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A Glimpse of Mother-Daughter Relationship In The Select Novels Of Amy Tan

Abstract

A mother plays a significant role in a daughter's life. She is an inspiration and a pillar of strength for a daughter. A daughter too is adored by her mother. She is the pride and joy for her mother. Their affinity is unshakable and perennial. Amy Tan exhibits certain nuances of mother-daughter relationship in her novels. The paper provides a brief overview of the complexities betwixt the Chinese immigrant mothers and their American born daughters. The study sheds light on the disputes that arise due to the generational and cultural differences and the impact of those clashes on their relationship. Additionally, the present work marks the beauty of the mother-daughter bond, that in spite of the challenges, it stays intact and eternal. As, Amy Tan was closely attached to her mother, the paper also brings forth, the influence of her mother in Tan's fiction.

Keywords: mother-daughter relationship, Chinese immigrant mothers, American born daughters, complexities, generational and cultural conflicts.

Introduction

A mother's love for her off-springs is ingenuous, unconditional, immeasurable and efficacious. Be it a son or a daughter, a mother fosters her child with all her passion and

puissance. She guards, inspires and encourages her child in good as well as in bad times. The word ‘mother’ is inexplicable as ‘mother’ is the person whom God has conferred with myriad qualities like love, care, faith, patience, strength, compassion, empathy, honesty, generosity and so forth. The famous poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge has rightly said, “The love of a mother is the veil of a softer light between the heart and the heavenly father.”(Coleridge, *et. al* 148) Amongst many relationships, the connection between a mother and her daughter is impeccable and exceptional. They share an intimate and beautiful bond. Every mother has been a daughter and a mother’s influence on her daughter is inevitable. Alike other relationships, a mother-daughter relationship may grow resentful sometimes, but it ameliorates with the passage of time and situations. Amy Tan, the author of several enchanting novels, beautifully portrays the bond between Chinese mothers and their Americanized daughters, in her writings. This paper is an exploratory attempt to trace the mother-daughter relationship in the select novels of Amy Tan.

Influence of Mother

Amy Tan, an American author of Chinese origin, was born on February 19, 1952 in Oakland, California. Like other daughters, she deeply regarded her mother, Daisy Tan. The affinity with her mother provided Tan with an intrinsic appreciation of Chinese customs, traditions and history. Even her writing style is significantly influenced by her mother. In *The Opposite of Fate*, her memoir, Tan mentions that her writings contain:

. . . an emotional truth. It has to do with a mother who has helped her daughter see the world in a special way. It is a world in which the mother possesses rare magic. She can make the girl see yin when it is yang. The girl sees that her mother, who is her ally, is also her adversary. And that is an emotional memory that I *do* have, this sense of double jeopardy,

realizing that my mother could both help me and hurt me, in the best and worst ways possible. (109, pt. II, ch. 3)

Amy was hugely influenced by her parents. Her father, John Tan, being a Baptist Minister, wrote sermons and read them aloud to Amy as his test audience. Talking about her father, Amy shared in an interview with Dana Gionia, “They were stories about himself and his doubts, what he wanted and how he tried to do it.” Whereas, her mother told her the stories about her life and would act out what happened to her. Tan further mentioned in the interview:

The stories were based on her life, so the emotions there were real . . . My mother taught me emotional truth, and that’s something you cannot find in a book. You have to be with somebody who’s experienced it, and whose very life depends on it.

Daisy Tan had a troublesome life in China. Married to an abusive man, she suffered imprisonment, because her husband had told the authorities that she was in love with John Tan. She had three daughters from her first marriage, but was forced to leave them behind in China. Amy, later on learnt that she is actually the seventh of the eight children born to her mother. Apart from three daughters, Daisy also had a girl, who died soon after her birth and a boy, who died at the age of two or three. Having endured the pains and agonies in her life, Daisy immigrated to America to start a new life with John Tan. But the death of her husband and her eldest son turned her life upside down. Daisy lost her faith in God, she stopped offering prayers. She started believing in curses, karma, reincarnation, and also in the existence of spirits. She often asked Amy to talk to the ghost of her father, brother and her grandmother, using a Ouija board. In order to find a balance in her life, she kept shifting with her family from place to place. She became hysterical and gave warnings to kill herself when Amy disobeyed her. After a time, tired of her mother’s warnings, Amy began to rebel against her. The mother and the daughter would argue and quibble with each other. This worsened

their relationship. Apart from these issues, the generational and cultural gap between Daisy Tan and Amy aggravated their clashes.

Even after going through highs and lows in their lives, eventually, things settled down between the mother and the daughter. Amy also visited China with Daisy Tan to keep her vow to her mother. She met her half sisters and felt an instant connection with them. She observed that her mother was the same with her half sisters as she had been with Amy. This was the time when Amy realized that her mother's tough personality is the consequence of the hardships endured by her mother in China. Tan's visit to China also helped her to accept the Chinese-American identity. It was in 1995, when Daisy was diagnosed with Alzheimer's that their lives took a turning point. It brought Amy closer to her mother. Reminiscing about her mother Tan remarks in her memoir, "Today my mother is gone, but I still know certain things. They are in my bones." (36, Part I, ch. 1)

The aforementioned incidents form an integral part of Tan's novels. She writes about a mother, who has left behind her daughters in China, she writes about the mothers who had suffered from bad marriages, she writes about the mothers' superstitious beliefs, she also writes about the daughters who, like Amy, are defiant to their mothers, but at the end, realize their mothers' love and concern for them. The amalgamation of love and agony instilled in each of the fervid mother-daughter relationships are analogous to Daisy and Amy Tan.

MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND

Speaking generally about mother-daughter relationships, Amy Tan opines that it is:

. . . the metaphor of the umbilical cord . . . which gets stretched over time; whether it's the mother or daughter who severs it or tries to pull it tighter, part of that is individual and part is cultural. In a Chinese family the mother pulls very tightly on the bond to a point where [the daughter] asks, 'Why can't I know about such and such?' and the [mother answers],

‘Because I haven’t put it in your mind yet.’ The notion that your mother puts everything in your mind □ the blank slate theory □ is part of Chinese culture. (Henderson 16)

Tan’s novels display an instinctual fondness for the matters that are pivotal to the lives of disintegrated Americans who have to get into grips with diverse intercultural sets of prospects and experiences. Her novels describe the Chinese mothers who immigrate to America to live a better life. The mothers in her stories have survived an excruciating life in China. Contrary to it, the American born daughters are oblivious to their mothers’ previous life. *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan’s magnum opus, manifests many comparisons between Amy Tan’s and her mother’s experiences and the characters and incidents in this novel. This is apparent from the very first page of the novel, which Amy has dedicated to her family with these words:

*To my mother
and the memory of her mother
You asked me once
what I would remember.
This, and much more.*

The novel chronicles the lives of four mother-daughter dyads. The Chinese mothers: Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu and Ying-ying St. Clair feel alienated not only from their homeland, but also from their daughters. As expatriates, they make significant changes in their lives. They are impelled to unload themselves of their personal stories of loss and agony and to reconsider their yearnings. Though, superficially they are well-settled in their new lives, but the mothers never acculturate completely. They do not acquire fluent English and they do not renounce their Chinese culture and heritage.

On the contrary, their daughters: Jing-mei Woo (June), Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu Jordan and Lena St. Clair are wholly and inefaceably American, not only by birth but also by

their education, and disposition. They disregard their mothers as old-fashioned. They are also contemptuous to the stories about their mothers' life in China. While the mothers strive to instil in their daughters, the reverence for their Chinese tradition, the daughters in turn, grapple with the need to harmonize their American lifestyle and careers with the impracticable and inconceivable expectations of their mothers, whose beliefs stay ingrained in their motherland. This leads to estrangement and silence between mothers and daughters. The impediments between the two generations are finally eliminated when the daughters genuinely listen to their mothers' stories and begin to reconcile with the connections between those stories and their own lives.

The Kitchen God's Wife continues to delve into the complexities of mother-daughter relationship. Tan exhibits their relationship by placing them on the contrary sides of a huge cultural and linguistic severance. Furthermore, she puts up the questions regarding the condition of women in particular cultural settings.

The Bonesetter's Daughter, Tan's another masterpiece, provides an insight of her childhood and her relationship with her mother. Filled with suspense, mystery, superstition and magic, the novel not only explores the bond between mother and daughter but it also depicts the relationship between different cultures. The novel is a perfect blend of fiction with Tan's elements of autobiography, as she mentions in the acknowledgements of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, "the heart of this story belongs to my grandmother, its voice to my mother."

Tan's novels are packed with captivating images of powerful girls and women. Her fifth novel, *The Valley of Amazement*, deals with the analogous themes of her previous works. It demonstrates the intriguing story of mother-daughter relationship, spanning three generations of women. Once, Tan attended an exhibition on Shanghai at the Asian Art Museum, where she saw a book in which she discovered a photograph of ten courtesans,

“The Ten Beauties of Shanghai,” taken around 1910. The photograph became the source of inspiration for Tan to write this novel. Speaking about the novel, Tan remarks in an interview with PP Wong:

. . . in this new novel, I entered the world of courtesans and wrote about two women, a mother and daughter, whose lives are upturned several times, who remake themselves to make the best of their new circumstances.

Mothers' Aspirations for Their Daughters

At the age of eight, Amy won an essay contest and this encouraged her to write fiction. But her parents said to her that, “if you liked doing something, it wasn’t worth pursuing.” (Henderson 17) From the age of six, her parents told her that she would become a brain surgeon. Her mother believed that Amy could also be a musical prodigy like any other children of her age, they saw on TV. So her parents brought a piano and made her take piano lessons. Amy was a bright student so her mother was convinced that with hard work, her daughter could be both a neurosurgeon and a concert pianist.

Likewise, the Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* wish that their daughters “have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character.” (308; pt. IV, sect. 3) They hope that their daughters live a successful life in America, but also adhere to their Chinese customs. Suyuan Woo believes that, “you could be anything you wanted to be in America.” (151; pt. II, sect. 4) She anticipates that her nine-years-old daughter, June, could be a prodigy if she worked hard. Regardless of her daughter’s indifferent attitude, she becomes determined that she would discover June’s hidden talent. After watching a nine-years-old Chinese girl playing the piano on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, she makes her daughter take piano lessons. But her expectations are thwarted when June does not perform well at a

talent show in the church hall. She feels disappointed with her daughter and June too feels ashamed for letting down her mother's expectations.

For years, June continues to fall short of her mother's expectations. She realizes, "For unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me." (165; pt. II, sect. 4) Though Suyuan never again talks to her daughter about their clash for piano lessons, she gifts June a piano at her thirtieth birthday. Being a mother, she believes in her daughter's capabilities even after knowing that June could no more play it. "You have natural talent. You could been genius if you want to," she affirms. (165; pt. II, sect. 4)

Mother-Daughter Conflicts

The rifts between the mothers and the daughters in Tan's novels arise mainly due to the generational and cultural disparities. Looking at their Americanized daughters, the mothers become anxious. They become despondent as they never attain a certain level of communication with their daughters. The mothers realize that their daughters have totally embraced the American culture. For instance, while listening to the Joy Luck Aunties, June realizes:

They are frightened. In me, they see their daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English.(35; pt. I, sect. 1)

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Pearl Brandt Louie, daughter of Winnie Louie, is a second-generation Chinese American, who abnegates her Chinese heritage to embrace her American-identity. She shares an uncomfortable relationship with her mother. It is evident from the opening sentence of the novel, wherein Pearl reveals that whenever she converses with her mother, "she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an

argument.” (11, pt. I, ch. 1) Winnie, who has endured traumatic experiences in China, an unsuccessful marriage to a nasty man and the destruction of World War II, flees from China to begin a new, contented life in America. For years, she restrains the past experiences to herself and remains silent about her dreadful apprehensions, but her advancing age and debilitation impel her to share her story to Pearl, her only daughter. While Pearl, fearing her mother’s reaction, conceals from Winnie about her multiple sclerosis. She stays reticent not only to guard her mother from an awful shock but for the reason that she had intentionally barred her mother from various aspects of her life. She reflects, “I think of the enormous distance that separates us and makes us unable to share the most important matters of our life. How did this happen?” (34; pt. I, ch. 1)

Corresponding to her previous novels, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* too portrays the discordant relationship between LuLing Liu and her daughter, Ruth. For LuLing, “A mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin.” (299; pt. II, ch. 12) But her daughter realizes this lately. Unaware of her mother’s life, Ruth is so engrossed with her professional and personal commitments that she finds no time to visit her mother. Upset with her daughter, LuLing complains to her, “Too busy for mother. Never too busy go see movie, go away, go see friend.” (14; pt. I, ch.1) Eventually, Ruth is drawn closer to her mother when LuLing is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Ruth realizes, “Her mother wasn’t *that* bad off.” (74; pt. I, ch. 3) However, it is when she reads about her mother’s past life in China and her journey to America, that she actually understands her mother; the love and care for her daughter.

Tan’s *The Valley of Amazement* unravels the relationship between LuLu Minturn and her daughter, Violet and how the repression of their true feelings, emotions and family secrets generates a distance between the two. LuLu Minturn, the owner of a first-class courtesan house in Shanghai, is an American woman who is deserted by her Chinese lover whom she

met in California and follows him to China. Her daughter, Violet, considers herself a full-blooded American. "I'm American. There's nothing Chinese about me," (39, ch. 1) she asserts. Her life is turned upside down when she learns that she is half-Chinese. "I was never able to talk to Mother about my feelings over having a Chinese father. We could not admit to each other what I knew." (51; ch. 2) Later in the novel, Violet also feels betrayed by her mother when she leaves her daughter to find her lost son in San Francisco. The sudden change in her mother's behaviour makes Violet ponder:

She said she loved me, but I did not see any particular sign of that. I could not feel anything in my heart but the loss of her love. . . Bit by bit, she was having nothing to do with me. (30; ch. 1)

Besides language and communication, cultural differences widen the distance between the mothers and the daughters. The Chinese mothers believe in complying with their ancestral traditions and expect their daughters to revere and preserve their culture and ethnicity. The daughters, on the contrary, fail to comprehend the value of their Chinese heritage and consider their mothers to be old-fashioned. For instance, to assert her admiration for Chinese ethnicity, Suyuan believes that although her daughter, June, was born and raised in America, yet she cannot renounce her Chinese lineaments. She remarks, "Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese." (325; pt. IV, sect. 4) Her daughter, on the other hand feels, "I've never really known what it means to be Chinese." (326; pt. IV, sect. 4)

Moreover, the mothers profoundly believe in superstitions, curses and spirits. Owing to her mother's queer ability to presage unfortunate occurrences, Lena feels anxious what her mother would say about the new house bought by her and her husband in Woodside. She wonders that her mother might come to know about the marital difficulties going on in her life. When Ying-ying explores the house, she points out certain flaws that are annoying for

her daughter. However, Lena realizes that “everything she said is true . . . she can see what else is going on, between Harold and me.” (176; pt. III, sect. 1)

Despite the dissensions, the mothers exhibit their concern for their daughters. It is the bond of love that impels them to protect their daughters by all means. Winnie, in *The Kitchen God's Wife* narrates her story to Pearl and tries to bridge the gap between herself and her daughter. She tries to teach the lessons she learnt in her life to Pearl. “I know how it is to hear bad stories and believe they are true. You're lucky this has never happened to you” (152; ch. 8)

Another instance is an incident mentioned in June's story, ‘Best Quality.’ Once, Lindo's family is invited at Suyuan's place for dinner. While serving the dinner, everybody picks up the best quality crab from the platter. June picks up the “large crab with faded orange color.” (250; pt. III, ch. 4) Suyuan appreciates the quality of her daughter of being generous and not selfish. She feels proud of her. “Only *you* pick that crab. Nobody else take it. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different,” (250; pt. III, ch. 4) she says to her.

Conclusion

Hence, it could be said with certainty that a mother's love for her daughter is perceptible in her care, her advices, her criticisms and even in her complains. The daughters ultimately, comprehend and accept their mother's convictions and beliefs. The mothers and daughters in Tan's novels affirm that with purity and integrity, a relationship can surpass any obstacle, no matter what.

Tan's aforementioned novels, thus, apprise her readers with certain aspects of mother-daughter relationship. She has successfully brought into light, the subtleties of every mother and daughter bond, whether it is language and cultural barriers, family secrets, Chinese

superstitions, mothers' expectations from their daughters, their warnings and advices, the daughters' apprehensions or the maternal influence on mothers and daughters. Her well-knitted stories make Tan, a profound and prolific story-teller. Deirdre Donahue, reviewer for *USA Today* has aptly opined, "No contemporary writer has dug deeper and more effectively into the crucible of mother-daughter bond: loving, claustrophobic, maddening, inescapable." (Snodgrass 116)

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