets the liberal West: Suyuan thought she had the right and responsibility to explore Jing-mei's prodigy as her mother, while Jing-mei held the American value of individualism, considering herself as a single solid individual separate from her mother.

The reconciliation happens after many years, at Jing-mei's 30th birthday. She received the piano from her mother as a birthday gift, which shows that Suyuan understands why she refused to play: Jing-mei regarded it as

something for her mother's benefit. Now with the ownership of the piano, Jing-mei is able to try again out of her own will. Jing-mei is comforted that Suyuan's faith in her ability to do what she wanted, even after she failed so many times. She comes to understand that her conflicts with her mother did not arise from any cruel expectations on Suyuan's part but from Suyuan's love and faith in her. Notably, in the last section of the book, Jing-mei becomes the representative of the second-generation daughters who goes furthest in contemplating the nature of a double identity. She is encouraged by the members of the Joy Luck Club to complete her mother's unfilled wish – reunite with her twin half-sisters in China. She is worried for being not Chinese and she thinks she knows so little about her mother that she can hardly describe that to her sister. But when she eventually has her return trip to china, she happily perceives that the American culture she has embraced for so long does not preempt a Chinese consciousness as well. According to Rocio G. Davis, seeing her sisters and murmuring “mama” together – the word means mother in both English and Chinese – makes her realize that her inner Chinese identity, and uses that as a bridge to her mother (Davis, 22).

The Joy Luck Club articulates the renewed relationships between the first and second generation of Chinese American women. The misunderstanding between the two generations arose because of cultural and language barrier, but eventually reconciliation and resolution are reached when the daughters realize that the mothers have always had the daughters' own best interests at heart. To a deeper extent, the generation togetherness depends on cultural wholeness. The happiness of the family unit comes after a series of

cultural lost and found, and the affirmation of their Chinese-American identity has been examined as the major healing factor.

## **Works Cited**

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