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Immigrant Experiences : Themes of Family, Ethnicity, Memory and Identity in Amy Tan's *The Joy luck Club* (1989)

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Abstract :

With a resurgence in the reimagining of immigrant narratives, Amy Tan's The Joy luck Club (1989) explores the complexities of immigrant identity formation, the dynamics within families and between families, and the contrasting experiences of loss and gain that occur during these transitions.

Keywords :

Identity, memory, immigration, trauma, family, mother-daughter relationship, etc.

> My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more.
>
> - *The Joy luck Club*, Amy Tan

Amy Tan has expressed that her intention for The Joy Luck Club was not to create a novel, but rather a collection of stories. However, she did have a plan for these stories to revolve around a central theme, and she strategically crafted the preface, even though it was written last. The primary setting of the book is a Chinese-American community in a neighbourhood of San Francisco. The main characters consist of four families: the Woos, Jongs, Hsus, and St.Clair's. What unites these families is the mother-daughter relationships they share. The mothers, who are all first-generation immigrants from mainland China, have limited English proficiency and remain cultural outsiders in their new environment. On the other hand, the daughters are all American-born and educated, with some even being married to individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Within the microcosm of the family structure, the mothers rely on recollecting the past and sharing stories of their memories as the only means to preserve their ethnic heritage. One of the mothers, while lamenting the deteriorating marriage of her daughter Lena and Lena's lack of familiarity with Chinese ways of thinking, highlights the challenges faced by the younger generation in maintaining their cultural identity.

Lena, lacking any recollection of her past, finds herself adrift in the chaos of life, unable to define her own identity or maintain a sense of cohesion. While it is possible that Lena may acquire a shared belief in certain rules, roles, behaviours, and values through her mother's memories, this familial and overseas Chinese community ethos serves as a functional framework for communication. However, even if Lena unexpectedly encounters a moment that holds a profound connection to her mother's past, will she truly gain insight into her mother's deeply buried anxieties, psychological needs, specific thought patterns, and worldview? Can she genuinely comprehend her mother's unique life experiences? Is it possible for her to transcend her own existential limitations through her mother's narrative? What if Lena must confront an insurmountable barrier in her present existence that forever separates her from her mother? These inquiries extend beyond Lena and encompass all the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*. In this analysis, I will closely examine the generational

conflict within the novel and the inherent irreproducibility that divides them. By delving into the intricacies of memory, I will also explore the interplay between recollection, storytelling, and the formation of present-day ethnic identities.

The concept of "Memory" is highly captivating from an intellectual standpoint, as it draws upon a wide range of literature, encompassing speculative philosophy's cognitive concerns to experimental psychological investigations into the mind's processing-storage-retrieval function. However, due to the diverse intellectual origins and varied connotations associated with memory, it is essential to clarify two fundamental assumptions that underpin the usage of this term in the analysis of ethnic identity in *The Joy Luck Club*. Firstly, the premise that memory is constructed through narratives, and secondly, emphasizing its social-psychological mechanism. In the realm of philosophical discourse, the exploration of memory often unintentionally adopts a static perspective by perceiving memory as a specific content of the mind, such as an "image," a "presentation," or an "impression." However, it is crucial to recognize that memory not only consists of visual representations but also encompasses the stories and narratives we recount about our past.

These narratives not only shape our understanding of ourselves but also serve as a means of conveying our sense of self. The significance of our past experiences lies not solely in the actual events themselves but in the meaningful interpretations we attribute to them. In my analysis of *The Joy Luck Club*, I will delve into how the construction of meaning in our past experiences parallels the production of narratives. It is highly likely that memory plays a pivotal role in the formation of identity, as well as the associated processes of self-definition and self-narrative. Current studies in social psychology have revealed that self-images elicit a complex network of interconnected self-knowledge and self-identity. The information, values, and beliefs associated with these self-images are not only influenced by social contexts but also serve as valuable psychological resources.

According to Hayden White, the meaning of a set of events in a narrative, whether it is the narrative of an individual life or of history, is not the same as the story itself. White identifies recurring tropical enfigurations as the form that these events take, and suggests that their meaning differs from the story they comprise (White, 111). By following White's differentiation of two types of narrative meanings, without necessarily accepting his tropological explanation, we can distinguish between the 'life-story' and the 'existential

perception' within memory narrative. While the life-story appears to be based on actual events, the existential perception transforms everyday occurrences into a significant mental state or existential concern that is not immediately apparent. This perspective allows us to view a specific life-story as a representation of existential themes or issues, while the existential perception provides us with a much more comprehensive context in which we can ask meaningful questions about the factual events of that life-story, particularly regarding their purpose and significance.

A functioning mentality, such as the overwhelming will to survive exhibited by the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, is not readily apparent in the factual events themselves, but rather manifests through the presence of existential themes within the memory narratives. It is important to note that memory narratives do not aim to provide a perfect replication of the events it describes. Instead, it goes beyond the mere actuality of events to determine their coherence within an existential situation. This broader understanding of life then assigns exemplary values to the events that are recalled in that memory.

The childhood memories of Ying-ying St. Clair serve as a poignant example of how an individual's present mindset can awaken memories from the past. At the tender age of four, Ying-ying found herself separated from her parents during a Moon Festival excursion to a picturesque lake. While captivated by a performance by the Moon Lady, she made a wish, the details of which eluded her for many decades. It was only after enduring the dissolution of her first marriage and followed by a second with an affable yet foreign Irishman, and weathering the passage of time that she finally recollected her childhood desire to be found:

> I did not lose myself all at once. I rubbed out my face over the years washing away my pain, the same way carvings on stone are worn down by water. (Tan 65)

This recollection occurred as she found herself:

> […] moving every year closer to the end of my life, I also feel closer to the beginning. And I remember everything that happened that day because it has happened many times in my life. The same innocence, trust, and restlessness, the wonder, fear, and loneliness(81).

Among the four maternal figures depicted in The Joy Luck Club, Ying-ying enjoyed the most blissful upbringing. Her family's affluence ensured her well-being and she was cared for attentively. The incident of her temporary separation from her family during the festival trip was nothing more than a minor mishap, devoid of any lasting harm. However, this seemingly inconsequential event from her early childhood has come to symbolize the unfortunate trajectory of her life. It represents the memory of a survivor who has endured hardships and has lost the ability to recall a different existence, despite having once experienced it. This memory now serves as a psychological defence mechanism, justifying her withdrawal from society, her fatalistic worldview that perceives the world as a system of complete control, and her fascination with extreme circumstances and the potential lessons they hold for everyday life.

The survival mentality exhibited by Ying-ying is representative of all the female characters who are part of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. The women in the mahjong club have encountered two types of extreme situations. The first type includes famine, war, forced marriages, and broken families in China. The second type involves the cultural alienation, the breakdown of traditional family structures, and conflicts between mothers and daughters in America. To navigate through these drastic changes in their lives, these women must maintain a psychological continuity, a coherent understanding of their life-world, and a sense of self. This need for continuity necessitates the use of memory narratives, specifically life story narratives, which provide a consistent framework for their aims, intentions, hopes, and fears in the new spaces they inhabit. Memory serves as a means of socialization and ego formation, expressing their anxieties, hopes, and survival instincts. The 'Joy Luck Club' itself, with its central mahjong table, serves as an embodiment of this survival mentality and the strategies of erecting psychological obstacle employed by its members. Suyuan Woo, the mother of the book's first narrator, established the first Joy Luck Clubin wartime Kweilin as a refugee fleeing from the advancing Japanese troops:

> My idea was to have a gathering of four women, one for each corner of my mahjong table. I knew which women I wanted to ask. They were all young like me, with wishful faces.(20)

During times of turmoil, everyday life became a test of survival, both physically and mentally:

> … there was no room for fresh air. Unbearable smells from the sewers rose up to my second-story window and the stink had nowhere else to go but into my nose. At all hours of the night and day, I heard screaming sounds. (20)

For Suyuan Woo, whose life was in crisis, survival itself became a heroic action—a decisive action taken during a time of crisis. However, it was also a pitiful and disillusioned action. In order to hold onto life, the club members in Kweilin attempted to "feast" and "celebrate their good fortune," (21) focusing solely on winning and adding to their happiness.

In 1949, Suyuan establishes the second Joy Luck Club in San Francisco as a refugee escaping from the violence of civil war in China. This new club serves as a reminder of the first club and also acts as a means of survival. The newly immigrated members of the club, who have experienced unimaginable tragedies in China and struggle to express their hopes in their limited English, find solace and happiness in playing mahjong. These moments of joy and hope are rare for them, as they can only "hope to be lucky."(22) during these times. While the mahjong club represents the Club Aunties' efforts to survive, it goes beyond the mere practicality of making ends meet or the fear of poverty. It symbolizes their shared experience of surviving through those dark times successfully and escaping to a new world. It highlights the urgency to hold onto their lives amidst mounting pressures, which are reflected in their memories of past events that once victimized them. Understanding becomes crucial when faced with the unfamiliar, the unknown, and the uncanny. The process of understanding typically begins by shifting the unknown towards something known, apprehended, and familiar. Therefore, the process of understanding commences with an experiential shift. The realm of the unknown is transformed by reinvigorating the old survival strategy, directing it towards a domain or field that is presumed to have already been overcome.

The initial section of the book comprises stories that are narrated by mothers who have experienced victimization. These recollections from the past help the narrators to adhere and develop a belief that people are all victimized in some way or another by events beyond their control, particularly when they find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings. However, memories cannot be unidirectional, as individuals are collection of multiple experiences spread over time and space. Though the past can cast a shadow on the present through memory, the present can also pre-impose on the past through memory. The Joy Luck Club members, on the other hand, exhibit what Nietzsche calls "memory of the will" an active

memory that is sustained by the will to survive (Second Essay). Suyuan, for instance, tells her refugee story in various ways, making it difficult for her daughter to relate them to reality, and she can only perceive them as a "Chinese fairy tale." (22). These stories, in the form of memory, test Suyuan's ability to forget. They are her symptomatic records of a traumatized soul making a desperate effort to erect defensive mechanisms to push back the memory of the tragic loss of her husband and two baby daughters during the war. Although the real memory was suppressed, it did not disappear. As her daughter Jing Mei Woo reflects on her mother's death she is reminded of her father's words"…she was killed by her own thoughts." (16).

Suyuan's early encounters with extreme situations not only lead to a defensive contraction of her own self, but also bring about a transformation in her relationship with her daughter. This transformation is rooted in a fear that she may lose her connection with her daughter, and that her own experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and desires will not be carried forward by future generations. Despite the daughter's resemblance to her mother and the possibility of identification, there remains a significant gap between the two individuals.

Memory serves as more than just an abstract narrative; a certain structure is imposed upon it bridge the past and present. As such, its significance emerges from the experiential connection between the past and the present, which also shapes future projections. The contrasting experiential networks of Suyuan Woo and her daughter contribute to the daughter's resistance towards her mother's insistence on hard work and persistence, as well as her perplexity regarding her mother's constant sense of crisis. For the mother, as well as manyChinese immigrants, hard work and persistence are not merely self-sufficient virtues, but rather essential means and conditions for survival. These qualities hold value for her because her past experiences have taught her that they are attributes of a winner in life, and she perceives them solely in this context. Her self-approval for embodying these qualities is contingent upon their usefulness. Despite being aware that her daughter will never attain a Doctorate., she continues to inform her friends and neighbours that Jing-mei Woo is pursuing one. This is not a falsehood or wishful thinking, but rather a manifestation of her survival instinct. The mother seeks not the approval that praises her daughter's personal qualities, but rather the conviction that her daughter possesses the attributes of a survivor. It is important to recognize that attributing diligence, frugality, or any other qualities solely to Chinese ethnicity oversimplifies their significance. Such a perspective fails to acknowledge the

complex interplay between these qualities and a specific form of ethnic memory, and instead relies on an essentialist interpretation of them as inherent "Chinese" attributes.

Coming to Lindo Jong, one of the members of the Joy Luck Club in order to enhance her daughter Waverly's "invisible strength" (83) she presents her with a personal talisman of luck:

> My mother unwrapped something in her lap. It was her chang, a small tablet of red jade which held the sun's fire. "Is luck," she whispered, and tucked it into my dress pocket. a small tablet of red jade that possesses the fiery essence of the sun (90).

As Waverly engages in her chess battles, her mother feels deeply connected to her struggles. However, Waverly fails to appreciate the underlying worry and concern that drives her mother's subtle survival instincts. Instead, she accuses her mother of exploiting her to showcase her own abilities and seeking to claim all the credit. Waverly, who believes herself to be "Only her skin and her hair are Chinese. Inside—she is all American made." (242). She struggles to comprehend why her mother places such value on "luck" and "tricks" rather than "skill" and "intelligence." Lindo attempts to convey to her daughter that winning at chess does not necessarily require exceptional intelligence, but rather depends on employing clever strategies.

Waverly Jong experiences a sense of paralysis due to her mother's unexpected and covert actions. Initially, she fails to recognize the disillusioned heroic nature that underlies her mother's devious and underhanded behaviour. What she overlooks is that her mother's sneakiness is intended to prepare her for navigating unpredictable circumstances, where she will frequently encounter unstructured situations and must rely on her own survival skills. In contrast to the American approaches to survival that Waverly has been exposed to, such as striving for upward mobility, seeking security through legal means, and making active individual choices, Lindo Jong's survival strategy of sneakiness or trickiness is woefully devoid of heroism and is shamefully associated with Chinese culture. Waverly harbours fear and disdain towards her mother, and she resists her mother's teachings. On the other hand, Lindo is confused by her daughter's efforts to resist her:

> […] I couldn't teach her about the 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 easy things are not worth pursuing. How to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring. Why Chinese thinking is best. (243)

Wearing a mask, hiding one's true self holds great significance for Lindo Jong, as she perceives it as an act of survival, she believes that it is an essential act which is almost heroic and is needed for the survival of impoverished immigrants like herself. In America, where it is challenging to maintain one's identity, immigrants are forced to wear a face which becomes a means to conceal one's true emotions and deceive the others in order to secure a place in society. Lindo Jong acknowledges the burden that comes with showing a different face requires individuals to navigate the complexities of human deceit. However, she does not associate this act with the intense anger or passionate rebellion often associated with heroic acts of ethnic resistance. Instead, the prevalent sentiment among Chinese-Americans like Lindo Jong is one of survivalism, which has led to a cynical devaluation of heroism and a resigned acceptance tinged with a bitter sense of humour.

Upon their initial arrival in America, Lindo and An-mei Hsu found themselves employed at a fortune cookie factory, diligently crafting Chinese proverbs of good fortune for the American market. Lindo, however, pondered over the purpose behind these seemingly nonsensical Chinese fortunes. An-mei, in response to Lindo's curiosity, proceeded to enlighten her on the matter: "American people think Chinese people write these sayings." (299). But we never say such things!" in response Lindo says, "These things don't make sense. These are not fortunes, they are bad instructions." To this An-mei laughingly responds, "it is our bad fortune to be here making these and somebody else's bad fortune to pay to get them." (300).

Lindo Jong possesses a deep understanding of how the practice of wearing masks, much like the fortune cookie, can effectively create an illusion of familiarity and comprehension of Chinese culture among many Americans. Additionally, she possesses a unique insight into the potential psychological dependency that can develop in individuals who consistently hide their individual identities, even when it is unnecessary. The continuous hiding of these identities results in the obfuscation and hindering of an individual's ability to truly express their authentic self. For Chinese-Americans like Lindo, the act of wearing a mask has become a symbolic representation of their ethnic identity, as they navigate the

complexities of being neither fully American nor Chinese. In the case of Lindo, who embodies a self-aware duality, we encounter an individual who observes her own existence with a detached, amused, and ironic perspective. She is intrigued by the fact that she lacks a definitive sense of self that she can confidently claim as her own. This all-encompassing sense of detachment allows her to shield herself from emotional pain and exercise control over her expressions of anger or rebellion. Immigrants like Lindo Jong, must learn to perceive themselves not as autonomous individuals, but rather as individuals who are shaped by external circumstances, whether they be the current situation or predetermined destiny or disposition.

In Taoism, the concept of human existence revolves around the perpetual struggle to maintain a delicate equilibrium between yin and yang. This struggle is believed to be influenced even by seemingly insignificant factors such as the placement of a bedroom mirror or the location of one's condominium apartment. The Taoist masters conceived the five elements, namely water, fire, wood, metal, and earth, as fundamental phases that govern all processes in space and time. These elements hold a mystical significance as they determine the inherent flaws in an individual's character based on their birth hour. Rose Hsu Jordan, much like her mother An-mei, possesses an insufficient amount of the wood element. Consequently, she tends to yield to the ideas and opinions of others. Her marriage with Ted deteriorates due to his frustration with her indecisiveness. According to the Wuxing, a conceptual Chinese traditional system governing the sacred and the mundane, no individual possess a perfectly balanced combination of all the five elements. Therefore, each individual is inherently flawed by nature. This perspective on human imperfection may bear resemblance to the Greek notion of tragic flaw. However, the Chinese interpretation of character flaws does not involve a stubborn defiance against fate. The astute Chinese wisdom rejects conventional notions of heroism and defiance, as it acknowledges that heroes do not ultimately survive. This belief informs the disillusionment with traditional codes of heroism and the desire to overcome flaws through non-heroic, subtle actions. For instance, individuals may adopt special names, such as the inclusion of “rose” in Rose Hsu Jordan's name, in an attempt to augment the wood element within their character.

Both Rose and her mother perceive themselves as victims of circumstances; however, due to their belonging to different times and generations, they adopt distinct approaches to alleviate their fear of disaster. An-mei Hsu deals with everyday mishaps by preparing for the

worst and maintaining faith in hope. Her faith in God, which she upheld for numerous years until her youngest son tragically drowned, was not merely a religious conviction for which she was willing to sacrifice herself, but rather a survival strategy to sustain her hope. Despite An-mei's constant urging for her daughter to make her own choices or even indulge in a fantasy revenge for the injustices suffered by women, she is prepared to accept the most unfavourable outcome that can befall a woman: the destiny of being a woman, "to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness" (203).

An-mei's belief in God, even after the tragic loss of her son, and her continuing faith about a better future, is perceived by her American-born daughter as nothing more than a self-deceptive belief held by a fatalist. Rose Hsu Jordan humorously recounts her mother's conviction that their blessings were a result of faith, "only I thought she said 'fate,' because she couldn't pronounce that 'th' sound in 'faith." (115).Although Rose initially misinterpreted it as "fate" due to her mother's difficulty in pronouncing the "th" sound. It is only through her own personal hardships that Rose comes to realize that perhaps fate had always been at play, and that faith was merely an illusion that gave her a sense of control.

The distinct ethnic character of the mother-daughter relationship is evident not only in the Hsu family, but also in the Woos, Jongs, and St. Clairs. In these Chinese-American families, the bond between mother and daughter no longer dictates the daughter's obligation or the mother's authority. Rather, these shared family traits often cause embarrassment for one or both parties. However, unlike in typical American families, this relationship is not based on material service. Instead, the mother provides a unique service to her daughter by preparing her for life's challenges, offering her daughter the wealth of her life's experiences, and providing her with the necessary tools. The mother does not act as a self-righteous figure, but rather as a fellow victim who has survived. The traditional role of a Chinese mother has been greatly diminished in America, and she is now uncertain, defensive, and hesitant to impose her own standards on the younger generation. As a result, the daughter no longer identifies with her mother or internalizes her authority in the same way as in China, if she recognizes it at all.

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