

The voice from the
wall: exploring
isolation in the joy
luck club



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Role models influence our understanding of self, perception of reality, and personal growth. Parents are biologically programmed to serve as primary role models for their children, however some achieve more success than others. In her short story 'The Voice From the Wall' Amy Tan explores a child's relationship with her mother and how it alters her understanding of the outside world. As Chinese-American citizens the narrator and her mother struggle to place themselves within Western culture. The narrator, Lena, watches her mother confront countless barriers due to her race and grows to resent it. Communication, the largest and most obvious barrier, brings stagnancy to Lena's mother's life which translates to the narrator's perception and sense of self. Using race as a catalyst, Tan demonstrates isolation and the effect it has on the adolescent psyche.

Tan illustrates a mother who is trapped within the confines of her differences. By leaving China the Lena's mother enters a world that does not attempt to listen to her, and the displacement and fear she demonstrates on her wedding day affirms this. Described as a "Westernized suit jacket" (Tan 308) the mother's wedding dress symbolizes both her marriage and her stagnancy. "In this outfit she looks as if she were neither coming from nor going to someplace," (Tan 308-309). The jacket represents the way her new role in society sits awkwardly on her shoulders. Although her new life may not harm her more than her life in China, she must observe the world with a closed mouth and a tape of bad memories running endlessly in her mind. Lena's mother also wears an "Ankle-length Chinese dress with modest vents at the side," (Tan 308) but this is not the item of clothing described as a wedding dress. Her 'wedding dress' was a gift from Lena's father, one her

mother would not likely have worn if given a choice. These dresses in their entirety represent the only family dynamic the narrator knows, with an isolated mother who can only speak when her husband “ put[s] words in her mouth” (Tan 309).

Through violent imagery Lena suggests a negative tone towards her race. This attitude—although misguided—stems from the correlation between her mother’s isolation and her inability to communicate. “ I often lied when I had to translate for her,” (Tan 310). When Lena watches her mother struggle to understand Western Culture she associates her discomfort with her race. Lena does not understand the “ tragedy [her mother] could not speak about,” (Tan 308) in China or how this relates to her place in the world—she just knows that the Chinese aspects of her mother embarrass her. Lena expresses her embarrassment by widening her eyes, perceiving them “ As if they were carved on a jack-o-lantern with two swift cuts of a short knife,” (Tan 308). When she walks around like this her father tells her that she looks scared, because in truth she is scared. Her fears emerge in the visions she experiences growing up. She describes “[Seeing] these things with my Chinese eyes, the part of me I got from my mother” (Tan 307). By relating her visions to the Chinese aspects of herself she challenges her ability to find comfort in her race or in her home, ultimately increasing the negative thought patterns that initially sparked her visions.

Lena’s mother uses fear to isolate her daughter from the negative outside world, inevitably rendering her unable to differentiate between truth and falsity. Lena bases her understanding of the world upon the word of her parents. “ A man can grab you off the streets, sell you to someone else,
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make you have a baby. Then you'll kill the baby," (Tan 310). Lena's mother knows nothing but this reality, and only wishes to protect her daughter from it. However, these concepts are larger than Lena's ability to understand them. Children desire clarity, and require it to know their place in the world. Without a full understanding of her mother's truth, the truth of these warnings becomes lost in translation. While the narrator " Could no longer see what was so scary... [she] could feel it," (Tan 317). Just as her mother is disconnected from the outside world, Lena is disconnected from her mother. She can only feel the weight of the negativity around her, and this confuses her until she witnesses transparency in another family. " I heard them laughing and crying... shouting with love," (Tan 318). She realizes that silence, muddled truth, and isolation feel worse than physical pain, and wishes that her family would see and hear each other the way the voices from the wall do.

Tan offers no concrete resolution at the end of ' The Voice From the Wall'. Even after she understands the root of her pain Lena will continue living a life that tortures her. By writing this story Tan implies the importance of voice in a household. Parents must actively work to understand their children and vice versa. Without mutual understanding everyone is left incapable of growth and stagnancy is worse than the pain of a thousand cuts.