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The Transformation of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club and The Bonesetter's Daughter

The mother/daughter bond is the central subject of Amy Tan's two powerful books, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Tensions that arise in the novels between a Chinese mother and her Chinese-American daughter are often described by the critics as being the result of two important factors. One is based on the misunderstandings caused by the generational gap, while the other comes from the cultural gap. For a Chinese-born mother the American reality instigates various confusions, as she still views her life with the eyes of her traditional Chinese upbringing. On the other hand, her daughter lacks any profound knowledge about her Chinese ethnicity, which makes her unable to recognize the influences of her mother's Chinese past over their relationship. But in her novels Tan portrays also the relationship between the Chinese immigrant mother and *her* mother in China. Their relationship, which grew up exclusively on the grounds of the Chinese culture, is characterized by empathy and appreciation. In this paper I am going to discuss the change that occurred to the mother-daughter relationship after it has been replanted into a different cultural context. The line of argument will reveal in what ways the mother-daughter relationship underwent a significant transformation.

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Amy Tan is a prolific Asian-American author, born and raised in Oakland, California. She belongs to the group of the few American writers of Chinese descent who appear in the American literary canon. Thanks to her contribution, readers may be acquainted with the diverse aspects concerning the Chinese-American identity. All of Tan's novels are written in a subtly personal style. They are a source of many insights, especially ones concerning "the intergenerational relationships" (Adams 80), that is, family matters. What may be of particular note to the reader is that the relationship between a Chinese mother and her Chinese-American daughter resembles nothing but a clash of a volcano with a tornado. However, in her writings Tan portrays also the bond between the Chinese immigrant mother and *her* mother in China, which is far more symbiotic in nature. The change that occurred to the mother-daughter bond after it has been replanted into a different cultural context deserves closer examination, on account of its significant influence on the Chinese-American identity. Moreover, what Xiaomei Chen describes as "cross-cultural and multicultural discourses . . . illuminated by an analysis of mother/daughter discourse," offers readers from other cultures a noteworthy interpretative strategy, poses new questions, and delineates a new methodology both for literary and cultural studies (112). The study enclosed in this paper is based on two novels written by Amy Tan: *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. These two books are collections of stories told by the characters in their struggle for building a bridge of understanding between two generations.

Frictions and tensions that arise between the Chinese mother and her Chinese-American daughter are often described by some critics as being the result of two specific factors. One is based on the misunderstandings caused by the generational gap – growing up in different times. Yet, one should not fail to notice that conflicts between parents and children are older even than the Chinese civilization itself, and are, therefore, nothing extraordinary. The other factor is far more interesting, as it originates from the cultural gap, meaning, growing up in different cultural environments. Marina Heung argues that “in Tan’s novel, the maternal experience of generational conflict and differentiation takes into account the realities of cultural difference” (604). In the case of the characters appearing in Tan’s novels, the mothers were raised in China and later emigrated to the United States. The daughters, however, were born and bred on the American land and have never even been to Asia. Walter Shear defines this conflict as a double communication barrier: “that between generations and that created by the waning influence of an older culture and the burgeoning presence of another” (2). For a Chinese-born mother the American reality instigates various confusions, as she still views her life through the prism of her traditional Chinese upbringing. On the other hand, her daughter lacks any profound knowledge about her Chinese ethnicity, which makes her unable to recognize the influences of her mother’s Chinese past over their relationship.

Taking into account the abovementioned conflict, both analyzed texts clearly illustrate that the void between the Chinese and the American culture is immense. It was Edward T. Hall’s high and low-context culture theory that inspired me to believe that, in fact, no actual communication between the two separate cultures is possible. At least, not as long as they lack any thorough knowledge about each other. In his book entitled *Beyond Culture*, Hall distinguishes between two groups of cultures: the high-context and the low-context ones. The Chinese culture belongs to the group of the high-context cultures. In order to fully understand its messages, one needs to place it in the appropriate cultural context. The knowledge about the Chinese tradition enables the recipient to decode the message properly, together with its implied meaning (Hall 94). The examples from Tan’s novels, which will appear later in this paper, show that in highly contextual societies, even the simplest sentence uttered under certain circumstances can be misinterpreted. Conversely, the American culture belongs to the low-context group, which sends messages that are far less dependable on the cultural context. The well-known American openness and their frank attitude allows little inaccuracy in this matter. Hence, if the low-context American culture is not familiar with the intricacies represented by the Chinese high-context culture, their communication is unsuccessful. This is what Lisa M. S. Dunick defines as “a faulty translation.” In her understanding, “[t]hese failed attempts at communication are in part produced by a tension between persons who have different understandings of how stories, culture, and language are supposed to work” (6-7). Likewise, the Chinese senders may overanalyze low-context messages, being oblivious to the fact that there are no “cultural strings” attached to what is actually being said.

Tan’s novels are a good illustration of this point, as the members of the high-context culture (the Chinese mothers) have a great difficulty in reaching an understanding with the representatives of the American low-context culture (the American-born daughters). For instance, one of the daughters, Jing-mei Woo, says: “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* 37). The daughters fail to decipher the concealed meaning of their mothers’ personal narratives, because they are not aware of the weight of the Chinese cultural heritage that is present in the stories. In contrast, in the relationship between the Chinese immigrant mother and *her* mother back in China there is no sign of such

misinterpretation, as the bond grew up exclusively on the grounds of the Chinese culture. Both the mother and the child are familiar with the rules and regulations that are being imposed on them by the Chinese tradition. Sharing the same cultural context works in favour of the bond, making it deeply emphatic, harmonious, and emotional.

It is my conviction that the knowledge concerning family relations in China will be of essential help in approaching the two novels and explaining the magnetism of the Chinese motherly bond. Moreover, it will later shed light on the transformation which occurred to the relationship after the mother's emigration to America.

Leonid Wasiliew in his book entitled *Kulty, religie i tradycje Chin*, describes the vital role of a Chinese clan in creating the Chinese identity:

The cult of family provided China with a great pulling force. Wherever a Chinese has found himself, wherever his fate sent him, he always remembered about his family, felt a connection with it, tried to head home, or at least to be buried in the family grounds. As some of the scholars say, the cult of family played an important role in the decrease of importance of other feelings felt by an ordinary Chinese citizen. (145-46, *own translation*)

According to Wasiliew, a Chinese person is almost non-existent outside his/her clan. Family matters are always a central concern for a Chinese heart, to the point of neglecting all of the personal desires. The feeling of responsibility for the clan is deeply rooted in Chinese thinking, which contributes to the formation of the Eastern collective identity. Furthermore, this approach was carefully cultivated for centuries by the Chinese government, which believed that a strong clan is an indispensable component of a strong country.

A complementary aspect shaping the Chinese identity is the cult of parents (called *hiao*), which originates from the Confucian Five Relationships. According to the rules of *hiao*, a child was obliged to pay the highest respect to his/her parents, humbly listen to their wishes, and take care of them in their old age. Absolute obedience was expected at all times and at all costs. The most horrible crimes could be officially pardoned if the motive behind them was *hiao*. As Wasiliew observes, for some critics the cult of parents is considered the most fundamental ethical rule in the whole China (139). Therefore, my view is that this exceptional relationship between a Chinese parent and a child should be particularly emphasized in the cultural interpretation of Amy Tan's novels. It explains not only the nature of the relationship itself, but also helps in the reinvestigation of a new Chinese-American identity.

Signs of the cult of parents are clearly visible in the personal narratives of the Chinese mothers from Amy Tan's novels. For instance, in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* the reader may observe how desperately LuLing tries to connect with her mother's ghost in order to ask for her forgiveness. LuLing gives her daughter Ruth a sand tray, with the intention of teaching her some of the Chinese characters. But one day, a trivial misunderstanding causes LuLing to think that her daughter became a medium who can transfer messages from LuLing's dead mother (called Precious Auntie) via the sand tray. In this scene, her reaction is extremely emotional:

But then her mother began to whimper . . . in Chinese. She jumped up and her chest heaved. "Precious Auntie," LuLing cried, "you've come back. . . . Do you forgive me?" Ruth put down the chopstick. LuLing was now sobbing. "Precious Auntie, oh Precious Auntie! I wish you never died! It was all my fault. If I could change fate, I would rather kill myself than suffer without you. . . ." (Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* 72)

The mother's expressive behaviour after she supposedly got reconnected with her parent shows how deep their bond was. The expressiveness is even more striking when the reader takes into

account the reserved Chinese nature. Usually reticent and reluctant to express emotions, LuLing bursts outright when a sign of Precious Auntie appears on the sand tray.

Correspondingly, *hiao* can be easily detected in *The Joy Luck Club*, where An-mei Hsu frequently recalls the hardships of her mother's life in China. As a dishonoured fourth wife, her figure serves as a heartbreaking portrait of a burdened Chinese woman (her unforgivable sin was that she remarried, instead of taking care of her late husband's parents). Despite the clan's resentment, An-mei feels deeply attached to her mother, which can be best seen in a passage where An-mei meets her for the first time: "My mother . . . looked up. And when she did, I saw my own face looking back at me" (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 45). The striking physical resemblance between the mother and the child intends to show that the relation between them is so tight that it is as if they were one body. Similarly, another character from the book shares comparable experiences. While remembering her mother's familiar face, Lindo Jong says:

even though she said we looked the same, I wanted to look more the same. If her eye went up and looked surprised, I wanted my eye to do the same. If her mouth fell down and was unhappy, I too wanted to feel unhappy. I was so much like my mother. (257)

In all those cases, the women adore their mothers with an almost sacred devotion. Emotional attachment is reflected in the physical resemblance. The mother and the child look alike in physical sense, which is further translated into a deep psychological bond. Michelle Gaffner Wood argues that this mutual understanding is possible due to the shared geographical landscape and the ability to place the mother-daughter relationship within a larger social context (Wood 85). Because both sides belong to the same group of the high-context culture, it is easier for them to enter each other's worlds and decode their messages.

Unfortunately, the mother-daughter relationship in America changes and it stands in a sharp contrast with the one in China. Even if the daughters still feel strong psychological attachment to their mothers, they struggle to escape from their power. They fall out over numerous issues and each fight ends without any sign of reconciliation. For example, in the chapter "Two Kinds," Jing-mei Woo describes how she battles with her mother over the piano lessons. After another confrontation, she remarks bitterly, "I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China" (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 141). Living in the context of the American culture, the daughters want to lead separate, individual lives and do not understand the collective nature of the Eastern identity. There is no place for mutuality in their understanding of the mother-daughter bond. Empathy is replaced with strained relations, best described by one of the daughters as "a shock, exactly as an electric jolt, that grounds itself permanently in my memory" (170). Just as the Chinese daughters try to find themselves in the figures of their mothers, the American-born daughters want to do exactly the opposite. Instead of admiration and respect, they feel embarrassed by their mothers' strange, "un-American" behaviour. The daughters "grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese," or "think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English" (40-41).¹ LuLing's actions are so inexplicable for her daughter that she is being suspected of falling into dementia. Her invincible belief in the existence of vengeful ghosts of the ancestors and Ruth being a medium for Precious Auntie is far beyond comprehension for the American daughter. Lindo Jong says about her daughter: "I know her meaning. She's

¹ The term "fractured English" appears also in the essay "Mother Tongue" published by Tan. She comments there on the implications imposed on her mother by speaking a specific kind of English, which was often belittled by the native speakers who called it also "broken" and "limited" (21). In her essay, Tan describes how this experience influenced her relationship with her mother.

ashamed of my looks. What will her husband's parents and his important lawyer friends think of this backward old Chinese woman?" (254-55). The separating cultural void hinders the process of successful communication. Moreover, this polarity between traditional Chinese and modern American values is also the crucial source of mother-daughter conflict set in the two novels.

Zeng Li addresses this issue in the essay entitled "Diasporic Self, Cultural Other: Negotiating Ethnicity Through Transformation in the Fiction of Tan and Kingston," adding an insight of his own:

The ethnic malaise manifested in the relationship between the Chinese mothers and American daughters is the dilemma which many immigrants, especially their descendants, are faced with, that is, living "between worlds." The young generation is often split by two different cultures. . . . Structurally, the novel [*The Joy Luck Club*] devotes equally two chapters to each of the mothers and daughters who tell their stories. . . . In this multiple first-person narration, both the influence of traditional Chinese ideologies and presence of contemporary American culture within the family are equally strong. (3-4)

A Chinese home in America is a place where the East meets the West. Amy Tan wants to introduce the reader to the mysteries of such an encounter "[b]y giving equal weight on both sides of the hyphenated Chinese-American" (Li 4). It is important to note that, in my understanding, Tan does not put any of the cultural contexts in favour. Every character is given an equal opportunity to tell her story, everyone gets a voice; the author uses the values of both traditions to define the meaning of this mysterious hyphen in the expression: "a Chinese-American."

The transformation of the motherly bond in Tan's writings is only seemingly solely unfortunate. It is worth to highlight that the troubled relationship pushes the mothers to reinvestigate their past, which further on provides a good basis for future reconciliation. "Memory is not just a narrative, even though it does have to take a narrative form; it is more importantly an experimental relation between the past and the present, projecting a future as well," claims Ben Xu (8). His statement is particularly visible in one of the chapters of *The Joy Luck Club*, when a hairdresser observes a striking resemblance between Lindo Jong's and her daughter Weaverly's Asian face. This makes Lindo think about the "double face" she possesses, the American and the Chinese one. She goes back to the times of her childhood and remembers her deep desire to bear a strong resemblance to her all-Chinese mother. Then, she compares this memory with what she experienced with Weaverly, who "is the product of two cultures" (Heung 603). While relating to those two different situations, Lindo says: "I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other" (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 266). Her awareness of this "double vision," inspired by her family story, contributes to the discovery of her ethnic identity and provides an example of how she is able to make a connection between different times and cultures (Heung 600). What is more, this connection produces a fruitful result, as Lindo adds at the end "I will ask my daughter what she thinks" (266). The reinvestigation of Lindo's past linked with her present experiences of her double identity resulted in the reconsideration of the relationship Lindo has with her daughter (Heung 603). By deciding to ask about Weaverly's opinion, Lindo abandons the face of an autocratic Chinese mother and opens up to a dialogue. A dialogue, which may possibly be an onset of a new Chinese-American consciousness, since the topic it addresses is strictly connected with "the double face."

The issue of possessing two faces has yet another interesting connotation that is worth considering in the context of the ethnic self-discovery. The English expression "to be double-

faced” or “two-faced” implies both duplicity and deceit. A person manifesting such a feature may be perceived as a manipulator who intentionally adjusts his/her attitude, perhaps for some personal gain. In Lindo’s case one may also notice the problem of betrayal, yet the undertone is considerably different. It seems that she tries to learn how to manage her two faces, knowing that choosing one means losing the other, “Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other” (Tan 266). This opens up an entirely new set of questions for her to answer. For example, if she chooses the American face, is she at the same time betraying her Chinese face and, therefore, her Chinese heritage? This matter is of substantial importance, especially if one recalls one more English expression “to lose face,” (“to dishonour yourself”) and connects it with another fragment from *The Joy Luck Club*, which addresses the alarming consequences connected with betraying your family culture. One of the Chinese grandmothers appearing in the story preaches, “When you lose your face . . . it is like dropping your necklace down the well. The only way to get it back is to fall in after it” (Tan 44). In the Chinese tradition, dishonouring your family and neglecting your ancestry calls for a severe punishment. Lindo’s thoughts about her two faces may be circling around the possible costs of sacrificing one of them. Here, again, the decision of discussing the matter with her daughter may happen to be beneficial, principally because Weaverly also finds herself torn between two cultural backgrounds.

After all, the immigrant experiences, although slightly different in nature, are to some extent shared both by the mother and the daughter. The issue of sharing is especially embodied in one character from *The Joy Luck Club*. Jing-mei Woo is a Chinese-American, whose mother, Suyuan, recently passed away. The daughter is supposed to fill in her place at the ritual mah-jong table, which makes her wonder about their relationship and the responsibility which she owes to Suyuan. In the novel, Jing-mei narrates both the sections about her experiences and the parts where her mother’s past is being recalled. Thus, Jing-mei possesses a double voice, which speaks in the name of two cultures, two sides of the conflict. It is in her where the reader can observe the early stages of the emerging Chinese-American consciousness. Even though at the end of the book most of the conflicts are just beginning to clear out, Jing-mei’s final travel to China invites the reader to believe in a happy ending: “And now I see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go” (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 288). If it was not for the mother-daughter conflict, Jing-mei may not have focused so intensely on her ethnic heritage. In the end her struggles contributed to the emergence of the new identity.

Talking about seeking a new ethnic awareness, it is worth mentioning how this process situates itself within the context of a Chinese sense of the collective identity. In defining their new Chinese-American self, Tan’s characters do not only face the choice between the East and the West, but also have to delineate a new level of individualism. Before their emigration, the characters were living in a world where individualism is of no importance. Therefore, there was no clear reason for any strong redefinition of the self, as the only face that mattered was the one belonging to the clan. This state of matters changed after the emigration to a different cultural context. The origin of the very need for defining yourself was expressed by Ben Xu in his essay entitled “Memory and The Ethnic Self”:

Only when a Chinese person is uprooted from his or her own culture and transplanted into an alien one does he or she become aware of the fluidity, proteanness, and insecurity of his or her self. It is not until then that he or she feels the need to define himself or herself.” (9)

Perhaps the statement about defining the self in contradiction to the surrounding environment could be analogous for the immigrant experiences of all ethnicities, as evidenced in the work of, for instance, Jhumpa Lahiri (a representative of the Indian culture) and Sandra Cisneros (a Mexican American author). Although, with what has already been said about the Asian clan-oriented mentality and the depreciation of the personal desires, I would argue the particular importance of this aspect in interpreting Tan's novels. The characters have to bridge a huge void between the implications created by two different cultural contexts, which also involves taking a big jump from one kind of mentality to the other, from the Chinese traditional collective responsibility to the American devotion to the unbreakable rights of individualism.

While discussing the common issue of defining yourself with regard to your ancestors, the reader tends to take into consideration only the characters of the daughters, since it is they who are chiefly on the road of self-discovery. Nonetheless, in the process of negotiating their ethnic past, the mothers try to reconstitute their own identity as well. According to Yuan Yuan, the mothers' American experiences leave them feeling isolated, which results in treating China as "a repository for reproduction." From their marginal existence the characters of the mothers travel to China in order to assess their present (Yuan 3-4). By revising the narratives of their Asian past in the context of the American present, they attempt to find their own place within their immigrant experience. Of course, one may argue that such actions do not need to have their source purely in the conflict between generations. Still, bearing in mind the distinctive role of the Chinese collective identity, it is my contention that the mother/daughter bond plays a crucial part in defining the Chinese-American identities of Tan's characters. "All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way," (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 215) affirms An-mei Hsu. To my belief, the shared experiences of the mothers and the daughters bring them closer to delineating the new Chinese-American self.

One may wonder, how much can be interpreted from a fiery conflict, where both sides have nothing in their hands but a bunch of confused messages and a whole freight of hurt feelings. Amy Tan managed to illustrate in her novels a great change in the relations between a mother and a child, which occurs after their translocation into a different cultural context. "I raised a daughter, watching her from another shore," (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 251) admits Ying-Ying St. Clair. In the interpretative process, the contrast that is visible in the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship acts as an inspiration for observing the onset of a new Chinese-American consciousness. By arming the interpretative strategy with the knowledge of cultural contexts, the reader may observe how the battle between two generations and two cultures initiates the journey into the ethnic past and enables a process named by the critics as "cultural healing" (Shear 6, Li 3). In an attempt to reach an understanding, Amy Tan's characters discover the great influence of the mother's Asian past over their relationship and, therefore, succeed in building a bridge over the generational and cultural gap that has been keeping them apart.

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