

**Integral Bond between Mothers and Daughters in Amy Tan's
The Kitchen God's Wife and *The Joy Luck Club***

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Abstract

Amy Tan is a contemporary Chinese American writer whose achievements in her primary genre, the novel, have been complemented over the years by personal essays and juvenile fiction. Recurrent themes include the dynamics of mother-daughter relationship, general and cultural conflicts, and the particularities of women's life experience. The major theme in all her novels concerns the nature the mother-daughter relationship, which are complicated not only by age difference, but by vastly different upbringing. In her novels, *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan mainly explores the theme of the whole bond between mothers and daughters. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie Louie and her daughter, Pearl are unable to understand each other because both of them conceal the secrets between them. This inability to understand each other is central to the thematic development of the novel. As the novel moves on, they are trying to reveal their secrets with the help of Auntie Helen. When reconciliation and understanding is made between Winnie and Pearl, on sharing their secrets, a true bondage of love begins between the mother and the daughter. In her another famous novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, there are four mothers who left China. They dreamt of a bright and prosperous future for their daughters. The daughters who were born in a different country saw the easy lifestyle around and rebelled against their mothers. The mothers in this novel face difficulty in directing their daughters to the right choices. The four mothers share their past life to their daughters to make them understand their real love and affection on them. At the end of the novel, the daughters understand their mothers' care and love on them. A true and whole bond begins when reconciliation and understanding were made between them. Thus, the mother and daughter relationship is not easy to break. It is a strong and true bond. The integral or whole bond between mothers and daughters is unique and inseparable in this world.

Keywords: Mother-daughter Bond, Mystery, Reconciliation, Understanding

Introduction

Asian American history is the history of ethnic and racial groups in the United States who are of Asian descent. The term 'Asian American' was coined in the late 1960s, to promote political solidarity and cultural nationalism. Asian American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of Asian descent. Elaine Kim defines "Asian American literature as work in English by writers of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Korean descent about U.S. American experience". Asian origin communities were designated as 'Oriental', east of and peripheral to an unnamed centre. (Quotd. Asian American Literature 9) Historically renamed as 'Asian Americans' they have had no place in the discourse on race and culture in the United States except as 'model minorities' on the one hand and/ or as 'inassimilable aliens' on the other who refuse to be assimilated into the dominant centre. Therefore, many Asian Americans felt the need to assert a self determined Asian American identity in direct opposition to this dehumanizing characterization. Consequently they used their writings as a means to forge a new and distinct identity in America. Asian American literature became a category during the 1970s but didn't see a direct impact in viewership until later in the 1970s. Asian American literature is now one of the most popular and important research areas within American literature and Comparative literature studies in China.



Amy Tan

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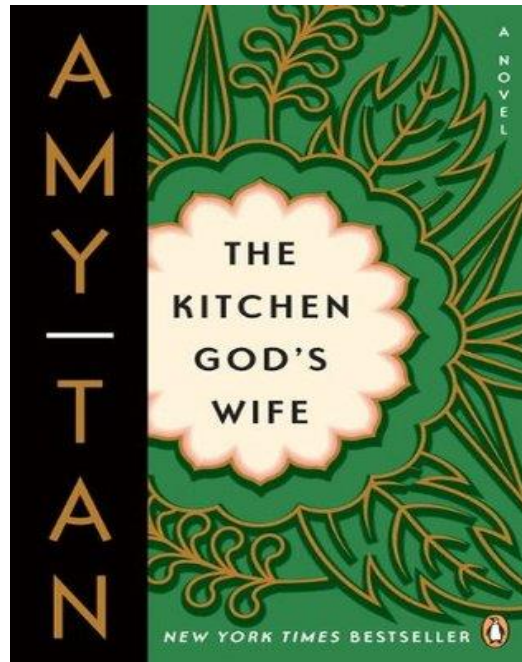
Amy Tan is an artistic member of the Chinese American women writers who address the issues of inequality meted out to women, the different cultural expectations of women, generation gaps between mother and daughter and the strength of women in the face of adversity. Amy Tan, whose Chinese name, An-mei, means “blessing from America”, was born in February 19, 1952, in Oakland, California. Her first Short story, *Endgame* later retitled *Rules of the Game*, earned her a pass to join the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, directed by the novelist Oakley Maxwell Hall, author of *The Art and Craft of Novel Writing* and *How Fiction Works*. This story was later incorporated into her debut novel *The Joy Luck Club*. Her other famous novels are *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, and *The Valley of Amazement* .

Unveiling the Mystery in Amy Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife*

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The relationship between a mother and a daughter is like a tie. A tie is made of two strings. Each string can be a tie, but to make a tie bigger, two strings are used. Similarly, a mother and a daughter are two different persons and they have their own lives. But they are connected and related very much. For a daughter, a mother is a big part of her life, and for a mother, a daughter is a reflection of her life. To make their lives better they rely on each other and understand their affection, love without any mystery between them.

Amy Tan's second novel, another jewel of a book, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), is again a story that a Chinese mother tells her daughter, but it surpasses its predecessor as a fully integrated and developed narrative, perspective, poignant, humorous and wise. In Tan's novel, a mother and daughter- Winnie Louie and Pearl share their stories, revealing the secrets that they hide - mind, self and history and veil and mask their voices. Winnie's tale is the loss of her mother as a young girl, marriage to a sadistic man who sexually abuses her, children still born or dying young, a patriarchal society that allowed little room for escape from domestic violence and her flight to America for the love of a good man. However the most devastating secret that she had kept away from her daughter Pearl is that she is the daughter of the monster Wen Fu who had raped her for one last time before she escaped. Daughter Pearl's secrets include her pain

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upon the loss of her father and the unpredictable disease multiple sclerosis that inhibits her body and her life.

The opening narrator of the novel, Pearl, is a young woman living in San Jose, California. She is the American-born daughter of a Chinese mother, Winnie Louie and a Chinese-American father, Jimmy Louie. As a result she is raised in a kind of limbo between two worlds, and, by the time we get to know her when she is in her forties, she is more American than Chinese, is married to an American man, has two American girls, and has a sad distance between herself and her mother. The chapter opens with the narration of Pearl Louie Brandt, Winnie's daughter. The very first paragraph of the novel reveals the tension that prevails between Winnie and Pearl.

Pearl says

Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument (KGW11).

Her mother has invited her to come from San Jose to Pearl's cousin's (Bao-Bao) engagement party in San Francisco. Pearl and her American husband, Phil, do not want to go but decide to make the trip, especially after Winnie tells her daughter, in another phone conversation, that her Auntie Du has died and that the funeral is planned for the day after the engagement party. Grand Auntie Du was actually Helen's relative, but Winnie has always had a daughterly attachment to her. We also hear about Pearl's condition, in which she is afflicted with multiple sclerosis, a condition she is hiding from her mother. The drinking buddy told me I had multiple sclerosis (KGW 26)

So I never told my mother. At first I didn't want to hear her theories of my illness, what caused this happen, how she should have done this or that to prevent it. I did not want her to remind me. (KGW 30)

After making the drive into San Francisco, Phil, Pearl, and their two children (Tessa and Cleo) stay the night at Winnie's house, upon Winnie's request. Once at the wedding, Pearl is talking to Mary, Auntie Helen's daughter, whose "sympathetic" behavior concerning Pearl's multiple sclerosis angers and irritates Pearl. It is also at the wedding that Auntie Helen calls Pearl

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aside. While cutting the cake, Helen tells Pearl that she must tell her mother about her condition, and, that if she does not, then Helen will be forced to do so herself.

She sighs deeply. “Pearl-ah, this is too much burden for me. It makes my heart and shoulders heavy that your mother does not know. How can I fly to heaven when this is weighing me down? No, you must tell your mother, Pearl. Tell her about your multiple neurosis. (KGW 36)

Winnie, on the other hand, thinks about how she turned down her first marriage proposal, to a boy named Lin, simply because her family did not think he was rich enough. And then years later, in America, that same Lin came to a church service conducted by Winnie’s second husband, Jimmy Louie. Lin was now a prosperous doctor with a beautiful wife. And although Winnie loved Jimmy and their life together, she could not help but feel she had made the wrong choice, so long ago, by not marrying Lin. It was the wrong choice because it led to her marry another man instead, a man named Wen, who made her life miserable. The element that arises out of these chapters is that the distance between mother and daughter seems to be filled with secrets. Winnie begins to think of all the things she would have to tell her daughter if she were going to unveil her secrets: that she had a first marriage and children that died from that first marriage; that she had survived a war; that Wen Fu is Pearl’s real father, not Jimmy Louie. She decides that she will call her daughter and that she will tell her these things.

Sure, I could tell my children first: I had another marriage, to someone else. It was a very bad marriage. I made a mistake. But now that man is dead. I could tell them: I had other children from that first marriage, but I lost them, so sad, but that was wartime, long time ago. (KGW 85)

Not only daughters are telling their stories and their mothers’ stories in the texts, but mothers are telling their own stories, enabling the texts themselves to incorporate different versions of the same events and circumstances. Within the process of telling of stories, mothers and daughters begin to understand each other whether there is common ground found or not. When reconciliation and understanding is made possible between Winnie Louie and Pearl, on sharing their secrets, a true bond of love begins with the mother and the daughter.

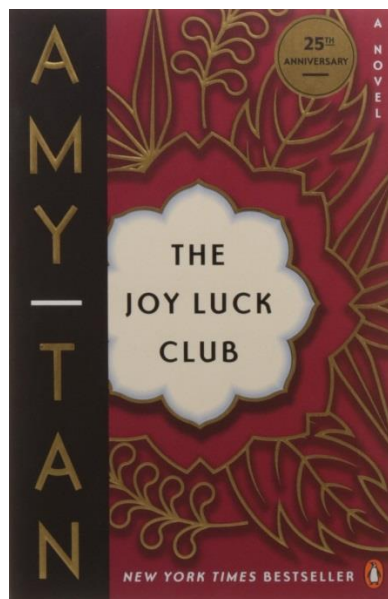
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Amy Tan's novels are a collection of inter-related stories, centered on the diverse emotional relationships of mother-daughter pairs. *The Kitchen God's Wife* is a novel, in which Amy Tan employs an inter-generational gap between a Chinese mother and an American daughter. The story relieves Winnie from her guilty feeling over the genetic rights of her daughter Pearl. Throughout all her novels the intensity and power of the mother-daughter bond is felt. This female identity shows that the mother-daughter bond is also connecting the bond to motherland.

Reconciliation in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*



One of the most basic and most insightful bonds women form with each other is that of a mother and daughter. It is a bond that should not be taken for granted, and it is a relationship built on trust and love. The mother and daughter relationship is one of the strongest and complex bond in the world. It is considered as one of the most powerful connections in nature. Sometimes mothers are the best friends for the daughters to talk their problems with and sometimes a beautiful smile on his sweet daughter will let father forget all the worries and stress in life. The mother is very caring and shows affection to her daughter. Therefore, mother is often considered as daughter's love.

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Amy Tan is one of the best known and most popular Asian American writers known for her versatility and wide range of outlook. *The Joy Luck Club* is a novel written by Amy Tan. Tan wrote her first novel *The Joy Luck Club*, in order to gain a better understanding of the generational and cultural tensions between herself and her mother.

The novel *The Joy Luck Club* contains sixteen interwoven stories and conflicts between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-raised daughters. In 1949, four Chinese women drawn together by the shadow of their past, become friends in San Francisco and start a “club”, which is their weekly mahjongg game. *The Joy Luck Club* has been divided into four parts such as Feathers From a Thousand Li Away, The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates, American Translation, and Queen Mother of the Western Skies. Each section carries four stories which contain separate titles. Structurally, the novel is comprised of sixteen stories told from the perspectives of all mothers and daughters. The narrators tell their stories in interior monologues over individually named chapters, with the only exception of Suyuan.

The first story begins two months after Jing-mei (June) Woo loses her mother, Suyuan, to a brain aneurysm. Jing Mei Woo began her narration speaking of her mother Suyuan, who believed that one could be anything one wanted to be in America and Suyuan was obsessed with the hope that her daughter would become a prodigy. At first she wanted Jing to become the Chinese Shirley Temple. Later she wished she would be like other remarkable children who knew the capitals of all the countries, or were good in mathematics or had exemplary memory. In order to prepare Jing-mei for a future that she hopes will be brilliant, Suyuan Woo nightly submits Jing-mei to a series of tests while forcing her to listen to countless stories about amazing children. Suyuan Woo however showed no signs of giving up. Once she saw a nine year old Chinese girl playing the piano on ‘The Ed Sullivan Show’.

Three days after watching The Ed Sullivan Show, my mother told me what my schedule would be for piano lessons and piano practice. (JLC)

Mother and daughter finally settle on Jing-mei’s becoming a concert pianist, and Jing-mei begins to take piano lessons from Mr. Old Chong, a retired piano teacher who happens to be

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deaf. Suyuan Woo arranged for Jing to participate in a talent show held in the church hall. All the other friends of Suyuan Woo were there and Jing put up an awful show and this devastated her mother. Jing waited for her to get angry and blame her, but she simply wore:

A quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything... No blame. And in a way, I felt disappointed. (JLC 162)

But she would not give up even then. She wanted Jing to practice as usual but Jing strongly opposed the idea. Jing mei decided not to follow her mother's decrees. In addition, Jing-mei has no desire to cooperate with her mother. On the contrary, she fights her every step of the way. Determined to thwart her mother's ambitions, Jing-mei neglects practicing the piano. As a result, Jing-mei is shocked when her mother offers her the piano as a thirtieth birthday present.

So she surprised me. A few years ago, she offered to give me the piano, for my thirtieth birthday. (JLC 165)

Only after her mother's death can Jing-mei accept the piano. As she is packing her mother's things, she sits down to play the piano for the first time in many years. It is only after her mother's death that Jing-mei begins to realize what her mother had wanted for her. She looks back over the music that she formerly shunned and discovers something that she hadn't noticed before. This realization brings together the theme of the tension between mothers and daughters.

The mothers and daughters in this book are separated by many factors--age, experience, ambition, and culture. In the final story of *The Joy Luck Club* is "A Pair of Tickets". Jing-mei discusses her trip to China to meet her half-sisters, and she finishes the story of her mother's life.

Jing-mei and her sisters are the only known living relatives of Suyuan, as Suyuan's entire family died when a Japanese bomb landed on their house, killing several generations in an instant. She recognised that her mother had loved her a lot especially as she learnt more of the Chinese language and the significance of her name. The love of her mother led her to a personal understanding and made her feel whole again.

The novel traces the fate of four mothers--Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair--and their four daughters--Jing-mei "June" Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, and Lena St. Clair. The four older women have experienced almost inconceivable horrors early in their lives. Suyuan Woo was forced to abandon her infant daughters in order to survive in a war-torn land; An-mei Hsu sees her mother commit suicide in order to enable her daughter to have a future. Lindo Jong is married at twelve to a child to whom she was betrothed in infancy; Ying-ying St. Clair was abandoned by her husband, had an abortion, and lived in great poverty for a decade. She then married a man whom she did not love, a man she could barely communicate with despite their years together.

By comparison, the four daughters have led relatively blessed lives, cosseted by their doting--if assertive-- mothers. Ironically, each of the daughters has great difficulty achieving happiness. Waverly Jong divorces her first husband, and both Lena St. Clair and Rose Hsu Jordan are on the verge of splitting with their husbands. Lena is wretchedly unhappy and considering divorce; Rose's husband, Ted, has already served the divorce papers. Jing-mei has never married nor has she a lover. Furthermore, none of the daughters is entirely comfortable when dealing with the events of her life. Although she has achieved great economic success as a tax accountant, Waverly is afraid to tell her mother that she plans to remarry. Lena has a serious eating disorder, and she bitterly resents the way that she and her husband, Harold, split their finances, and how her career has suffered in order to advance his. Rose suffers a breakdown when her husband moves out. She lacks self-esteem, and her mother cannot understand why she sobs to a psychiatrist rather than asserting herself. Jing-mei is easily intimidated, especially by her childhood friend Waverly. She is not satisfied with her job as an advertising copywriter, and, like Rose, she lacks self-esteem. Through the love of their mothers, each of these young women learns about her heritage and so is able to deal more effectively with her life.

Narrative Techniques

Narrative techniques are the methods and devices that writers use to tell their stories, whether in works of literature, film, theatre or even oral stories. All literary devices can be analyzed as texts with narrative aspects that include storyline, character, narration, point of view,

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etc. Tan's writing relies heavily on Memory Narrative, Storytelling, use of Myths, Prologues, Autobiographical elements, Language and Symbols. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is a long complex and tempting narrative. It was one of the best sellers of 1989. The novel is divided into four sections and each section is again divided into four stories. Each of the four sections is prefaced with an initiatory thematic tale or myth, portraying a mother figure. The readers notice a very deliberate and well-conceived plan in the structure of this novel. In Amy Tan's novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, the style significantly contributes to the development of both the tone and the theme of the influences that a mother can have on her daughter. The author effectively portrays the somber tone and the theme by using a concise style of diction, images, details, language, sentence structure, point of view, and organization.

Conclusion

This article "Integral Bond Between Mothers and Daughters in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Joy Luck Club*" has attempted to expose a solution that the bondage between mothers and daughters is unique in this world. No love is greater than mother's love for daughters. Misunderstanding occurs when anybody hide secrets within them. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie and her daughter Pearl are veiling secrets from each other and naturally the daughter did not understand her mother's love and care. When they reveal their secrets, they become united and their bond becomes much closer. In *The Joy Luck Club*, through the sharing of all four mother's personal experiences, reconciliation between mothers and daughters is reached. The daughters realize that their mothers have always had their best interests at heart. The reader suggests that hiding secrets from anyone may be resulted in misunderstanding. Thus the dissertation brings out a clear truth that whatever problems arise between the mothers and daughters, no one can break their bond between them.

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