

VOICES OF THE NOVEL *THE JOY CLUB LUCK* (1989)
BY AMY TAN

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1. INTRODUCTION

Amy Tan (1952) is an American writer of Chinese descent whose works explore mother-daughter relationships. She uses voices from her upper-class mother's and grand-mother's histories and myths to explore the voices of mothers and daughters of Chinese ancestry. The character Jing-mei "June" Woo, Tan's *alter ego*, provides the framing narrative for the whole book and plays a significant role in connecting all the stories. Her compelling storytelling examines various elements such as the complicated issues of identity, the immigrant experience, family, love and career. The chapters allow each character to tell her story in the first person, except for Suyuan (Jing-mei "June" Woo's mother) whose story is told in the third person, Jing-mei's voice. The mothers' characters' voices relate their life in China from childhood to adulthood as well as their experience as immigrants in the United States. The daughters' stories reflect their childhood struggles with identity and parental expectations together with topics of their personal lives. The novel is organized around a common method of using and telling stories to gain self-identity. In a certain sense, each story in the novel is a metanarrative, in which nearly every story frames or contains another story.

L. Dong (2009: 12) maintains that: "In her fiction Tan seldom utilizes a linear narrative since the past and the present are intertwined in an intricate structure". *The Joy Luck Club*¹ covers a long time span from the 1920s to the 1980s and different geographical locations in China (Kweilin, Chungking, Shanghai, Wushi, Taiyuan and others) and the United States (San Francisco) where the four families live at the present time. The stories interact through their superstructural arrangement into a narrative that stresses the importance

¹ From here on I will use this edition. A. Tan (1989): *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Ivy Books.

of returning to the past in order to progress into the future. Due to Tan's association of China with the past and America with the present, she implies that this polychromic progression can resolve the temporalized contradictions of Chinese American female identity. This novel essentially promotes a shallow scheme of ethnic identity in which Chinese American women must seek authentication from a highly orientalist version of their Chinese heritage.

2. THE THREE LEVELS: THE VOICE OF THE AUTHOR, THE VOICE OF THE AUTODIEGETIC NARRATOR AND VOICES OF THE HOMODIEGETIC NARRATORS

The novel is divided into multiple, multi-vocal narratives and its attempted end into one univocal ending. If we read the definition from (Bakhtin: 416):

Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and to what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue.

I could conclude that *The Joy Luck Club* suggests resolution and reconciliation, but the actual collection of voices cannot be reduced to a specific theme, identifying a powerful narrative tension between the work's multi-vocality and its attempts to gather those voices into a single novelistic plot. I shall focus only on the literal dialogicity between characters' voices, avoiding examining the novel's manipulation of chronology and sequence, which overwrites the dialogue between characters with a less visible but no less present dialogicity of time.

The author Amy Tan manifests herself and her point of view not only as the autodiegetic narrator Jing-mei Woo, June, but as the voice of the author since her speech and her language (that are to a certain extent objectified, objects of display) but also in her effect on the subject of the story – as a point of view that differs from the point of view of the autodiegetic narrator. Behind the narrator's story we read sixteen stories, the author's stories; she is the one who tells us about the narrator herself. We strongly sense two levels at each moment in the story; one, the level of the narrator, an imaginary system filled with his objects, meanings and emotional expressions, and the other the level of the

author, who speaks by means of her stories and through these stories. Amy Tan as narrator enters with her own discourse into the authorial belief system along with what is actually being told. The author's emphases that lie over the subject of the story is made confused, as is the story itself and the figure of the narrator as she is revealed in the process of telling her tale. If one fails to feel this second level, the intentions and accents of the author herself, the reader has failed to understand the novel.

Each chapter is prefaced with an introductory thematic tale or myth, all of which tend to stress the advice given by mothers. Written in italics the mothers' voices in the first person illuminate the preface of each of the four parts of the novel with their heterophonia, heterologia and heteroglossia, where superstition and reality are mixed. The first story starts with Suyuan's voice telling her history divided in two parts: the fable – her past and her illusions that change into the present, the second part – San Francisco in the 1980s. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan's skill at dialogue and motivation derive from telling a story in a first person voice that only that character could relate. She captures the irony of social progress: "We were always the last to give up stupid old-fashioned customs. In other cities, a man could already choose his own wife, with his parents' permission of course" (44-45). Left unsaid is that women had no choice under either system. She explained, I believe in self-determination and I believe there are experiences that filter down from generation to generation. It has to do with who we women are, not whom we are married to.

M. E. Snodgrass (2004: 166) pinpoints: "of the importance of fiction to her self-awareness as a woman, Tan expressed strong approval of feminism and matrilineal connections." *The Joy Luck Club* was crucial to the author's wholeness and to the end of intergenerational animosities. She noted that writing her mother and grandmother's stories divided into eight characters as fiction, she produced a satisfying intellectual fusion of past with present (Anmei Hsu: Magpies (239)).

Notwithstanding P. Kafka (1997: 48) highlights the quotation from (Lowe, 1990: 143):

In fact, where Tan ends in *The Joy Luck Club*, she carries Derrida's concept of "binary" and Foucault's notion of "discourse" one step further. The theoretical problem facing us in cultural criticism at this moment is not how to fit anomalous positions into a fixed dualistic conception of dominant ideology and counter-ideology of discourse and counter-discourse. Rather, it may be the reverse: heterogeneities, pluralities; and contradictions are given in culture.

Non-equivalences and non-correspondences between mothers and daughters or anomalous positions between mothers and daughters are a particular part of a multivalent approach to Asian American literature. This takes control of a situation and influences the way in which it develops from the East-West or the dual personality model and stresses instead a synergetic vision or what critics of Asian American literature prefer to call “syncretism”, as used not only to combine “East-West”, the two halves of the hyphenation in Asian American. It is also used by Asian American women to confront gender asymmetry, not only in Asia, but also in the United States.

The Joy Luck Club's multiple micro-narratives of the sixteen stories from seven narrators upset the traditional temporal, spatial and formal categories that make it postmodern (Bella, 2005: 39). At the level of form, the mother-daughter relationships and, the multiple micro-narratives, carries on a continual dialogue as well as dialogism. I think about whether the dialogues and by extension the relationships in and around the text are dialogics. From the beginning, Tan's narrators view of the mother-daughter relationship is frequently commenting on the monologism of their cultures and, indeed, of each other. For example, both generations criticize patriarchal ideology and its perpetration of the Chinese American woman as dark and shadowy figures who are unseen, unheard and unknown by others. Bella Adams remarks (2005: 60) that: “The Chinese mothers? Use of Chinese as well as Chinese sounding sentences, often containing a lot of short sentences and changing topics too often, accompanied by ‘Aiii-y!, ?pah! and so on, arguably words in a more complex way than their use of Englishes”.

To borrow from M. Marie Booth Foster's (2009: 17) words: “in this novel, Amy Tan uses stories from her own history and myth to explore the voices of mothers and daughters of Chinese ancestry. Each woman tells a story indicative of the uniqueness of her voice. *The Joy Luck Club* is a balancing act and the roles of daughter, wife, mother, sister, career woman. To succeed in reaching balance by making an effort for a long time, voice is important: in order to achieve voice, hyphenated women must engage in self-exploration, recognition and appreciation of their cultures, and they must know their histories. The quest for voice becomes an archetypal journey for all the women. The mothers came to the US and have to adapt to a new culture, to redefine voice and self. The daughters' journey become rites of passage; before they can find voice or define themselves, they must acknowledge the history and myth of their mothers. And each must come to terms with being her mother's daughter.

Quoting C. E. Robert (2010: 154).

Interestingly, the names of the mothers and daughters are set opposite each other as if the book were a chess game. [...] In a chess game when a pawn reaches the other side of the board she becomes a queen; likewise, daughters have to travel through many conflicts to achieve independence and self-understanding.

The mothers' mental picture of doubles, ghosts and shadows misdirect the daughters' journey. Number two and its synonyms are used several times in chapters with titles like: "Half and a Half", "Two Kinds", "Double face", and "A pair of tickets". The total image pattern is that of a fable aiming at a moral. The mysterious images make Amy Tan story's a modern fairy tale.

This novel is a series of stories by and about narrators whose lives are interconnected as a result of friendship and membership in the Joy Luck Club: Suyuan (mother) and Jing-mei Woo, An-Mei Hsu (mother) and Rose Hsu Jordan, Lindo (mother) and Waverly Jong, and Yin-ying (mother) and Lena St. Clair. The stories are narrated by seven of the eight women in the group in the first person except for Suyuan: the four daughters and the three mothers. Suyuan has recently died from a cerebral aneurism. Hence Jing-mei, nicknamed June –Amy Tan's *alter ego*– must be her mother's voice. The book is divided into four sections: "Feathers from the Thousand *Li* Away", "The Twenty-six Malignant Gates", "American Translation", and "Queen Mother of the Western Skies". Amy Tan's mother's story of her marriage to another man in China and of three daughters left behind when she came to the US in 1949 is remembered when telling the Suyuan story, Tan's mother's *alter ego*. Storytelling or relating memories allows for review, analysis and understanding of ancestry and in this way, of themselves.

Tan's fiction presents ambivalences and contradictions in the complicated interaction of mothers' and daughters' voices. Paying no attention to how much the daughters try to deny it, it is through their mothers that they find their voice, their mind, their own selves. Voice finds its form in the process of interaction, even if that interaction is conflict. As Jing-mei Woo tells her story and that of her deceased mother, her journey to voice and balance begins since "June" has to use memories as a guide instead of her mother, whose tale she tells and whose saga she must complete. She has to find a happy end for Suyuan's daughters left behind in China that her mother told her over and over again and that she thought to be a cock-and bull story. This story of Suyuan's previous life includes a husband and daughters. Suyuan's first husband, an officer with the Kuomintang, takes her to Kweilin, a war refuge where she stars with three officers' wives in the Joy Luck Club to take their minds off the terrible smells of too many people in the city and the screams of human suffering. They attempt to raise their spirits with the mah-jong, jokes and food.

Suyuan emigrated to San Francisco, helped by the Methodist Church, where she met other 3 Chinese refugee mothers. While working in the fortune cookie factory, she met An-mei Hsu:

So she picked up another one and read in English: “Money is the root of all evil. Look around you and dig deep”. And then in Chinese: “Money is a bad influence. You become restless and rob graves”.

“What is this nonsense?” I asked her, putting the strips of paper in my pocket, thinking I should study these classical American sayings.

“They are fortunes”, she explained. “American people think Chinese people write these sayings”.

“But we never say such things!” I said. “These things don’t make sense. These are not fortunes, they are bad instructions”.

“No, Miss”, she said, laughing, “it is our bad fortune to be here making these and somebody else’s bad fortunes to pay to get them. [...]. So that is how I met An-mei Hsu” (299-300).

and decided to continue with the mah-jong table and the Joy Luck Club until Suyuan dies and her daughter has to take her place every week. According to “June”, she and her mother never understood each other because her mother always seemed displeased with everyone and everything she did. In exploring the problems of mother-daughter voices in relationships, Tan unveils some of the problems of biculturalism of Chinese ancestry under American circumstances. She presents daughters who do not know their mother’s “importance and thus cannot know their own, who marry American men and put on American faces and hence they adapt to the new culture. At the end of the novel when Jing-mei and her father met her sisters in China, communication was a problem: “Aiyi and my father speak the Mandarin dialect from their childhood, but the rest of the family speaks only the Cantonese of their village. I understand only Mandarin, but can’t speak it that well” (316).

3. LOOKING FOR THE PAST

The Joy Luck Club puts a lot of effort into analysing connections between two generations of women. It traces four family genealogies that span the twentieth century, stressing the importance of ethnic heritage. However, the family histories depicted in the novel are profoundly mythical, for instance, the tales of the mothers’ youth are timeless fables filled with supernatural wonders, introducing a China that seems drawn much from occidental cliché as from authentic Chinese history. Events certainly as clearly historical as the communist revolution become transmuted into heavily allegorical parables

such as An-mei Hsu's tale of angry peasants rising up against tyrannical magpies:

But one day, all these tired peasants, from all over China, gathered in fields everywhere. They watched the birds eating and drinking. And they said, "enough of this suffering and silence!" They began to clap their hands, and bang sticks on pots and pans and shout, "Sz! Sz! Sz!" –Die! Die! Die! [...] What would your psychiatrist say if I told him that I shouted for joy when I read that this had happened? (272-273).

Tan, seldom mixes history with mythic fabrication. The techniques of myth are strictly reserved to represent China and the past, while America is narrated with a historical specificity which for the author connotes modernity and the present. The separation is so extreme that Tan creates two entirely different scripts of cultural identity, a realistically-outlined American identity for the daughters and an orientalist Chinese one for their mothers. In my opinion, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* might easily be classified as a mere collection of independent short stories joined by a the homodiegetic narrator, who is at the same time the author. This narrative structure not only connects the past to the present, it also balances the modes of historicity and myth that Tan uses to represent those periods. Hence, the true dialogue in the novel is not a cacophony of voices but a convergence of different moments and methods of representing time.

The stories interact through their superstructural arrangement into a narrative that stresses the importance of returning to the past in order to progress into the future; because Tan almost uniformly associates China with the past and America with the present, a way which implies that this polychromic progression can resolve the temporalized contradictions of Chinese female identity.

The novel's structural unity is located in the similarities it draws between characters through their gender, their culture and specially their generation. The mothers seem interchangeable in that the role of mother is considered to be old-fashioned and thus the novel presents a struggle between mothers and daughters. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* ambivalence contains one crucial novelistic element: a very important plot which progresses through a carefully modulated chronological arrangement of events.

The novel is organized around a common script of using and telling stories to gain self-identity, then in some sense every story is a metanarrative which is entirely consonant with its multi-layered narrative structure, in which nearly every story frames or contains another story. Despite this, *The Joy Luck Club*

offers the earliest and most explicit reflections on the power and value of narrative, narrative which functions as a social glue between the women, as they trade gossip and generate stories around the mah-jong table: “what little we say to one another often comes back in another guise. It’s the same old game, everybody talking in circles” (28).

The novel ends with the mothers’ hypothetical stories, each one a dream of wish fulfilment that reverses some predicament in the mothers’ families. Jin-mei perceives that the older women circulate family tales around the mah-jong table to comfort themselves. However, these mothers may be alienating themselves from their time and their families:

“Tell them stories of your family here. How she became success”, offers Auntie Lin.

“Tell them stories she told you, lessons she taught, what you know about her mind that has become of your mind”, says Auntie Ying. “Your mother very smart lady”.

I hear more choruses of “Tell them, tell them,” as each auntie frantically tries to think of what should be passed on (31).

The narrative in the novel becomes a cushion of comforting lies, the only way for Jing-mei to preserve her mother’s memories.

In the first chapter, the authorial voice and the homodiegetic narrator Jin-mei builds a conversation between its characters – yet none of the novel’s sixteen tales are ever spoken or delivered to any other character. Without a dialogue to connect her stories, the author turns to a more formal method to bring the sixteen short stories together into a single novelistic plot. Daughters’ tales are framed in mid-1980s San Francisco, that deliberately dislocates the mothers’ Chinese stories from modern-day America by constantly stressing the differences between the two time periods and the ways time itself is experienced in those two periods.

The mothers’ voices assume the qualities of a folktale or oral narrative to frame their stories like Lindo Hong: “*How do you know I’ll fall? whined the girl. It is a book, The Twenty Six Malignant Gates, all the bad things that can happen to you outside the protection of this house*” (87). The mothers are ambiguous about the stories’ exact placement in chronological history but quite ambiguous about the geographical and temporal distance from the present. The book is divided into 4 parts which begin with the tales told by the mothers, where they recall their childhood changing China in memory, followed by tales told by the daughters during their childhood, and then followed by the tales told by the daughters concerning their relation with

their mothers in San Francisco nowadays and finally followed by the tales told by mothers' relations with their daughters in the novel's present in San Francisco and finally Jin-mei Woo meeting her Chinese sisters and the real China. The four parts begin with a metaphorical tale written in italic letters to reinforce its allegorical meaning.

M. Singer (2009: 92) explains: Even the mothers' voices, frame their stories with narrated openings like An-mei Hsu: "When I was a young girl in China, my grandmother told me my mother was a ghost "(33) assuming the qualities of a folktale or oral narrative – the mothers are ambiguous about the stories' exact placement in chronological history but quite unambiguous about their geographical and temporal distance from the present day.

The Joy Luck Club begins with a metaphorical flashback from Suyuan Woo arriving in the US called *Feathers From A Thousand Li Away*. She is flying from wartime chaos in China and remembers it as a mysterious country. This has the effect of introducing the American viewpoint as the framing perspective for the entire novel. This device paradoxically will render her daughter Jing-mei unable to reconstruct Suyuan's life story. Jing Woo's narration steady moves from present-tense narration into past-tense memory, as when she considers playing mah-jong with her aunts:

Auntie Lin looks exasperated, as though I were just a simple child: "How can we play with just three people? Like a table with three legs, no balance. When Auntie Ying's husband died she asked her brother to join. Your father asked you. So it's decided" (22).

This passage exemplifies the characters' preoccupations with intergenerational continuity and Chinese identity. So long as the mothers cannot perpetuate their traditions through their daughters, the families will be as out of balance as the mah-jong table: "these kinds of explanations made me feel like my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (23).

Quoting Marc Singer (2009: 96) "Each story instead bears its own separate narrative frame; most if not all the tales appear to be internal monologues, rehearsed but never spoken".

The various stories of the novel are considered to be a literal dialogue between characters as mothers discover that storytelling is the best way to reach the hearts and minds of their daughters. The first example of a mother sharing her mysterious past is Yin-ying St. Clair: "I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose [...].because this is the way a mother loves her daughter" (286). But the daughters never

listen to their mothers. Remarkably significant is Marc Singer's (2009: 97) assumption: "if the mothers fail to voice their thoughts, then the daughters are even more radically self-isolated" since as daughters they never address their mothers, and as independent adults they are not anymore connected with them. Tan upholds the lack of communication between women at the same time that she displaces the male characters and voices to the narrative periphery. This cultural shift is often described as a generational struggle, enhancing the temporal elements since each generation represents a different age as well as nationality and cultural identity.

The daughters are united with their matrilineal heritage by their recurring characters and themes, the interlocking networks of symbols, and specially the stories' chronological alignment into a supranarrative master-plot. This diachronic structure governs the novel's narrative interconnections so thoroughly that it prevents any literal, synchronic conversations between the stories and the characters.

The novel narrative, progressing from China to America, is divided into sections, with each of the first three groups of stories arranged chronologically. The stories of the first section (with exception of "The Joy Luck Club"): "Feathers from a Thousand *Li* Away" all focus on the mothers as children in pre-revolutionary China. The second section: "The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates" jumps a generation relating the stories of the daughters as young girls in post war America. The third section: "American Translation" describes the four daughters as adults, although this section too has its exception like the story "Best Quality" deliberately avoiding the romantic and marital focus of the other three tales to continue examining Jin-mei Woo's relationship with her mother. "Queen Mother of the Western Sky" carries out a dramatic alteration on the lineal chronological and cultural scheme, following another temporal scheme specially in the final story "A pair of Tickets"; as M. Singer (2009: 100) asserts: "Tan concludes with a cascade of multiply-layered, self-reflexive recursions: the novel temporal progression is re-enacted in its final section, and in its final story". The narrator arrives in China and discovers that Guangzhou from a distance, looks like a major American city with high rises and construction going on everywhere (317). Although China is not anymore the ahistorical, mythical, settings of the mothers' tales, both cultures are interrelated: "and then there is a building, its front laced with scaffolding made of bamboo poles held together with plastic strips" (317).

4. CONCLUSION

Tan by means of analepsis and prolepsis succeeds in writing a lasting homage novel about her deceased mother, who spoke a sort of fractured

English. Despite the book's title, ironically, it does not narrate joy. *The Joy Luck Club* relates the misfortune of their Chinese characters, who decided to found their small club to forget all the war misery they found first in China and afterwards their struggle to live in the US, first as refugees and then as foreigners with children born and educated in San Francisco. Mothers and daughters spoke different languages; the lack of communication between mothers and daughters is the diegesis narrated by the novel.

This novel is circular and begins with Jin-mei Woo as homodiegetic narrator telling us, implicit readers, that she has to replace the seat of her deceased mother as the fourth player at the mah-jong table every week with her aunts (ladies who her mother met once and together decided to fight their fate, meeting once a week to play and eat together) and finishes with Jin-mei Woo satisfying Suyuan's deceased mother's wish of meeting her Chinese sisters, her mother's daughters who she left fleeing the horrors of the world in Kweilin: "She took the two babies out of slings and sat them on the roadside, then lay down next to them [...]. And then she knew she could not bear to watch her babies die with her" (324-325). This last section "The Queen Mother of the Western Skies" is a fairy tale. R. C. Evans claims that (2010: 152) "in *The Joy Luck Club*, the relationship between mothers and daughters starts with the imbalance and finally ends with a definite balance". The daughter searching for her mother's real past finally arrives at her own identity. The author explains that the key to the structure of her novel is finding the right balance.

At the beginning of *The Joy Luck Club* there exists a very big difference between mothers and daughters because they have different attitudes. The daughters, as young women occasionally expose complacent superiority and judgmental self-complacency toward their elders. Meanwhile, their creators expose how similar they are in so many crucial ways to their own mothers. On the other hand, the young women's discourse and perspective in relation to their men folk uncover a self-consciously critical and disturbed attitude that would not have been possible only a few years ago without the effort and work of the Second Wave mainstream feminist movement which Friedan's work inspired.

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