

Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed

---

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation  
in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

**Mona A. M. Ahmed**  
Zagazig University, Egypt

**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate pluralism, acculturation and assimilation in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). In this successful novel, Amy Tan, as a Chinese American, masterfully managed to portray the Chinese experience in the United States through two generations represented by four Chinese immigrant mothers and their four American-born daughters. Despite the fact that the Chinese mothers stuck firmly to their Chinese cultural heritage, they eventually managed to make some sort of compromise between their Chinese culture and the American way of life. Consequently, they adopted a pluralistic identity. In the meantime, though their American-born daughters assimilated into American culture, and continually ridiculed Chinese culture, towards the end of the novel, they accepted some of the Chinese cultural heritage. In fact, the theories of pluralism, acculturation and assimilation are applicable to Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. The Chinese mothers adopted pluralism whereas their American-born daughters embraced acculturation and assimilation though, as they matured, they perceived the great worth of their Chinese cultural heritage, and managed to strike a balance between their ethnic culture and the American culture. In this novel, Amy Tan actually affirms the indispensability of one's ethnic culture, along with the American way of life; subsequently, she recommends pluralism. The great merit of the novel, really resides in the fact that Amy Tan's approval of pluralism can be applied to any ethnic group.

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation  
in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

**Mona A. M. Ahmed**

Zagazig University, Egypt

The purpose of this paper is to investigate pluralism, acculturation and assimilation in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), a finalist for the National Award, and a recipient of the 1990 Bay Area Book Reviewers award for fiction. Amy Tan (1952- ) is a Chinese American novelist; she is the daughter of John Tan, a Chinese electrical engineer, and Daisy Tan, who immigrated to the United States a few years before Amy Tan's birth. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan skillfully explores the Chinese experience in the United States through two generations. The first generation is represented by the Chinese immigrant mothers, Suyua Woo, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu and Ying-Ying St.Clair. The second generation is represented by their four American-born daughters, Jing-mei "June" Woo, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu Jordan and Lena St Clair. Though adhering to their Chinese cultural heritage, the Chinese mothers eventually managed to make some sort of compromise between their Chinese culture and the American way of life. Subsequently, they adopted a pluralistic identity. Meanwhile, despite the fact that the American-born daughters assimilated into American culture, and constantly ridiculed Chinese culture, towards the end of the novel, they accepted some of the Chinese cultural heritage. The paper is actually an application of the theories of pluralism, acculturation and assimilation to Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*.

In its broad sense, pluralism occurs when a minority group such as the Chinese immigrants on which *The Joy*

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

*Luck Club* focuses, as will be illustrated, retains its ethnic identity, and at the same time shares in the activities of the host country. In other words, while preserving its cultural heritage, a minority group does not isolate itself from the way of life of the society to which it immigrated, but indulges in its social processes and accepts its institutions. Subsequently, pluralism does not entail "an absolute separation of groups", but it "implies the maintenance of many varied cultural systems with the framework of the larger sociocultural system" (Wadsworth 93).

Sociologists believe that there are two main types of pluralism: cultural pluralism and structural pluralism. Cultural pluralism was coined by Horace M. Kallen in 1915 to denote "American democracy and ethnic identity" (Toll 58). Cultural pluralism actually indicates the participation of a minority group in the dominant culture of the host country while maintaining their cultural difference. In fact, cultural pluralism is indispensable in a multicultural society, since, as Francis Muchenge points out, it "leads to the appreciation and tolerance of others who are culturally different leading to sustainable living" (71). In order to avoid conflict among groups, who are culturally different, ethnic diversity should be accommodated. In other words, each ethnic group can preserve its culture, but it should adjust to the dominant culture. According to Chandra Vennoposa :

One of the outcomes of a variety of cultures and subcultures is that a minority group tends to be controlled by the dominant cultures because the latter has the power and uses affluence to take over the smaller cultural societies. With a diverse culture, an

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

exchange and sharing of cultural values and attitudes take place. (n. p.)

In fact, the need to adjust to disparate cultures is a must because it results in the unity and solidarity of groups in society and puts an end to conflict and opposition among various groups. Adjustment to other cultures is actually indispensable for the health and unity of society.

As for Structural pluralism, it is related to the structure of society; it refers to the existence of sub societies within the host society. According to Martin N. Marger:

Structural pluralism connotes not simply differences in culture but also the existence in some degree of segregated ethnic communities within which much of social life occurs for group members. These ethnic sub-societies, or communities, comprise institutions - schools, businesses, churches and the like - that duplicate to some extent those of the dominant group. (93)

Subsequently, structural pluralism indicates that minorities, who are culturally different from the dominant group, can live in certain districts or minor societies such as Chinatown in San Francisco, California, on which Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* focuses, as will be illustrated. Such minor societies have their own schools, churches or temples, markets and restaurants which may be regarded as minor copies of the larger society to which they belong. Marger proceeds to point out that "equalitarian pluralism" characterizes interethnic relations since minor groups maintain their "cultural and, for most part, structural integrity while participating freely and equally within common

political and economic institutions" (93- 94). He argues that some theorists have called this state "accommodation" which denotes that the minority group "desires equality with, but separation from the dominant group and the dominant group agrees to this arrangement" (94).

As regards Assimilation, it is actually the opposite of pluralism. It takes place as a result of the contact between people belonging to diverse cultures. In its broad sense, assimilation refers to the complete adoption of the way of life of the dominant culture and giving up one's own culture. According to Christine J. Yeh, "[A]ssimilation is the strategy associated with rejecting one's cultural values in favor of entrance to the dominant cultural practices" (35). In fact, an assimilationist is likely to regard the culture of the host country as superior to his own culture. According to John W. Berry, "when the individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interactions with other cultures, they are using the assimilation strategy" ("Conceptual Approaches" 24).

Like pluralism, assimilation has two principal types: cultural assimilation and structural assimilation. According to Martin N. Marger, "the cultural dimension of assimilation involves the adoption by one ethnic group of another cultural traits" (83). He goes on to argue that "cultural assimilation, or acculturation, denotes the adoption by a minority ethnic group of dominant group's cultural patterns - language, political beliefs, and so on" (87). This process is referred to as acculturation by Milton M. Gordon who calls it "behavioral assimilation" by which he means "the absorption of the cultural behavior pattern of the 'host' society" (279). Similarly, John W. Berry sees that

## **Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club**

---

acculturation is used as a synonym of assimilation. He contends that the "concept of acculturation has become widely used in cross - cultural psychology and has also been the subject of criticism because of the gradual erosion of the original meaning of the concept [...]. So it became synonymous of assimilation" (" Immigration" 7).

Like Marger, Gordon and Berry, David L. Sam perceives acculturation as the outcome of the contact between individuals and groups who have diverse cultural backgrounds. However, Sam argues that, as terms, acculturation and assimilation have occasionally been employed not as synonyms of each other but as "sub- sets" of each other. He goes on, "Specifically, assimilation has sometimes been seen as one form / phase of acculturation and at other times the situation has been reversed (i. e., acculturation is the form / phase of assimilation" (11). Accordingly, acculturation may be regarded as a stage of assimilation, and vice versa.

Concerning the second type of assimilation, namely structural assimilation, it is regarded as a subsequent phase to cultural assimilation or acculturation. In fact, it is the opposite of structural pluralism which has been previously discussed. According to Milton M. Gordon, structural assimilation

refers to the entrance of the immigrants and their descendants into the social cliques, organizations, institutional activities, and general civic life of the receiving society. If this process takes place on a larger enough scale, then a high frequency of intermarriage must result. (279)

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

Accordingly, structural assimilation occurs when the minority ethnic groups enter the social structure of the host society through joining public institutions such as schools and universities as well as workplaces such shops, factories, firms and offices. This process will ultimately lead minority group members to intermarry to those of the larger society or the host country. Consequently, they will "no longer encounter prejudice and discrimination" (Marger 88).

In fact, the theories of pluralism, acculturation and assimilation are applicable to Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* which actually echoes some of the incidents of Amy Tan's and her parents' life. Like the first generation

characters of the novel, Amy Tan's parents adopted a pluralistic identity. According to E. D. Huntley:

Daisy and John Tan continued to cling to many elements of the culture of their homeland, living essentially insular life and socializing mainly with the members of California's Chinese community, although their ambitions for their children included a certain degree of Americanization. (2)

Despite the fact that Amy Tan's parents immigrated to the United States with great ambitions for making their children enjoy better conditions of life than those they experienced in China, they did not assimilate into the American way of life. They actually adhered to their Chinese cultural heritage and tried to maintain their Chinese traditions. Meanwhile, during her youth, their daughter, Amy Tan, as a second Chinese generation, assimilated into the

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club**

---

American way of life and rejected her Chinese cultural heritage:

The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Amy Tan had spent her youth trying to deny her heritage. She was more interested in fitting in with her American friends. She once spent a week sleeping with clothespin on her nose trying to change her Asian appearance because she thought it set her apart from other children. She was embarrassed by her mother's broken English and by her Chinese customs. By the time she was teenager, Amy had rejected "everything Chinese". (Kramer 8)

When she was young, Tan suffered severely because of being different from her classmates. In an interview with Kam Williams, she maintains that "[B]y the time you reach 11 or 12, no child wants to be different [...]. I wanted to have blonde hair and a perky nose and have boys look at me and admire my figure. But that did not happen" (n. d.). In 1969, when Tan graduated from high school, she "vowed to distance herself from anything Asian" (Snodgrass 12). Tan continued to reject anything Chinese until she was thirty five when she visited China with her mother for the first time in 1987, where she realized the worth of her homeland. This trip actually "allowed Tan the opportunity to reconnect with her Chinese heritage" (Darraj 11). On arriving in the land of her ancestors, Tan completely changed. As Mary Ellen Snodgrass points out that,



**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

the fear of the old country disappeared as soon as Amy arrived in the People's Republic of China, she felt distinctly at home [...]. She hoped to blend in with other Asians [...]. For the first time she visited her three half-sisters and created an instant family bond that changed her outlook. As the warring sides of her ethnicity made peace, she felt complete for the first time. The reunion serve the closing chapter of *The Joy Luck* (1989), in which June Woo reunites with her twin half- sisters, whom the family had not seen in forty- five years. (15)

The *Joy Luck Club* is a series of sixteen stories; eight stories deal with the lives of the Chinese immigrant mothers in both China and the United States. Each mother narrates two stories except for the two stories of Suyuan Woo which are narrated her daughter Jing- mei "June" Woo due to her mother's recent death. The other eight stories focus on the lives of their American- born daughters; each two stories are narrated by one of the four daughters. The novel is set in the late 1980s; however, it traces the lives of four families of the eight characters in both China and the United States. In fact, the Chinese immigrant mothers of *The Joy Luck Club* adopted a pluralistic identity. In other words, while keeping their Chinese ethnic identity, they welcome life in the United States hoping for better conditions for both themselves and their children. The four Chinese mothers of the novel really led a bitter life in China. Suyuan Woo, the mother of Jing - mei "June", the main character of *The Joy Luck Club*, for instance, suffered greatly during the Second World War as a result of the Japanese invasion of China and the bombs they exploded which resulted in the murder of her first husband,

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club**

---

who was a military officer, as well as the loss of her twin daughters, an event that haunted her whole life. The other three mothers, Lindo Jong, the mother of Waverly Jong, Anmei Hsu, the mother of Rose Hsu Jordan and Ying- Ying St. Clair, the mother of Lena St. Clair suffered from oppression in Chinese patriarchal societies. Subsequently, they longed for a better life in the United States. *The Joy Luck Club* opens with a prologue which actually sums up the attitude of the four immigrant mothers:

*The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai. This bird, boasted the market vendor, once was a duck that stretched her neck in hope of becoming a goose [...].*

*Then the woman and the Swan sailed across an ocean[...]*

*toward America [...]. On her journey she cooed to the swan:*

*"In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there*

*nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her*

*husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her,*

*because I will make here speak only perfect American English.*

*And over there she will always be too full to swallow any*

*sorrow! She will know my meaning because I will give her*

*this swan. (Tan Joy 17)*

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

The four immigrant mothers actually had great expectations for their daughters. They hoped that their daughters would maintain their Chinese cultural heritage, along with grasping American culture. In other words, they wanted them to keep their ethnic cultural identity, and, at the same time, indulge in the American way of life. As Zenobia Mistri points out, none of the mothers hoped that her daughter would "follow nothing but Chinese ways"; each mother wanted her daughter to have a better life. Each mother "wants [sic] her daughter to know the power and advantage of joining the strengths of two cultures instead of embracing only one" (251). Accordingly, the four Chinese mothers embraced cultural pluralism which has been previously discussed.

Combining the advantages of both the Chinese and American cultures is explored in the attitude of Lindo Jong, who suffered from abuse in a male dominated society in China, where she was a victim of an arranged marriage. When she was two years old, Lindo was promised to the Huangs' son for marriage. Since then, as she narrates, "my own family began treating me as if I belonged to somebody else" (Tan *Joy* 51). Upon becoming twelve, her family moved to another village due to a flood that terribly damaged their house. As a result, Lindo went to live with the Huangs where she was treated as a servant. When she was sixteen, Lindo married Tyan-yu Huang who had no desire for her, and treated her in a severe way. As Bella Adams puts it, "Lindo bites her tongue and tries to love a man who is more like a younger brother than a husband" (48). Yet, she was accused of being

## **Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

responsible for the delay of pregnancy. In order to flee from her unhappy marriage, Lindo devised a plan by convincing her mother in law that "Tyan- yu would die if he stayed in this marriage" (Tan *Joy* 64). Thus, she managed to free herself from her unsuccessful marriage. Despite the fact that she sacrificed her happiness so as to keep her parents' promise, Lindo promised not to forget herself. She immigrated to the United States where she worked in a cookie factory, and met her husband. Lindo had great ambitions in the United States; she hoped that her children would combine both the Chinese tradition as well as the American way of life. As she narrates, "I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character" (Tan *Joy* 254). She aspired to transform their circumstances as well as maintain their ethnic identity. Hence, Lindo adopted cultural pluralism which has been previously discussed. Realizing that her daughter, Waverly, was talented in playing chess, Lindo encouraged her until she became a national chess champion. Despite the fact that Lindo opposed Waverly's marriage to Rich, who was younger than her, she eventually accepted their marriage, and suggested China for spending their honeymoon. She advised them to go in October because it is "the best time. Not too hot, not too cold" (Tan *Joy* 184). Moreover, she accompanied them in their trip which denoted that she managed to make some sort of compromise between her Chinese traditions and the way of life in the United States.

Despite her great sufferings in China due to the death of her husband and the loss of her twin daughters, Suyuan Woo never lost hope for a better

---

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

life in the United States. Before leaving China, she met Canning Woo whom she married, and they immigrated to the United States in 1949 where they met the Jongs, the Hsus and the St. Clairs. In the same year, Suyuan started the San Francisco version of the Joy Luck Club, two years before her daughter Jing mei Woo was born. Jing- mei Woo narrates, "My mother could sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they left behind in China [...]. And she saw how quickly their eyes moved when she told them her idea of the Joy Luck Club" (Tan *Joy* 20). The Joy Luck Club of San Francisco was actually another version of the Joy Luck Club Suyuan, another officer's wife and two other women started in Kweilin, a Chinese city, where Suyuan's first husband brought her and their twin babies as refugees in order to protect them from the bombs of the Japanese. The Joy Luck Club was actually, as M. Marie Booth Foster expresses it, a means of taking "their minds off the terrible smells of too many people in the city and the screams of humans and animals in pain. They attempted to raise their spirits with mah jong, jokes, and food" (98). In the San Francisco Joy luck Club, the four Chinese immigrant mothers used to meet weekly. Narrating her mother's story, Jing- me Woo states, " 'Each week we could forget past wrongs done to us. [...]. We feasted, we Laughed, we played games, lost and won, we told the best stories. And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our joy. And that's how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck' " (Tan *Joy* 25). The four mothers used to play mah jong, a popular game in China. Subsequently, the Joy Luck Club was a means of preserving their Chinese cultural

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club**

---

heritage while existing in an alien country. Additionally, it became, as Magali Cornier Michael points out, "an emblem of the mother's fierce will to survive physically and psychically in a land foreign to them, of their recognition that their individual survival and control over their destinies in America requires communal support, and of their need to retain a sense of hope for the future" (140). Moreover, the great value of the Joy Luck Club resided in the fact that as a "familial entity", it is of particular interest, in that it "retains the habitual Chinese emphasis on the family and kinship but in a significantly revised form" (146). Adhering to her ethnicity, Suyuan believed that the Chinese mah jong was superior to that of the Jewish mah jong. When her daughter Jing-me asked her about the difference between the Chinese mah jong and the Jewish one, Suyuan proudly replied:

"Entirely different kind of playing," she said in her explanation voice. "Jewish mah jong, they watch only for their own tile, play only with their eyes."

Then she switched to Chinese: "Chinese mah jong, you must play using your head, very tricky. You must watch what everybody else throws away and keep that in your head as well. And if nobody plays well, then the game becomes like Jewish mah jong. What play? There's no strategy. You're just watching people make mistakes." Tan *Joy* 33)

In fact, Suyuan was keen to preserve her ethnic identity; she highly appreciated everything that belonged to China. She spoke poor English; therefore,

---

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

on expressing the preeminence of the Chinese game, she shifted into Chinese so as to express exactly what she greatly conceived of this national game.

Aspiring for a better life in the United States especially for her daughter, led Suyuan to do housecleaning despite the fact that she was a nurse in return for the piano lessons offered to her daughter by a piano teacher, Old Chong, as well as the "free use of a piano to practice on" (Tan *Joy* 38). Later, she bought her daughter a second hand piano. Suyuan wanted her daughter to be a "fantastic Chinese American success" (Mistri 254). She hoped that her daughter would be extraordinary in playing piano, but Jing- me was a source of disappointment for her mother since, as assimilating into the American society and embracing the American ideals of freedom and individualism, Jing- me did not accept any authority over her even that of her mother. In a quarrel with her mother, she openly told her, "You want me to be someone that I'm not! [...]. I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!" (Tan *Joy* 142). As she was taught in China, Suyuan was of the view that a girl should be obedient and follow her mother's instructions, a mother, on the other hand, should control her daughter's life. Suyuan, as Bella Adams contends, believed in the "inalienable right of the mother to regulate and run the life of her daughter" (73). However, Suyuan eventually perceived that the way of life in China is different from that in the United States; therefore, she stopped interfering with her daughter's will. As Jing- mei narrates, "For after our struggle at the piano, she never mentioned my playing again. The lessons stopped. The lid to the

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

piano was closed, shutting out the dust, my misery, and her dreams" (Tan *Joy* 143). This change actually denoted that Suyuan began to adjust to the American culture maintaining, at the same time, her ethnic culture. In other words, she began to adopt cultural pluralism.

Like Suyuan Woo and Lindo Jong, An-me Hsu gradually embraced cultural pluralism. An-me Hsu actually led a terrible life in China. After the death of her father, An-me's mother was dismissed from her grandmother's home because she married another man, Wu Tsing, who was a very wealthy merchant, and became his third concubine. The fact is that her mother was forced to marry this man after he had raped her. When An-me's mother gave birth to a son, the "Second Wife claimed [him] as her own" (Tan *Joy* 237). Feeling mercy for her mother, who came to visit her, and she watched her crying, An-me moved to stay with her in Wu Tsing's luxury house where she lived with Wu Tsing's other four wives. She "chooses to break with her family in order to go live with her mother" (Michael 149). Despite leading a luxury and comfortable life in Wu Tsing's house, An-me was "marginal to the household" due to her mother's position. (Huntley 54). In Wu Tsing's house, she realized the humiliation her mother suffered from. However, her mother could not continue in this debased life; therefore, she committed suicide by poisoning herself. An-me narrates, "When the poison broke into her body, she whispered to me that she would rather kill her own spirit so that she could give me a stronger one" (Tan *Joy* 240). Fearing his third concubine's "vengeful spirit", Wu Tsing promised to



**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

bring An- me up as his daughter. Speaking about her mother An- mei narrates:

My mother, she suffered. She lost her face and tried to 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. That could not run away. That was their fate. (Tan *Joy* 241)

We know nothing more about the life of An- me in China, but we know about her relationship with her daughter, Rose Hsu Jordan, in the United States which testified to An- me's emphasis on her ethnic identity. When her daughter, Rose, told her that she would marry Ted, an American medical student, An- me opposed this marriage simply because Ted was "American" (Tan *Joy* 117). She warned her daughter against this marriage. Additionally, An- me adhered to her Chinese cultural heritage when she later urged her daughter to listen to her because, as a mother, she deeply loved her more than anyone else. Rose narrates:

"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. But if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak. You will fall to the ground with the first strong wind, and then you will be like a weed, growing wild in any direction, running along the ground until someone pulls you out and throws you away. (Tan *Joy* 191)

## **Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

An- me's daughter was weak, confused and unable to take any decision because she felt herself responsible for the death of her young brother whom she could not save from drowning in the ocean. Therefore, she used to listen to the opinions of many people. An- me wanted her daughter to listen only to her because she would sincerely advise her. She helped her daughter in her predicament when Ted got tired of her passivity and inability to take decisions, and asked for a divorce. Ted attempted to exploit Rose; he wanted to have their house since he would remarry, and asked Rose to sign the divorce papers. An- me advised her daughter to assert her personality and get rid of her passivity; she wanted her to be strong and withstand the abuse of Ted. She believed that her daughter should not keep silent; she "should speak up" (Tan *Joy* 193). Following her mother's instructions, Rose decided not to sign the divorce papers, and refused Ted's plan to uproot her from the house. With the help of her mother, Rose was able to take a decision. In fact, An- me's advice denoted that she eventually reconciled herself with the American culture. She began to give up the silence women experienced in patriarchal China which is indicative of the fact that she adopted cultural pluralism.

Unlike the other immigrant Chinese mothers, Ying Ying St. Clair belonged to a wealthy family; she had a "privileged upbringing" (Huntley 46). Yet, in China, she suffered from life in a male- dominated society; she was actually a victim of an arranged marriage. When she was sixteen, her beauty attracted the attention of an older man, who was one of her family's friends, whom she married. After few months,

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

she discovered that he was a womanizer, and he abandoned her for an opera singer despite the fact that she was pregnant. As a consequence, she aborted the baby since she "came to hate this man so much" (Tan *Joy* 248). Then, she moved to live with a second cousin's family in Shanghai where she stayed without work for ten years. Thereafter, as she relates, "With the money of my family, I bought fresh clothes, modern straight suits. I cut off my long hair in the manner that was stylish, like a young boy. I was so tired for doing nothing for many years I decided to work. I became a shopgirl [sic]" (Tan *Joy* 249). Ying Ying managed to restore her beauty after years of pain due to her husband's betrayal. In that shop, she met Clifford St. Clair, "a large pale American man who bought the store's cheap- stylish clothes and sent them overseas" (Tan *Joy* 250). She married him, and he took her to the United States. Despite her flexibility concerning her ethnic identity, Ying Ying did not assimilate into the American society. She maintained her Chinese language, and spoke broken English despite marrying an Irish American who, in turn, did not understand Chinese. As, a result, their American- born daughter, Lena, used to translate for them. Additionally, Ying Ying appreciated her Chinese cultural heritage. When she went to her daughter's new house, her daughter gave her a small room to sleep in. Ying Ying narrates:

My daughter has put me in the tiniest of rooms in her new house.

"This is the guest bedroom," Lena said in her proud American way.

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

I smiled. But to Chinese ways of thinking,  
the guest bedroom is the best bedroom,  
where she and husband sleep.  
(Tan *Joy* 242)

Accustomed to and maintaining the Chinese way of life, led Ying Ying to yield to the treatment of her husband, Clifford St. Clair who used to silence her; he "consistently speaks for her" (Michael 149). Thus, Ying Ying adopted cultural pluralism.

Accordingly, the four mothers are portrayed as adopting cultural pluralism. In the United States, they attempted to keep their Chinese cultural heritage, along with adjusting themselves to the new way of life in the United States. In other words, they preserved their traditional values, and, at the same time, did not isolate themselves from the American life, but accepted some of the ideals of the American society. In addition to cultural pluralism embraced by the four Chinese mothers, they experienced structural pluralism which has been formerly discussed. All the families of the four mothers lived in the same neighborhood of Chinatown in San Francisco, California which is regarded as a segregated ethnic community. As E. M. Huntly points out:

Although Chinatown - as its name suggests - an  
outpost of the old country set incongruously in the  
heart of California, the distinctly Chinese  
ambiance is punctuated by intrusions of Western  
culture. Dominating weekend activities in  
Chinatown is the First Chinese Baptist Church, the  
setting for the annual neighborhood Christmas  
party [...]. Also in Chinatown are several

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

American institutions: a MacDonald's restaurant [...]; the Bank of America; Pacific Telephone; and the fortune-cookie factory. (56)

Accordingly, Chinatown is a microcosm or a small version of the American cities. It is inhabited by the Chinese Americans, an ethnic group, who adjust themselves to the way of life of the larger society of the United States, but do not assimilate into it. Existence of such sub communities is what sociologists call structural pluralism as previously illustrated.

Unlike their Chinese immigrant mothers, the American-born daughters acculturated and assimilated into the American society. In other words, they adopted cultural assimilation formerly discussed. Meanwhile, they almost experienced structural assimilation which has been previously illustrated. Jing- me, nicknamed "June" Woo, is a successful typewriter. Assimilated into the American society, she used to oppose her mother, Suyuan, who highly appreciated her Chinese cultural heritage. Jing- me had no tolerance of Chinese customs. As Melanie Mcalister points out, Jing- me "is made uncomfortable by the old generations' insistence on maintaining old customs and parochial habits, which she views as an impediment to breaking loose from her parents' cultural gravity" (8). Jing- me considered the Joy Luck Club, which her mother started in San Francisco, a "shameful Chinese custom" (Tan *Joy* 28). Before accepting some of the customs of the American society, her mother used to dress in a way which Jing- me regarded as peculiar, and ridiculed it. Describing

## **Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

the clothes her mother and Auntie An- me wore in a party in the Joy Luck Club, she states, "She and Auntie An- me were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, and too strange for American parties" (Tan *Joy* 28).

Brought up according to the American ideals of individualism and freedom, Jing- me rejected the authority of her mother who initially wanted her to study biology, then art; but Jing- me finished neither and "went off to work for a small ad agency as a secretary, later becoming a copywriter" (Tan *Joy* 31). Again, she protested against her mother's desire who was fascinated by music, and wanted her daughter to be a piano concert. Suyuan and Old Chong, who taught Jing- me music, prepared to make Jing- me play in a talent show held in the church, but Jing- me failed her mother's expectations by playing the wrong note" (Tan *Joy* 138- 39). As, Xlaoyan Peng and Guodong Zhao point out, Jing- me "refuses to be raised as a submissive Chinese daughter. So she launches a battle against Suyuan's domination and asserts her individuality by sabotaging her mother's every effort to bring out a genius in her against her own will" (5).

Grown up, Jing- me eventually realized the hollowness of the American culture and the richness of the Chinese cultural heritage. After her mother's death, Jing Mei's father asked her to replace her mother in the Joy Luck Club, and to take her seat at the mah jong table. Jing- me's consent to her father's command indicated her understanding of "her mother's devotion

---

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

and seeing things from her mother's perspective" (Tai 1). Additionally, she began every day to wear a pendant on a gold chain her mother had given her before her death. The carvings on the pendant "mean something to Chinese people" which she did not know; she would ask her auntie Lindo about the meaning of these carvings. (Tan *Joy* 197). Furthermore, she started to cook Chinese food for her father. She narrates, "My father hasn't eaten well since my mother died. So I'm here in the kitchen to cook him dinner. I'm slicing tofu. I've decided to make him a spicy bean-curd dish. My mother used to tell me how hot things restore the spirit and health" (Tan *Joy* 209).

Jing- me's Aunties told her that before her death, her mother, who had searched for years for her twin daughters, knew that they were still alive, and she got an address, but she died. Jing- me's Aunties wrote to this address, and were able to know her twin sister's location. They gave her a check for \$ 1, 200 dollars, and asked her to travel to China, meet her sisters and tell them about their mother's life. Jing- me travelled with her father in order to fulfill her mother's dream. Her trip to China was actually a turning point in her life. She narrates:

The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong borders and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. I can feel the skin of my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And I think, My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese.

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

"Cannot be helped," my mother said when I was fifteen and had vigorously denied that I had any Chinese whatsoever below my skin. (Tan *Joy* 267)

Thus, Jing- me restored her bonds with her homeland. On meeting her twin sisters, she restored her familial bonds. She asked her father to relate the final episode of her mother's story, and to relate it in Chinese; hence, she, at last, appreciated her mother tongue. In fact, Jing- me's trip to China enabled her to strike a balance between the Chinese culture of her homeland and the American culture of her host country. As Magali Cornier Michael puts it, the trip to China "functions as a means for Jing- me to explore the Chinese side of her Chinese American identity which she has repressed for years" (164). Consequently, she managed to restore her lost ethnic identity.

Like Jing-me, Waverly Jong, the daughter of Lindo Jong, acculturated and assimilated into the American way of life. She embraced the American ideals of individualism and independence from parents. Similarly, she constantly refused her mother's instructions. Her mother wanted her to combine both Chinese and American cultures; yet, she embraced only American culture. As her mother narrates, "Only her skin and hair are Chinese. Inside - she is all American made. [...]. I could not teach her about Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. [...]. Why Chinese thinking is best." (Tan *Joy* 254). Additionally, Waverly spoke English fluently, and knew few Chinese words; She rejected her mother tongue. When she was young, she was talented in playing chess. By her ninth birthday,



**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

she became a national chess champion. She was "touted as the Great American Hope, a child prodigy and a girl to boot" (Tan *Joy* 97). When her photo appeared in *Life* magazine, her mother became very proud of her; whenever they went, she told people " 'This is my daughter Wave-ly,' she said to whoever looked her way" (Tan *Joy* 99). Feeling shameful of her mother's poor English, she shocked her by saying " 'I wish you wouldn't do that, tell everybody I'm your daughter' " (Tan *Joy* 99).

Waverly hated life in her ethnic Chinese community, Chinatown. Therefore, when she grew to adulthood, she chose to marry from outside Chinatown; she married Marvin Chen, her high school American sweetheart. Subsequently, she experienced structural assimilation which has been previously discussed. Waverly "eloped" Marvin when she was eighteen and he was nineteen. She narrates, "When I was in love with Marvin, he was nearly perfect. He graduated third in class at Lowell and got a scholarship to Stanford. He played tennis" (Tan *Joy* 175). However, after marriage, he eventually ran away from family responsibilities. Their marriage was a failure, and she was divorced. Later, she married Rich, a Chinese American who was younger than her. Despite the fact that her mother did not approve of Rich, she eventually accepted their marriage, and proposed to go to China for their honeymoon. Waverly agreed to her mother's suggestion which denoted that she started to make some sort of reconciliation between her Chinese culture and that of the United States. As Magali Cornier Michael puts it, choosing China as "the

## **Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

destination for their upcoming honeymoon" [is indicative of] Waverly's wish to connect more firmly with that part of herself that is Chinese" (162). As Waverly and Rich left San Francisco for China with her mother, Waverly maintained, "The three of us, leaving our differences behind, stepping on the plane together, sitting side by side, lifting off, moving West to reach the East" (Tan *Joy* 184).

Rose Hsu Jordan, the daughter of An-me Hsu, likewise, embraced acculturation and assimilation. Overwhelmed by American culture, Rose rejected her ethnic identity. Like Waverly, she chose to marry from outside Chinatown. She insisted on marrying Ted despite her mother's "disapproval of their interracial relationship" (Michael 160). On warning her against such marriage since Ted is an American, Rose nervously replied, "I'm American too" (Tan *Joy* 117). Subsequently, she experienced structural assimilation. The fact is that what attracted Rose to Ted is his difference from her brothers and Chinese boys in general. She narrates:

I have to admit that what I initially found attractive in Ted were precisely the things that made him different from my brothers and Chinese boys I had dated: his brashness; the assuredness in which he asked for things and expected to get them; his opinionated manner; his angular face and lanky body; the thickness of his arms; the fact that his parents immigrated from Tarrytown, New York, not Tientsin, China. (Tan *Joy* 117)

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

Assimilating into the American way of life overpowered Rose to the extent that she regarded Chinese people and manners as foreign and strange. However, Ted could not continue in his marriage with Rose because of her passivity and inability to take decisions as previously remarked. After initially rejecting her mother's advice, she began to listen to her so as to save herself from the exploitation of Ted. Hence, she managed to bring back her motherly bonds which she had lost as a result of indulging in the American way of life. Throughout her life, Rose believed in the superiority of the American opinions to those of the Chinese; she believed that the "American version was much better". Eventually, she discovered that "there was a serious flaw with the "American version" (Tan *Joy* 191).

Lena St. Clair, the daughter of Ying Ying and Clifford St. Clair, who was an Irish American, entirely acculturated and assimilated into the American way of life; she extremely absorbed American culture. As Patricia L. Hamilton Points out, "Not only is Lena a second-generation Chinese American, she is half Caucasian, which makes her Chinese heritage even more remote" (141). Lena neither inherited her father's straw-yellow hair nor his white skin. She actually inherited her mother's eyes; therefore, as she relates, "I used to push my eyes in on the sides to make them rounder. Or I'd open them very wide until I could see the white parts" (Tan *Joy* 104). Lena was half Chinese; however, she rejected her mother and her ethnic identity. This "double rejection" of her mother and her Chinese culture took the form of marrying a white

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

American (Michael 159). At first, she married Arnold who died of a mysterious disease; later, she married Harold who worked with her in an architecture firm. Thereafter, Harold started a new firm, and asked Lena to work for him as a project coordinator. Though Lena exerted great efforts in the firm, Harold refused to promote her. Lena and Harold had separate accounts. On dining outside, each of them paid half of the bill. Upon buying a new house, each of them paid a percentage depending on what they earned. Lena relates:

"[w]hen we bought the house, we agreed that I should pay a percentage of community property; this is written in our prenuptial agreement. Since Harold pays more, he had the deciding vote on how the house should look. [...]. As for vacations, the one we choose together is fifty - fifty. (Tan *Joy* 161)

Lena suffered highly from this strict relationship. On realizing the misery of her daughter, Ying Ying decided to help her by relating her past; she did not want Lena to remain passive and silent. She was "stirred to speak directly when she sees her daughter's unhappy marriage" (McIister 27). Ying Ying believed that telling her daughter about her past was "the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved" (Tan *Joy* 242). Lena ultimately began to change; she eventually, listened to her mother which was indication of the fact that she finally appreciated her mother and her past.

In fact, as they grew to womanhood, the four American - born daughters eventually began to get

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

connected to their Chinese cultural heritage. They perceived the hollowness and narrowness of the American culture which is based upon individualism, self-reliance, independence from parents and materialism. They realized the worth and richness of their ethnic culture as well as the wisdom of their mothers and the necessity of listening to them.

To conclude, as a Chinese American, Amy Tan masterfully depicts the Chinese experience in the United States in her successful novel, *The Joy Luck Club* through two generations, the Chinese America immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. The novel is actually an application of the theories of pluralism, acculturation and assimilation. The Chinese American mothers adopted pluralism whereas their American-born daughters embraced acculturation and assimilation though, as they grew to womanhood, they realized the great value of their Chinese cultural heritage, and managed to strike a balance between their ethnic culture and the American culture. In fact, Amy Tan pinpoints the indispensability of one's ethnic culture, along with the American way of life; in other words, she approves of making some sort of reconciliation between the Chinese culture and the American culture. Subsequently, she recommends pluralism. Such recommendation can be applied to any ethnic minority, and this is actually testifies to the greatness of the novel.

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club**

---

**Works Cited**

Adams, Bella. *Amy Tan*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2005.  
Print.

..... "Identity in difference: Regenerating Debate about Intergenerational Relationships in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. *Studies in Literary Imagination*. 39: 2. (Fall 2006). Georgia State University. 79- 94.  
Web.17 Sept. 2016.

Berry, John W. "Conceptual Approaches to Acculturation."  
*Acculturation: Advances in Theory, Measurement and Applied Research*. Ed. Kevin M. Chun, Pamela Grgasnista and Gerardo Marin. Washington: American Psychological Association. 2003. 17-37. 2003. *Library Genesis*. 5 Jan. 2017.

....."Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation." *Applied Psychology: An International Review*. Vol. 46. No. 1. 1997. 5- 68.  
Web. 19 Sept. 2016.

Darraj, Susan Muddai. *Asian American of Achievement: Amy Tan*. New York: Infobase Publishing. 2007. *Library Genesis*. Web. 19 Oct. 2016.

**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

Foster, M. Marie Booth. "Voice, Mind, Self: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Bloom's Modern Critical Views. Edited with an Introduction by Harold Bloom. New York: Blooms Literary Criticism. 2009. 95 - 111 *Library Genesis*. Web. 17 May 20016.

Gioia, Dana. "A Conversation with Amy Tan." *The American Interest*. Vol. 2. No. 5. May 1- 2007. Web. 17- 4- 2017.

Gordon, Milton A. "Assimilation in America: Theory and Reality." *Daedalus*. Vol. 90. No. 2. *Ethnic Groups in American Life*. (Spring 1961). 263- 285. *JSTOR*. 17 Feb. 2017.

Hamilton, Patricia L. "Feng Shui, Astrology, and the Five Elements: Traditional Chinese in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." *MELUS* Vol. 24. No. 2. *Religion, Myth and Ritual*. (Summer 1999). 125- 145. *JSTOR*. 25 July 2016.

Huntley, E. D. *Amy Tan: A Critical Companion*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1998. Print.

Kramer, Barbara. *Amy Tan: Author of the Joy Luck Club*. United States of America: Enslow Publishers, Inc. 1996. Print.

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

Mcalister, Melanie. "(Mis) Reading *The Joy Luck Club*." *Amy Tan*. Edited

with an Introduction by Harlod Bloom. New York: Bloom's  
Literary

Criticism. *Library Genesis*. 2009. 3- 16. Web. 20 June 2016.

Marger, Martin N. *Race and Ethic Relations: American  
and Global*

*Perspectives*. United States: Wardsworth Cengage  
Learning. *Library*

*Genesis*. 2009. Web. 13 Jan. 2017.

Michael, Magali Cornier. "Choosing Hope and Remaking  
Kinship: Amy

Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." *Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club*.  
Edited

with an Introduction by Harold Bloom. New York:  
Infobase

Publishing. *Library Genesis*. 2009. 139- 172. Web. 15  
June 2016.

Mistri, Zenobia. "Discovering the Ethic Nature and the  
Genealogical Tie in

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. *Studies in Short Fiction*.  
Vol. 35.

1998. 251- 57. Web. 16 Oct. 2016.

Muchenge, Francis. "Cultural Pluralism and the quest for Nation  
Building

in Africa: The Rationale for cultural Educatin."  
*Journal of*

*Sustainable Development in Africa*. Vol. 14. No. 4.  
2012. 70- 81.

Web. 11 Feb. 2017.



**Dr. Mona A. M. Ahmed**

---

Sam. David L. "Acculturation : Conceptual Background and Core Components." *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology. Library Genesis.* 2006.11- 26. Web. 23 Jan. 2017.

Snodgrass. Mary Ellen. *Amy Tan: A Literary Companion.* North Carlonia: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. 2004. Print.

Tai, Chuen- Shin. "Love, Loss and Forgiveness in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club.*" Web. 10 Sept. 2016.

Tan, Amy. "The Boomer List." Interview with Kam Williams Pum Contributor. Web. 15 April 2017.

..... *The Joy Luck Club.* New York: G. P. Putman's Sons. 1989. Print.

....."Mother Tongue." Web. 13 Jan. 2017.

Toll, William. " Towards the Development of a Theory: Cultural Pluralism Redefined. *American Jewish History.* Vol. 85, No. 1. (March 1997). 57- 74. *Jstor.* Web. 15 Feb. 2017.

Vennopoosa, Chandra. "Cultural Pluralism." Web. 17 Jan. 2017.

Xlaoyan Peng and Guodong Zhao. "Chinese Mothers as Other before

**Pluralism, Acculturation and Assimilation in  
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club***

---

American Born- Daughters- on the Chinese Mothers'

Communication on *The Joy Luck Club* from the Perspective of

Orientalism." *European Journal of Business and Social*

*Sciences*. Vol. 2. No. 3. (June 2013). 1- 9. Web. 17 Sept. 2016.

Yeh. Christine J. "Acculturation and Assimilation." *Cultural Diversity and*

*Ethnic Minority Psychology*. Vol. 9. No. 1. 34- 48. Web. 11- June-

2016.