



LIBERATION OF SILENCED VICTIMS: A FEMINIST STUDY OF AMY TAN'S THE JOY LUCK CLUB

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Abstract : Feminism is a clarion call to do away with the inequalities confronted by women in society. Radical Feminists posit that the oppression of women is the consequence of patriarchal domination. It criticizes the family circumstances, which place women in the domestic area, and endeavors to emancipate them from oppressive gender roles. Amy Tan is among the Asian American women writers who have given highly volatile expressions to women's issues. This research paper intends to analyze three short stories in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* using a feminist lens, to expose the absence of freedom experienced by female characters, An-Mei, Linda Jong, and Rose Hsu Jordan. It attempts to delineate the facets of their struggle to combat gender discrimination, marital constraints, and identity crises to unshackle themselves from the subverting patriarchal society.

IndexTerms: *Feminism, Gender, Oppression, Patriarchy, Freedom* -

As Simone De Beauvoir remarked in *The Second Sex*, woman's is a cultural construction, rather than a biological one. A woman's role in the family is insignificant as she is adjudged only as a childbearing device. As she is oblivious to her worth, she holds less social status, power, or opportunities than men. Moreover, society views her with a different demeanour. Hence, today's women confront many obstacles while trying to be independent. Issues concerning women have emanated in the novels of contemporary women writers worldwide. Amy Tan is an Asian American women writer whose novels deal with the hardships tackled by Chinese women. The narratives encompass the sympathetic situation of women in the patriarchal system of Old China as well as the psychological aberrations endured by her immigrant female characters in America.

Feminism promotes women's rights based on social and political guidelines. *The Joy Luck Club* which established Tan as a prominent writer, delves into the transitional phase experienced by her characters in establishing their identity. It comprises a collection of stories the mothers and daughters recount in the Joy Luck Club. There is a marked difference between the mothers and daughters as far as their upbringing is concerned. The mothers had undergone a lot of hardships in their past life in China while managing the social taboos. They continue their struggle to survive as immigrants in America, drawing sustenance from memories of their native land. Although the American-born daughters seem well established in their new environment, they face a lot of conflicts in terms of their identity and culture and disregard for the values thrust upon them by their mothers. The stories stand testimony to the social constructs that are the root cause of the oppression of women in the novel.

The story 'Scar' narrated by An-Mei portrays women trapped in the constraints of societal practices in China. An-Mei's widowed mother was a victim of concubinage. Rich men could purchase concubines to bear children for them. They exploited the poverty of the females. After An-Mei's mother became a widow, she went to Hangchow to visit the Six Harmonies Pagoda. During the trip, she met Wu Tsing and his second wife who discerned her plans from their conversation with her. The second wife worried about her husband spending his money lavishly in tea houses, decided to make An-Mei's mother his concubine. She invited An-Mei's mother to her place and coaxed her to stay that night there. With his wife's consent, Wu-Tsing raped An-Mei's mother and later accused her of prostitution. Unable to bear the disgrace, An-Mei's mother went to her brother seeking solace but he kicked her out of the house and her mother banned her from the house forever. She had no other choice but to live with that despicable rich man as his third wife. An-Mei and her brother had to live with her grandmother Popo. Popo always referred to her mother as a ghost, a number three concubine who had brought disgrace to the family.

The absence of parents' love and care made An-Mei and her brother lead an unhappy life in their uncle's house. She did not know anything about her father except his painting that hung on the wall. "The only father I knew was a big painting that

hung in the main hall. He was a large, unsmiling man, unhappy to be still on the wall.” (*The Joy Luck Club* 38) After her grandmother’s death, An-Mei lived with her mother in Wu Tsing’s house. She witnessed the shameful and pathetic life of her mother there. Wu Tsing continued to marry young girls and bring them home. He used An-Mei-’s mother to satisfy his physical needs. Her mother had no identity in that house. Even her son was owned by the second wife. An-Mei-’s mother couldn’t openly claim him as her son.

Depressed by the mortifying life in Wu Tsing’s house, An Mei’s mother committed suicide on Lunar New Year's Day so that she could wreak revenge against Wu Tsing. Chinese believed that the ghost of a person who died on Lunar New Year's Day could take revenge on the perpetrators in her life. An-Mei recalled, “He promised her visiting ghost that he would raise Sayudi and me as his honored children. He promised to revere her as if she had been First Wife, his only wife” (290). An-Mei’s mother’s life demonstrates the horrible life led by the Chinese women and the unjust victimization endured by them. An-Mei recounts her mother’s pathetic life in these words, “She lost her face and tried to hide it. She found only greater misery and finally could not hide it. She found only greater misery and finally could not hide that. There is nothing more to understand. That was China. That was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away that was their fate” (291).

The novel underscores the sacrifices women make, foregoing their wishes, to satisfy their parents. In ‘The Red Candle’ Lindo Jong sets aside herself to fulfill her parents’ promise. It was an old-fashioned custom in China to choose a daughter-in-law who would be fit enough to take care of their family. Huang Taitai fixed Jong as her daughter-in-law when Jong was just two years old. As she grew up, Jong’s mother began to treat her like Huang’s daughter-in-law. She hurt her with harsh words, passing remarks about her looks, “Such an ugly face. The Huangs won’t want you and our whole family will be disgraced” (49). An -Mei would start crying but her mother would continue, “It’s no use ... We have made a contract. It cannot be broken” (49). Lindo Jong had no control over her fate as she grew up as she was treated like a commodity in the family.

The first time, Lindo Jong saw her husband was when she was nine. His behaviour showed that he was a pampered boy. When she was aged twelve, she was handed over to Huang’s family as if she were their property. The Huangs were an affluent family so they looked down on Jong’s family. Jong noticed that Tyan-Yu behaved like a warlord. Huang Taitai made Jong do different tasks saying “How can a wife keep her husband’s household in order if she has never dirtied her own hands” (55). Jong began to yearn for Huang’s approval of whatever household chores she did. She began to think of her as her real mother, “Someone I wanted to please, someone I should follow and obey without question” (56).

But on the day of her marriage, she cried bitterly, thinking about her parent's promise. Only then she reflected on why others should decide her destiny and why she should lead an unhappy life for her parents to be happy. The Chinese have a superstitious practice of lighting a red candle that should burn throughout the night of the marriage day. If it remains burning till the day break, then the matchmaker declares that the marriage can never be broken. It also means that Jong can’t divorce nor ever remarry even if Tyan-Yu dies.

Women are considered inferior to men. Tyan-Yu avoided Jong at night. He had no desire for her. She thought, “He was a little boy who had never grown up” (63). Tyan-Yu ‘s mother admonished her for not bearing a child. Jong decided to escape from the miserable life, exploiting the superstitious beliefs of the Chinese. On the Festival of Pure Brightness, she narrated a dream in which their ancestors had told her that Tyan-Yu would die if he stayed in this marriage. She gave them some convincing proof to substantiate her statement that urged Huang Taitai to decide to free Jong. Thus, Jong freed herself from the servitude she endured in her married life to live a life of her choice. Women like Jong have to use different tactics to escape from the oppressing societal norms.

The Joy Luck Club highlights gender conflicts that arise from the clash between races; Americans, and Chinese. Chinese American women are doubly marginalized. They experience oppression both by their spouse and the American society. The Joy Luck Club's daughters were born and raised in America. Although they are Chinese, they identify themselves with the Americans. In the story, ‘Half and Half’ we find that when Rose Hsu Jordan started dating an American, Ted, his mother warned Jordan that their relationship would never end in marriage because Jordan belonged to a minority race. She explained that the American society would not accept her as one of them. Since Ted insisted, they got married.

After their marriage, being an American, Ted played the role of her savior. He was the deciding authority in all matters. But after he faced a setback in his profession, he became less solicitous. There was a reversal of roles. He expected Jordan to use her discretion to make decisions. Jordan could not rise to his expectations. He began to avoid her saying “You can never make up your mind about anything. His regret for marrying her was explicit in these words, “How the hell did we ever get married? Did you say ‘I do’ because the minister said repeat after me? What would you have done with your life?” (137). It was clear to her now that “they were like two people standing apart on separate mountain peaks, recklessly leaning forward to throw stones at one another, unaware of the dangerous chasm that separated us” (137). He decided to get divorced. The sudden change in Ted’s attitude towards her was devastating. Ted considered Jordan inferior to him for she was a Chinese immigrant.

Jordan became obsessed with revenge. She received a letter from Ted asking her to sign the divorce documents. He tried to bribe her to sign the papers by enclosing a cheque for ten thousand dollars along with the letter. He wanted the house and was planning to get married again. After pondering for a long time, she took a bold decision not to sign the papers nor vacate the house. Ted became furious but she retorted saying, “You can’t just pull me out of your life and throw me away.” (234). Women are stronger than men in their stubbornness. She would not allow herself to be treated like a piece of furniture. Jordan’s married life exemplifies the psychological trauma experienced by Chinese immigrant women in a hostile society.

The novel *The Joy Luck Club* delivers a clear understanding of immigrant mothers who are victims of patriarchal subjugation, later they also face the problem of coping with the new society. The mothers' limited work and language skills place them at an immediate disadvantage driving them to be economically dependent on their husband and virtually trap them in domestic drudgery. Even the daughters who are financially independent and self-reliant repeat their mother's patterns of behaviour as they inadvertently position themselves in oppressive situations in the family, in marital relationships, and also in their careers. Thus, gender issues are explicitly discussed in *The Joy Luck Club* which chronicles depression, vexation, and conflicts experienced by the mother, daughter, and wives.

Feminist critics point out that in Western Culture, the mind and reason are coded as masculine whereas the body and emotion are coded as feminine. To identify the self with a rational mind is to masculinize the self. (Lloyd 1993) The corollary of this masculinized view of selfhood is that women are committed to selflessness, subservient passivity, and self-sacrificial altruism. (McDonagh 1996) Amy Tan subdues the traditional role of male in the family unit. She makes them voiceless. Her emphasis is predominantly on women. She is interested in the struggles within oneself. Amy Tan extols the individuality of her characters, thereby transposing them as cult figures. She exemplifies the different manifestations of gender discrimination through her characters. Women depend on men for recognition. They crave a social space that would enable them to establish their identity. Thus, the tone of Tan in her novels is feminist and she presents the misogynistic and patriarchal aspects of culture. She reveals the harsh truth that some women have to face overwhelming odds to exist amid sanctioned dehumanization. Tan succeeds in her attempt to evoke sympathy and increase awareness of the socially and culturally imposed infringements on women's human rights as well as exhibit them as liberated souls. Feminist theory has played a significant role in shaping social movements, policy changes, and legal forms aimed at addressing gender-based discrimination and inequality

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