Cultural Conflict in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*

**K. P. Kumaran**  
Ph.D., Research Scholar, Department of English  
Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar- 608 002, Tamil Nadu

**Dr. R. Palanivel M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.**  
Assistant Professor, Department of English (DDE)  
Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar- 608 002, Tamil Nadu

*The Joy Luck Club* highlights the relationship between the different races, between men and women and between different generations. The theme focuses mainly on the relationship between an immigrant Chinese mother and her American daughter which also forms the basis. It also depicts on the cultural background of the important characters, the intimate relationship between culture and life, the tension and interpretation of characters of belonging to different cultures, the adoption and diffusion of cultures giving rise to new problems is in charge for weaving together all the sections and who adds continuity by narrating the first and last section. The four daughters in this story are the first generation Chinese American and their mothers are immigrant Chinese. In this novel, all the mothers are born and brought up in China. Even though they are settled in America they still value the cultural values they had inherited from their parents. Because of this they try to implant Chinese traits and qualities on their daughters who have assimilated American lifestyle. The main character Jing-Mei is the one who is mainly recalling and reflecting on her mother’s stories. Both the Chinese and American culture is strongly exhibited in the family. Like Jing-Mei, Amy Tan struggled to harmonize American roots with her parent’s Asian customs and with being the only Chinese face in her class. The daughters on their part attempt to avoid/ undermine Chinese traditions. A lack of proper understanding of each other’s perceptions results in a communication gap. As a result the miscommunication and misunderstanding increases day by day. The mothers speak a mixture of fractured English and they feel comfortable in Chinese language and often use the language. The daughters speak English the way it is spoke in America and, what is more, and they fail to understand and even their understanding of Chinese is uncertain. Who have formed a mahjong group called *Joy Luck Club*.

In the novel whenever the mothers express any wishes or get command of their daughters, the daughters try to counter them or resist. They are irritated when their daughters despise their disapproval. For instance Jing-Mei confesses to her self-protective strategy against her mother, “I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won’t. I won’t let her change me, I promised myself. I won’t be what I’m not (198-99). As mother Lindo Jong succinctly put it, “I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese Character. How could I know these two things do not
mix?” For instance Jing-Mei’s self-protective strategy against the mother who expected her to be a child prodigy is to disappoint her mother whenever possible. Feeling bound in American culture the daughters is bold and even rebellious and they make their own decisions rather than follow the whims of their mothers. Their independence and defiance of Chinese tradition are further reflected in her strong belief in American style individualism. Mothers are trapped in nostalgia for their lost relations and daughters on one side unable to decide and follow Chinese or American culture. In addition to cultural and geographically displacement these Chinese born mothers are almost linguistically the communication barrier here is double one, that between generations and that created by the waning influence of an older culture and the burgeoning presence of another. The mothers being the first generation immigrant not only maintain a cultural correlation with China emotionally, but also have a strong urge to explain their painful China experience as ethnic heritage to give intellectual, moral and social instruction to their daughters.

English became the official language and definitely represents the dominant culture. Every new immigrant has to manage English to a certain extent in order to fit in or at least to pass the naturalization. It is also a carrier of culture. A lack of proper understanding of each other’s perceptions results in a communication gap in *Joy Luck Club*. Amy Tan agrees that different languages come with different thinking system. Since Amy was raised in a Chinese speaking family and living in America, she found that she is a kind of “two minds” due to richness of her linguistic experiences. She found she was forced to speak modest and polite when she speaks in Chinese. Language enforces the culture behind it implicitly. People who live in a society, which is dominated by certain culture, have to adapt that dominant language. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the female characters speak dual language and live in adult cultures. The ethnic dissatisfaction manifested in the relationship between the Chinese mothers and the American daughters is the dilemma which many immigrants, especially their descendants, are faced with that is living between two world’s i.e. native world and the immigrant world. The young generation is often spilt between the two worlds.

Daughters symbolized the contemporary American culture and mothers on the one side the Chinese culture. There is nearly always some tension in the exchange between mother and the daughter, between China and American environment. The people moving into a new country have to face the anxiety and alienation from changes in their living style and expression of their thoughts that have long been solidly established by their mother tongue. Furthermore, most of minority ethnic language are also excluded and discriminated in the white mainstream society. In the aforesaid background, the Joy Luck mothers and their language, Chinese, meet with the same circumstances in America. Lacking a shared language and a common tongue, the mothers find themselves overwhelmed by the powerful force of English discourse; as a result, it is difficult for them to communicate even with their daughters. Mothers and daughters are in a bilingual world. For mothers, despite their insistence on speaking Chinese in most cases, their lovely familiar Chinese language is already too far away from them now. They can only speak and express in “fragile English” (6). For daughters, they have become unsympathetic strangers who do not even speak their mothers’ language.

Linda Young points out, “For one thing, the bonds between Chinese writer-reader or speaker-listener imply a deep and dynamic mutuality between participants that reflects belief in the interconnectedness and interdependence of existence. Chinese put ideas together to draw others into a collaborative effort to make people partners in mutual meaning-making” (106). Both Suyuan and Lindo are typical Chinese speakers and listeners. Their discourse reflects the dynamics of mutual meaning-making between speakers and listeners. Suyuan especially cherishes the Chinese emphasis on “meaning beyond words.” However, June thinks, “It was one of those Chinese expressions that mean the better half of mixed intentions. I can never remember things I didn’t understand in the first place” (6). The difficulty of communication naturally leads to the growing alienation of American daughters from their Chinese mothers and mothers’ culture. In contrast to the Chinese way of communication which is exasperating to the American-born daughters, the American style is sympathetically shown to be clear, simple and direct. Observing American straightforwardness, Waverly tells her mother to call her ahead of time instead of dropping by her apartment without forewarning. Lindo, however, senses rejection and offence in Waverly’s American-style request. There are communicative
as well as culture differences involved here. Culturally, a Chinese mother can visit her daughter at any time. The main reason for that is the granted intimacy between a Chinese mother and daughter. Communication wise, the daughter, no matter how much she dislikes it, seldom tells her mother not to visit unless pre-notified. Any attempt of suggestion or rejection would be done in a much more roundabout way. Chinese communicative style bears the profound impact of Confucianism, which envisions a society of people in hierarchical relationships and mutual obligations. People live a life of respect and are willing to participate in the making of communal harmony. Waverly’s simple, straightforward suggestion sounds inevitably too thorny and alienating to Lindo, who, in consequence of the event, refuses to visit Waverly unless formally invited. In Waverly’s narrative she is using this as an example to illustrate her mother’s image of being hard to communicate with. So the other is produced.

Reference
