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MEMORY RECOUPS ETHNIC ROOTS: A READING OF AMY TAN'S *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

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ABSTRACT

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* can be regarded as one of the iconic representations that convey the universal theme of mother-daughter relationship. All the four mothers in the novel express the apprehensions regarding their daughters' future and ultimately realises the significance to share the precious past with the daughters to ensure ethnic continuity. They try to reminisce their past and decide to articulate tales of what is remembered. The present paper attempts to analyse the complex operations of memory and explores how the recollection and narration of the past recoups ethnic roots. Memories are not just phantasmagorias, appearances and imprints. They can also be defined as stories and chronicles that tell about the bygone days which both shape and convey our sense of self. Memory has great significance in moulding the past, genuine or illusory, and pushes mothers to persevere in recalling their past culture, a patriarchal one if ever there is one and inflict it upon their daughters. The daughters, while appear at first as wholly cohesive into the American culture rebuffing all ethnic elements, over while start probing for poise between their Chinese heritage and American lifestyle.

Key Words: Ethnic, Memory, Culture, Mother-Daughter relationship

*Time it was
 And what a time it was, it was
 A time of innocence
 A time of confidences
 Long ago it must be
 I have a photograph
 Preserve your memories
 They're all that's left you
 (Paul Simon, Lyrics 1964-2008)*



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Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* can be regarded as one of the iconic representations that convey the universal theme of mother-daughter relationship. The novel depicts the remarkable narratives of four mother-daughter pairs Suyuan Woo- Jing-mei Woo (June), An- mei Hsu- Rose Hsu Jordan, Lindo Jong- Waverly Jong and Ying- ying St. Clair- Lena St. Clair. The mothers are all first generation Chinese immigrants from mainland China desperately trying to reclaim their roots while remaining hostile to the new land. The daughters contrariwise consider America as their homeland where they are born and brought up and dwell on China as a mysterious place. All the four mothers express the apprehensions regarding their daughters' future and ultimately realises the significance to share the precious past with the daughters to ensure ethnic continuity. They try to reminisce their past and decide to articulate tales of what is remembered.

Memory is the only means by which one can recreate past, understand self and inherit values that shape future. The present paper attempts to analyse the complex operations of memory and explores how the recollection and narration of the past recoups ethnic roots. Memories are not just phantasmagorias, appearances and imprints. They can also be defined as stories and chronicles that tell about the bygone days which both shape and convey our sense of self.

The plot of the narrative advances through imperceptible connections between life events and it is quite interesting to trace a narrow line that divides the novel into two-- the first part is that of the immigrant generation and the second part, their American born daughters. The novel is episodic in structure and memories precede the story. The memories of the mothers offer a rather material order to the whole plot which unravels the conflict between mothers and daughters. Though the sections are interconnected, they stand alone giving least chance for fragmentation.

The novel's sixteen narratives, interconnected and dovetailed, are divided into four sections with four chapters in a section. Each section has a emblematic title and is preceded by a short fable or narrative proverb or vignette, which serves as an allegory or directing code for the story that follows. The prologue to each section announces the running theme that ties all stories together. "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" details the story of a woman who attempts to bring a swan to America, expecting a new and better life. The immigration officials take her swan away and what remains with her is only a feather which she decides to give to her daughter when she is old enough to be described its importance. Similar to the prologue, the section centres on the mothers who hope to pass on their culture and customs to their daughters. The American circumstances initially hinder all



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possibilities for a psychological unison. As the daughters realise their mother's past experiences, they headway toward their mothers and apprehends the significance of their cultural roots. "The Twenty –Six Malignant Gates" attempts to explain the daughter's difficulties in accepting their mother's Chinese methods to attempt to teach their children virtues. "American Translation" elaborates the Americanized lifestyles that the daughters lead along with the conversion of their Chinese selves to American and vice versa. The last and the final section, "Queen Mother of the Western Skies", carries a note of inspiration for the future. This section is significant as it takes the daughters back to their roots.

The mothers' China narratives encompass a convoluted process of the reminiscence of past memory. The narrative structure of the novel is comparatively grounded on the mother's recollection of the past experiences. The four mothers "reconstruct various narratives of their experiences in China against the background of American society and within the context of American culture" (Bloom 110). The novel begins with a mother's memory:

The old woman remembered a swan she had brought many years in Shanghai for a foolish sum....Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide, stretching their neck towards America.... Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coco-Cola than sorrow (17).

The mother's memory emerges in the milieu of San Francisco and China is presented through the "complex process of translation, translocation, and transfiguration via fairy tales, imaginations, and fictionalization of the original experiences in China" (Bloom 111). The memories thus recast in the form of folktales happen to transfigure the real experiences to mythical narratives. The four mothers, in order to endure the drastic vicissitudes in their lives, manage to retain "a psychological continuity" (Ben Xu 313) which is possible only through memories. Memories, for them, are "socializing, ego-forming expression of anxieties, hopes, and survival instinct" (313). The adult daughters recognize the old mothers only when the mothers share the long held secrets. The mah jong table and the Joy Luck Club are the very first instances of relishing memory that these old women carry out as a means of survival. Suyuan Woo, the mother of June, started the first Joy Luck Club in Kweilin as a sort of mental comfort amid the miseries of war. She explains:

It's not that we had no heart or eyes for pain. We were all afraid. We all had our miseries. But to despair was to wish back something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable....What was worse,



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we asked among ourselves, to sit and wait for our own deaths with proper sombre faces? Or to choose our own happiness? (24-25)

After reaching San Francisco Suyuan starts another club in memory of the first club and this was a sort of blessing to the new club members newly immigrated to America, “who had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn’t begin to express in their fragile English”(20). It really vests a glint of happiness in their faith ridden minds. They try to rewrite their fate through faith and the past memories help them a lot in creating meanings for their lives.

Suyuan tells her past to her daughter in varied ways that June fails to relate them to reality and finds the whole episode as a made up story.” Over the years, she told me the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine”(21). The stories are her indicative archives of a devastated personality making a deliberate and frantic effort to thrust back the haunting memory of the tragic loss of her husband and the twin daughters in China. The real memory survives in the subconscious mind and she fails to communicate it to her husband and daughter. Memory connects past and present and extends into future. The mothers survive in the whims of memory and they learn to mould their life accordingly. They want their daughters to inherit these immigrant Chinese ethnic attributes. These memories become extended metaphors of their true selves once they wish to embrace their ethnicity. The mothers succeed in bringing a balance between the daughters’ Chinese heritage and American life style.

Lindo Jong, the next mother among the four, gives her daughter “her *chang* (mascot), a small tablet of red jade which held the sun’s fire” (96). Lindo believes that the jade has power to give invisible strength to her daughter, Waverly who severely resists her mother’s premonitions. Lindo, like other mothers, voices her long repressed memories and tries to pacify Waverly by evoking the “collective cultural history” and by reciting personal memories of her past. But later she subverts the opinion about her mother and echoes: “Oh, her strength! her weakness!—both pulling me apart. My mind was flying one way, my heart another. I sat down on the sofa next to her, the two of us stricken by the other (181)”. Though the daughters approach their mothers for explanations, validations, and self-reinforcement; they are incompetent to fully connect until they try to listen to their cultural roots and accept an appeasement of both attitudes and values.

The third mother-daughter pairs An- mei and her daughter Rose canters through several challenges. Rose, like other daughters, in the beginning fails to appreciate and recognise her mother’s advices. It is only after her



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vexing experience with her psychiatrist that Rose feels an invisible golden thread that binds both her and her mother. She remembers the reverberations of her mother's voice:

“A girl is like a young tree,” she said. “You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight....It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing.

Rose realises that the mother-daughter relation among them is not just Chinese or American, but Chinese-American. It is only then that she starts identifying realities which her mother was struggling to teach her all through her life.

Lamenting the unhappy and fragile married life of her daughter Lena and Lena's inability to comprehend the ways of her mother, Ying-ying, with deep anguish and intense emotion, voices the anxiety and feebleness shared by all the mothers in the novel:

I think this to myself even though I love my daughter. She and I have shared the same body. There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell everything about her past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved (*The Joy Luck Club* 242)

The mothers feel edgy in the apathetic lives they are leading in the United States, but fail to verbalize their predicament as the daughters have wilfully “closed American born minds” (31). E.D.Huntley opines thus:

Doggedly clinging to their memories of life in China even as they adapt to American culture... (the mothers) deliberately remain suspended between two worlds and two cultures, embracing-- as they believe—the best of each world and creating a new way of life that they hope to pass on as their legacy to their children (52).

Mothers understand the need for an open communication with the daughters. Their relationship progresses through countless phases till it reaches reconciliation. Memory has great significance in moulding the past, genuine or illusory, and pushes mothers to persevere in recalling their past culture, a patriarchal one if ever there



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