

# The Resilient Contestants in Amy Tan's

## *The Joy Luck Club*

Ms. N.Sangeetha Rani  
Assistant Professor of English,  
Fatima College, Madurai  
miragesandhya01@gmail.com

### Abstract:

Literature is always ingrained in reality and the writer's sensibility reacts to the changes in social life in the most eloquent way possible. In the earlier days, the unfair gender roles under patriarchal system were created to safeguard gender inequality between men and women. Gender role practices expanded gradually to maintain the male hegemony to make women helpless because female traditional gender roles create dependency. Men were assigned to masculinities equipped with power, whereas women were endorsed to femininities to mark boundaries that confine their movement. But the increase of female awareness of gender equality has altered this situation. Gender roles are gradually shifting from traditional to modern. Modern women writers, are trying to break the hegemony of men with their superior masculinities. Amy Tan is one of the internationally acclaimed Chinese American women writers of the modern era, whose works are typified by representational role of women in relation to the structure of the society. Her writings expound the gendered notion of thinking in which lack of freedom and actions are anxiously presented. Tan has succeeded in bringing about a great change in the male dominated mentality of the society through her expository works. She highlights the gendered behaviour, consciousness, freedom and differences which bring a new ideology in the feminist existentialist thought. This paper explores the cultural and familial clashes in the lives of young women in Tan's debut novel *The Joy Luck Club* and how it results in feminist consciousness. It discusses the gendered situation and position of these women in terms of their cultural, marital and racial ideologies. It also examines how Chinese American women writers represent the immigrant family as an institution where the second generation struggle to build their female identity and subject hood.

**Key Words:** patriarchal system, gendered behaviour, Chinese Americans, female identity , Otherness of women.

**“A gender-equal society would be one where the word 'gender' does not exist: where everyone can be themselves.” - Gloria Steinem**

Jasbir Jain writes that “tradition represents stability but is in itself never stable. It carries the unwavering burden of the past with itself”. If a person violates this, he or she is deemed as tradition breaker. Gender practices started in the smallest units of society called family. For women, gender is a forceful word as it shows the dominance of men over women. Man is always seen as a law maker and woman, the follower of laws. Hence when discussing tradition, one tends to focus on women’s status, condition in this society as they are expected to maintain the patriarchal codes of morality and not express their desires and wishes. Women’s nature is such that they desire to please others and serve other’s interest before, in preference to theirs. In contrast to it, when a woman breaks these codes, she’s is no longer a traditional woman but is tagged as ‘Modern woman or New woman’. With the emergence of the feminist ideologists the hegemony of men with their superior masculinity is shattered.

The gender roles in China are influenced by patriarchy which considers men more powerful than women. The Chinese American literature that developed as an ethnic literature, focussed on inter relationship between gender, race and culture and Chinese women’s identity or ‘otherness of women’ caught between the Chinese past and the White culture. Chinese American literature is a gamut of works written by Americans of Chinese origin but settled in America. The earliest immigrants from China went to America, way back in 1840s, on learning about the “Golden Mountain” in California to dig up gold. Very few Chinese women came to America as the Chinese society mandated men to toil in public and women to remain at home to do the domestic chores. The immigrants were also employed in mines and the construction of rail roads. As America was a white dominant society, the racial discrimination made the immigrants to keep in touch with their cultural tradition. It was not possible for the first generation Chinese immigrants to be absorbed in the American society and they sensed the disparity in culture and language poignantly. Unlike these first generation Chinese Americans, their American born children slowly imbibed the American culture and language. Although they accepted the American cultural values, they only faced rejection by the American White society. Amy Tan herself was a first generation Chinese American who had experienced the brunt of immigrant oppression which found expression in her works.

Amy Tan published her first work the *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989. It shot her to great fame and drew the attention of the American critics. The novel portrays the life of four women diverged in

character and fate, who immigrate to USA after confronting the disasters in their country and their life. It also explicates the growing experience of four daughters of the four women. The mothers establish a recognition and economic stability by starting a ladies club 'The Joy Luck club'. Suyan forms the club along with other three women, in order to escape the fear of war and insecurity. The novel comprises of sixteen stories, narrated by mothers and daughters, who strive to gain their identities. The younger generation receives great support from the older one, and becomes stronger individuals once they begin to come to terms with their cultural heritage. Lindo, Ying Mei, Rose Hsu Jordan and Lena St. Clair are subjugated by males because of their sex and Chinese tradition. Ann-Mei experiences psychological oppression in many ways. Her mother is invited to spend time at the home of a wealthy merchant named Wu Tsing. Despite emotionally scaring Ann-Mei, it also demonstrates the lack of respect for women in China. Ann-Mei's mother is forced into concubinage because of her lack of power as a woman. She becomes the third wife and unfortunately maintains very little status in the home of Wu Tsing. Ann-Mei's family disowns her mother because she has brought shame to her family by becoming a third wife.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan posits femininity on surface in opposition to masculinity. In China, men under the gendered system perceive women as only a commodity. Lindo has no freedom in her marital status. When she is two years old she is engaged to Huang Taitai's son, one year younger than her. Lindo escapes from a traditional role of a dutiful wife and potential mother. "I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside ....that no one could ever take away from me". As Cecily Hamilton observed in her work "Marriage as a Trade", "the cloak of affection in which the relation between woman and man is wrapped is vicious and that is why she began to suspect both the motives which lay behind it ...such false affection both masked and reinforced basic inequalities." Tan demonstrates the suppression of the women physically and mentally by showing how the patriotic culture is blindly accepted by the Chinese women. According to Confucianism, women are expected to practice all the virtues throughout their whole life. Thus Lindo is compelled to play the role of the conventional wife in order to uphold the dignity of the family. She thinks Tyan-yu, her husband as a god. Her individuality dissolves when she successfully plays the role of her father's daughter and her husband's wife. Ying Yang, another character representing whole China, is a mute witness to the injustice done to her by her husband who dotes over another woman as soon as their marriage takes place.

'Yin' and 'Yang' are Chinese notions representing female passivity and masculine active conscious mind. The relationship between Rose and her husband is like Yin and Yang. She is a weakling in her husband's eyes. She implicitly obeys him until she receives the divorce papers from him. The American born daughter of Ying Ying, Lena grows up as an independent free 'new woman' who has

tasted emancipation. But she is torn between independence and submissiveness in her relationship with her husband, Harold. She is expected to live in the shadow of Harold. Lena's husband Harold, who is also her boss, repeatedly denies Lena a raise, saying that it'd be awkward to reward his wife in front of other employees. Even though she has earned the company the most profit, she remains passive to maintain peace in her marriage. This power imbalance ultimately ruins her, as she grows resentful of Harold's unwillingness to listen and cherish her.

In addition to the cruelty of the patriarchal culture, the mothers in this novel also assume a pseudo-male role to safe guard their daughter's morality. They believe that girls have no right to fulfil their needs. "A boy can run and chase dragon files because that is its nature. But a girl stands still if you are still.....then it will come to you and hide in the comfort of your shadow". The mothers not only influence their daughters in their identity formation and enable them to become strong women to master their own destiny but also become the source of cultural nutrition to build their cultural identification.

Thus in *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan takes a journey inward to discover the female self hood in order to achieve female consciousness. She establishes that achieving gender equality will necessitate changes in institutional practices and social relations through which disparities are reinforced and sustained. As the daughters go through a process of understanding, they become more appreciative of their mother's beliefs. The customary representations of the ancestral homeland's culture are modified by Tan when she sets this old culture in a new context, America. She also emphasizes that it also needs strengthening of women's voices in shaping the society. As Wollstonecraft says "liberated woman would be one who exercises virtue, not sourcing it through her male counterparts, but on her own. She would be rid of all "epithets of weakness"

### Works Cited

Adams, Bella. *Amy Tan*. Manchester, 20005.

Bai, K. Meera. *Women's Voices: The Novels of Indian Women Writers*. Prestige Books, 1996.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex* (1952) pp.672-705. In Alice S. Rossi (ed.) *Feminist Papers: from Adams to de Beauvoir* .Northeastern University Press,1972.

Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family* (1884) pp. 480-495. In Alice S. Rossi (ed.) *FeministPapers: from Adams to de Beauvoir* . Northeastern University Press, 1972.

Jain, Jasbir. *Writing Women across Cultures*. Rawat Publications, 2002.

Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. Minerva, 1994.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) pp. 41-85. In Alice S. Rossi (ed.) *Feminist Papers: from Adams to de Beauvoir* . Northeastern University Press,1972.