Analysis of Cultural Conflicts and Integration Between Chinese Mothers and American-Born Daughters in The Joy Luck Club

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Abstract

The Joy Luck Club is one of the best-selling books in America. From the perspective of the second generation of Chinese immigrants in American, Amy Tan successfully depicts the lives of four Chinese immigrant families in San Francisco and how they cope with conflicts between two different cultures and generations. Conflicts between mothers and daughters in The Joy Luck Club are mainly caused by different experiences of the two generations, the absence of a common language, differences in family values, and vague ideas about identity, all of which are manifestations of the differences between Chinese and American cultures. And the final reconciliation of the mother-daughter relationship indicates that Chinese and American cultures will inevitably move from opposition into integration.

Keywords

The Joy Luck Club; Cultural conflict; Cultural integration.

1. Introduction

Today, the acceleration of globalization is having a remarkable impact on our lives and cultures. The world is becoming an interdependent and inseparable unity, where frequent cultural exchanges or even cultural clashes between nations are inevitable. Therefore, coordinating the conflicts between foreign and indigenous cultures is of profound significance to the establishment of a more inclusive and harmonious world.

In literary works, conflicts on multicultural backgrounds are becoming fundamental for contemporary literature. As an eminent contemporary Chinese American writer, Amy Tan makes great contributions to the development of Chinese American literature. Her most influential work The Joy Luck Club, which received the Los Angeles Times Book Award and was translated into 25 languages, arouses wide attention and reflection among both American people and Chinese people. The Joy Luck Club tells stories of the first generation of Chinese immigrants and their offspring, and how they struggle to tackle the differences between Chinese culture and American culture. This novel serves as a valuable guideline for Chinese immigrants to better integrate into American society while maintaining their own identity, which plays an essential role in preventing them from getting lost in a foreign culture. For American people, this novel opens a window for them to know about Chinese culture and to reduce misunderstanding and discrimination.

This thesis explores the causes of conflicts between mothers and daughters with different cultural backgrounds by analyzing two typical manifestations of cultural conflicts, and it also focuses on the reconciliation of mothers and daughters, which indicates the possibility and the trend of cultural integration, aiming to seek some enlightenment of multicultural communication in this novel.
2. Introduction to the Work and the Author

2.1. About Amy Tam

Amy Tan, who was born in Oakland, California on February 19, 1952, is a prominent Chinese American author. She is the second of three children of her family, and both of her parents were Chinese immigrants. It is never easy for immigrants, people with different cultural backgrounds, to integrate into a new society and to adapt to a new culture. Amy Tan senses the struggling of Chinese immigrants and discrimination in American society. All her works, including The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God’s Wife, and The Bonesetter’s Daughter, are about Chinese traditions and her mother’s experience.

2.2. About The Joy Luck Club

Among all the works of Amy Tan, the most influential one is The Joy Luck Club, which depicts the lives of four pairs of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. The idea of the Joy Luck Club, brought up by Jing-mei Woo’s mother Suyuan Woo, is to have a gathering for four women, one for each corner of a mahjong table, to eat dim sum, play mahjong, and talk. These four women all have their miseries. Each week they host such a party to raise money, to raise their spirit, and to forget all the misfortune that happened in the past. It is a time when they could hope to be lucky, and that hope is their only joy.

3. An Analysis of the Cultural Conflicts in The Joy Luck Club

3.1. Typical Manifestations of Cultural Conflicts

This part focus on the typical conflicts between mothers and daughters in The Joy Luck Club, especially those between Jing-mei and her mother Suyuan and Waverly and her mother Lindo.

3.1.1. The Conflict between Jing-mei and Her Mother

Jing-mei finds it impossible to live up to her mother’s unrealistically high expectations. During Jing’s childhood, her mother Suyuan used to tell her that she could be the best and anything she wanted to be in America. Her mother trades housecleaning services for weekly piano lessons and a piano for her to practice on every day, which makes Jing feel she is sent to hell. “Why don’t you like me the way I am? I’m not a genius! I can’t play the piano.” [6] (TJLC 136). Her mother slaps her, considering that Jing-mei is ungrateful. To be a genius, Jing-mei has to know the names of different capitals of different countries and she is asked to report very difficult pages from the Bible. She cannot understand her mother’s intention. She becomes rebellious and she decides not to do what her mother says anymore, for, unlike her mother, she is realistic and doesn’t believe that she can be anything she wants to be. They never try to understand each other. Before Suyuan tells June her story in Kweilin, she imagines “Joy Luck” is a shameful Chinese custom.

3.1.2. The Conflict between Waverly and Her Mother

Waverly shows contempt for her mother even at a very early age. June and Waverly are childhood rivals, and their mothers used to compare their daughters’ accomplishments. Waverly Jong is an independent and intelligent woman. She was once regarded as a chess prodigy. However, after feeling that her mother takes all her credit, Waverly gives up playing chess. She is ashamed of her mother discussing her games as if she has devised the strategies, and hates her mother saying hundreds of useless things before her games that have nothing to do with her winning. When Waverly is going to marry Rich, her second husband, she doesn’t want to tell her mother, wondering that her mother will hate her husband. While she is getting married, she asks Lindo Jong, her mother to go to her beauty parlor. Lindo is proud of Waverly while Waverly is not proud of her mother and even feels ashamed of her mother’s look, a backward old Chinese woman.
3.2. Causes of Conflicts between Two Generations and Two Cultures

Mothers and daughters in The Joy Luck Club represent Chinese culture and American culture respectively. Different experiences, languages, family values, and identities cause conflicts between the two generations and two cultures.

3.2.1. Different Experiences

One of the reasons why conflicts and misunderstandings occur is that the two generations have different experiences, and daughters can not understand their mothers' miseries in Old China. Four mothers speak little of themselves, their past, their hardship, and their expectation, and even if the daughters hear something about their mothers, they can not decide which story is true, since the mothers have different versions of China. Over the years, June has heard about the same story, which has grown darker, casting long shadows into her mother's life. The ending of the story always changes. She never thinks her mother's Kweilin story is anything but a Chinese fairy tale. The four mothers in this novel are directly affected by the war with Japan, and it is hard for the daughters who never go through that kind of experience to understand their mothers' miseries in Old China, let alone to appreciate the struggles and wisdom of their mothers.

3.2.2. The Absence of a Common Language

The absence of a common language undoubtedly serves as a barrier to effective communication between mothers and daughters, which leads to conflicts between mothers and daughters [4]. Mothers in The Joy Luck Club, the first generation of Chinese immigrants to America, are well versed in Chinese but not in English, whereas daughters, who grow up in American circumstances, speak perfect English.

Language, in general, is capable of evoking emotions. Mothers communicate with their daughters in broken English, which helps build the bond of understanding between them, but it is still inadequate to convey their deep emotions, feelings, and profound love. Daughters grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, and they even think that their mothers are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. As it is depicted in The Joy Luck Club “We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more.” [6] (TJLC 37), June and her mother never really understand each other. While June asks Auntie Lin about the differences between Jewish and Chinese mah jong in English, Auntie Lin explains in Chinese, which reminds June that she always talks to her mother in English, while her mother answers back in Chinese.

3.2.3. Different Family Values

Different family values cause the conflicts between Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters. In the 1900s, people thought the USA was the land of opportunity. They believed in “the American Dream”, which was that if they worked hard, they would become rich.

Mothers in The Joy Luck Club have high expectations for their daughters, believing that their daughters can be anything they want to be in America. They all come to America after losing everything in Old China, and America is where their hope lies. To prevent their daughters from suffering the same miseries as them, they place too much hope and too much burden on their daughters, resulting in their rebellion against them. June can not understand why her mother has hoped for something so large that failure is inevitable, and she considers that the reason why her mother pushes her so hard to practice playing the piano is that she wants her to become a prodigy, whereas her mother only wants her to try her best. “Who ask you to be genius? Only ask you be your best. For you sake.” [6] (TJLC 136).

The idea of “I’m what I am. I’ll always be myself” reflects American individualism, which is the most important part of American values. However, it violates the traditional Chinese family education, which contends that children should listen to their parents [2]. Collectivism plays an
essential part in Chinese culture [5]. No one can live alone, and for the sake of family honor, children have to try hard to do things that are benefic to their family. Four mothers are brought up by traditional Chinese parents. As women, they have to follow the Three Obediences and Four Virtues and have no right to make their own decisions [1]. To keep her parent’s promise and not to disgrace her family, Lindo Jong sacrifices herself and marries someone she doesn’t like. When someone suggests that Waverly should play in the local chess tournaments, Waverly knows that her mother won’t let her play among strangers, for if she loses, she will humiliate her family.

American patients place emphasis on equality, while traditional Chinese parents perform the absolute authority against their children and teach them to be obedient. Individualism in American culture has been deeply rooted in the thoughts of the daughters. Affected by American mainstream culture, June wants to be her own person rather than the kind of daughter her mother wants her to be, and she refuses to be her mother’s slave. On one hand, Suyuan hopes that her daughter can integrate into the society of America. On the other hand, she wants June to be an obedient daughter like a traditional Chinese girl.

3.2.4. Vague Ideas about Identity

Affected by the mainstream American culture, daughters have vague ideas about their Chinese identity. They are biased against Chinese culture, believing that American culture is superior to Chinese culture. They also struggle to have a different identity from their mothers, for their mothers’ Chinese identity is marginalized by the American society and would not be respected [3].

Waverly has never given importance to her mother’s words, feeling humiliated for her mother and being Chinese. “I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character.” [6] (TLJC 254). What Lindo Jong says represents the expectations of the four Chinese immigrant mothers. As the first generation of immigrants, these mothers can only speak broken English. To integrate into the American society, an unfamiliar environment with different culture, they have to equip themselves with two faces. One is Chinese, the other is American. For the sake of their daughters’ future, they encourage their daughters to speak English rather than Chinese and to grow up in the American culture, hiding their Chinese faces and miseries. When they show the American faces, they have to sacrifice the other. Those mothers with similar backgrounds gather and set up the club for the sake of sharing and memorizing traditions and the old days in China. Though living so long in America and being influenced by American society to some extent, they cannot abandon Chinese culture. The Joy Luck Club is the only place where they can have their own identities in America. And only in the club, they are not alone and they are themselves. When talking about Waverly, Lindo says that only her skin and her hair are Chinese. Inside--she is all American-made, which means that Waverly has been assimilated by the American culture and has lost her identity as a Chinese. Over the years, Rose Hsu Jordan has learned to choose from the best opinions between Chinese opinions and American opinions, and in almost every case, she considers the American version is much better, but later she discovers that there is a serious flaw with the American opinion, which is easy to get confused. June recalled that when she was fifteen, she vigorously denied that she had any Chinese whatever below her skin. And only when she finds her Chinese identity does she realize that the reason why she used to fail to remember things that her mother once taught her is that she didn’t understand them in the first place and she refused to accept her Chinese identity. In fact, even the daughters refuse to admit their Chinese identity, Chinese culture has been rooted deeply in their minds, influencing their characteristics, their thoughts, and their behavior.
4. An Analysis of the Cultural Integration in The Joy Luck Club

4.1. Typical Manifestations of Cultural Integration

From conflicts to reconciliation, the changes in the relationship between mothers and daughters symbolize the integration of Chinese and American cultures.

Waverly used to disdain the philosophy of her mother, regarding her mother's ideas as obsolete and useless, but eventually, she learns to appreciate the traditional virtues of her Chinese mother. Waverly used to consider that her mother never thought anybody was good enough for anything. While she decides to get married to Rich, she is afraid to tell her mother about that, worrying that her mother won't like Rich. It seems to Waverly that her mother Lindo is always able to make her see black where she once only sees white. She is afraid that after her mother comments about Rich, her husband will transform from the divine man into someone quite mundane and imperfect, and she even wonders if her mother has poisoned her first marriage. But after a quarrel with her mother, Waverly tells her mother about her feelings, and she comes to realize that what her mother tries to do is, to tell the truth, which Waverly can see clearly herself but is unwilling to accept. It is Waverly herself who tries to escape from the obstacles and cultural differences in her marriage with Rich. Gradually, Waverly discovers that she shares a lot in common with her mother, and she decides to go to China for a honeymoon, where her Chinese characters stemmed from. While Rich invites Lindo to go with them, Lindo refuses, knowing that her daughter dislikes it. Yet for the first time, Waverly starts to think that this idea is quite meaningful. “The three of us, leaving our differences behind, stepping on the plane together, sitting side by side, lifting off, moving West to reach the East” [6] (TJLC 184) indicates the elimination of the invisible barriers between two cultures.

In order to be herself, June refused to play the piano as a protest against her mother's absolute authority, but after the death of Suyuan, she plays it again, for purely sentimental reasons. Among the two songs she plays, “Pleading Child” is shorter but slower, while “Perfectly Contended” is longer, but faster. After June plays them both for a few minutes, she realizes they are two halves of the same song, so do the two cultures. Chinese culture and American culture, different in modality but the same in essence, are of equal importance to a world with diverse cultures. June comes to realize her mother is the only person she can have asked, to tell her about life's importance, and to help her understand her grief. Finally, she replaces her mother and becomes a member of The Joy Luck Club, which means that the inheritance of Chinese culture is realized.

4.2. Causes of Integration between Two Cultures

As daughters grow up and get to know the past, hardship, and miseries of their mothers, they come to really know their mothers and learn to appreciate the Chinese characters and virtues of their mothers.

The genuine love between mothers and daughters is the reason why they are trying to understand each other, to respect and accept the differences between them. For instance, June gradually understands her mother's intention of forcing her to play the piano. Her mother wants June to enjoy herself and try her best, rather than cultivate her into a musical master. After Suyuan's death, June wears the jade pendant given by Suyuan every day, which is not a piece of jewelry June would choose for herself and was once put away and forgotten by June, believing that the carvings meant something, and she wants to find out what it means to Chinese people. Lindo tries to accept Rich. She suggests that Waverly and Rich should not go to China in July since it is too hot in summer, and she worries that the hot weather will make Rich's face become red and grow more spots, which is appreciated by Rich. While Auntie Lin addresses June by her Chinese name “Jing-mei”, Auntie Ying corrects her that daughters all go by their American names. June thinks it is acceptable to call her by her Chinese
name and she points out that “In fact, it's even becoming fashionable for American-born Chinese to use their Chinese names.” [6] (TJLC 37).

By establishing a connection with her mother’s past and memories of China, June gradually gains confidence in her Chinese identity. June used to think all those things her mother did were embarrassing, but after her mother’s death, she eventually understands her mother and what it means to be Chinese. “Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese and it's your blood, waiting to be let go.” [6] (TJLC 267). Finally, she goes back to China to fulfill her mother’s dream, and she finds her Chinese part on the bottom of her heart and understands what her mother once said—cannot help.

5. Conclusion

The Joy Luck Club is a tragedy of incomprehension and misunderstanding between two generations and two different cultures in America in the early 1960s. The four immigrant mothers represent traditional Chinese culture, while their American-born daughters symbolize American culture. For many immigrants, like the mothers and daughters in The Joy Luck Club, the pressure to assimilate is overwhelming. Apart from that, communication is not easy for them, as misunderstandings occur due to cultural differences. However, conflicts between mothers and daughters, which are mainly caused by different experiences, languages, family values, and identities, do not end up with the break-up relationships between them, suggesting the possible co-existence of the two different cultures. It is the common desire of several generations of Chinese Americans that Chinese and American cultures move from opposition to integration, which requires people with different cultural backgrounds to respect each other and seek common ground while putting aside differences.

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