

„ЕЗИЦИТЕ“ НА ЛИТЕРАТУРНАТА ТВОРБА
“THE LANGUAGES” OF THE LITERARY WORK
TRANSLATING OTHERNESS IN AMY TAN’S “THE JOY LUCK CLUB”

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ABSTRACT: The Joy Luck Club by the Chinese American author Amy Tan is about the lives of four Chinese women born and raised in China and their American born daughters. The novel has been adapted into a 1993 film with the same name. The lives of the four families, with Chinese immigrant mothers and their Chinese American daughters intersect in the club named ‘Joy Luck Club’ in San Francisco. During this intersection there are issues pertaining to cultural identities, gender, immigrant lives, marginalisation and otherness. Language and its role in shaping identities comes to the fore as Chinese words often surface, as these words express the exact meaning for the mothers, but not so much for the daughters who are English speaking. How Tan puts the racial and cultural identities of the mothers and their daughters under a lens is interesting, for through the lens we see how Otherness manifests itself within the domain of families and outside of them. The present paper investigates ways by which the novel and film depict Otherness and how identities are formed by social interactions. Another area that will be investigated is that of fluidity of linguistic interactions as the author indulges in domestication and code switching.

KEYWORDS: cultural and social identity, otherness, homogeneity, cultural stereotypes, multiculturalism, code switching

1. Introduction

In multicultural, pluralistic and globalised societies, communication happens when we step out of our ways of understanding the world and acknowledge that others look at it differently. This Otherness in intercultural translation is heavily marked, especially when the cultures involved in interaction and negotiation have different power equations. Otherness is the way individuals and communities experience a sense of not belonging, of being outsiders, making them grapple with identity and acceptance conflicts. How people from different cultures negotiate differences and what are the ways in which the dynamics of gender, ethnicities, language, and power come into play, how identities are altered and shaped by such negotiations, are some aspects the present study aims to undertake.

In a postcolonial multicultural world, cultural identities hold the possibility of being lost, blurred, regained, reconstituted, and reiterated. The question of the subaltern and whether they have a voice cannot be ignored because in case of dominant hegemonic cultures the one that is subservient might be at the receiving end (see Spivak, 1998, p. 66).

A study of *The Joy Luck Club* is a way to understand these multiple possibilities of cross-cultural otherness and translation. Since the novel has been adapted into a film with the same title, a comparative study will be interesting as the two are powerful and distinct forms of telling a story, “The book and movie are the two types of medium in which to present a story. “These two mediums have their own unique characteristics, which differ from one another, but the two also have similarities” (Samson & Arcenal, 2014, p.14).

The paper will examine the theoretical background of cultural translation and identity to see cultural stereotypical images associated with the east by westerners, how immigrants view themselves and try to fit in and in the process witness dehumanisation or cultural domination. This is especially relevant in the post-colonial discourse in which multiculturalism, pluralism, and inclusiveness are key denominators of identity. How history, cultural nuances of food, clothes, marriage, and language come into play in the novel and the film, posit a study from the point of view of *otherness* and its translation. The film as an adaptation enables us to draw parallels between the two within the framework of Otherness. Since Tan herself has penned the screenplay with Ronald Bass, it will be insightful to compare it to the text to see the area(s) of contact of the film and the novel.

The Joy Luck Club creates an interactive space for cultural discourse. There is a conversation and a competition between the Eurocentric western discourse and the Oriental discourse, and their

cultural practices. Since ethnicities are integral to our identities, giving us a sense of who we are, the dialogue between ethnocentricity and multiculturalism manifests itself in the novel, as does the representation of binaries.

Binaries are often difficult to create a space and find acceptance in a world where homogenisation is, by and large, the unsaid way of life. This stands true of identities as well. Identities are constructed based on hegemonic relationships, and they are pluralistic, dynamic, and complex. They are not confined to the identity one is born with, but are also sociologically constructed: these social identities “reflect the way individuals and groups internalise established social categories (...) such as their cultural (or ethnic) identities, gender identities, class identities, and so on” (Zevallos, 2020).

Moreover, linguistic issues are foregrounded as Johnson (2019) says, in the use of code-switching which “functions to announce specific identities, create certain meanings, and facilitate particular interpersonal relationships.” This can be understood by the following example from the text: “*chabudwo*. Or maybe she said *butong* (...) It was of one those Chinese expressions meaning the better half of mixed intentions” (Tan, 1989, p.17). The immigrants’ divided identities, both cultural and ethnic, the one they have been born with and their socially constructed identities are the cause of Otherness, which Edward Said (1978) talks of in terms of the others.

Collective ideas of belonging are seen as being challenged by people who are different and are viewed as being different. This dialogic of binaries and dichotomies, results in a conflict that is not just inter-cultural, but also intra-cultural. Due to the hierarchies in social identities, power differentials are manifested.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Background

In the preface of her book *What is Cultural Translation*, the writer states that the objective of her book is “to demonstrate (...) its capacity to serve as a vehicle for new ways of seeing and being that enable us to question the received ideas that structure the worlds in which we live” (Sarah Maitland, 2017, p.9).

The term culture has several layers and encompasses many aspects of human societies within its fold. Culture is also primarily communication, communication entails use of language, and languages engage in a dialogic through translation and “the study of translation is the study of cultural interaction (...)” (Bassnet & Lefevere, 1998, p. ix).

When two cultures are situated within a domain and the two have unequal power indices, what happens to language? “Any language use is thus the site of power relationships because a language, at any historical moment, is a specific conjecture of a major form holding sway over minor variables” (Venuti, 1998, p. 10).

Gender and generation are two layers that operate within the umbrella term of culture. Both these are prominent in the novel, and even more in the film. The mothers and daughters provide a subtext for gender identities and the generational distance between them. Simons, in this respect opines that hybridization of diasporic culture and the mobility of all identities – including gender – are central to the concerns of cultural studies. These contestatory sites of identity have sharpened awareness of the cultural authority of language, and of the position of the speakers within dominant codes (Simon, 1996, p. 127).

This theoretical background provides the framework for the present paper using which the textual analysis of *The Joy Luck Club* as the primary text has been done, comparing and contrasting it with the film to see how the book and the movie shape the elements of the story in vastly diverse ways. Although there is a similarity in the book and its film adaptation, the theme and flow of the storyline both differ from each other in terms of the type of presentation and its manner of giving information and descriptions (see Samson & Arcenal, 2014, pp. 6-7).

3. The Joy Luck Club: A Comparative Analysis

| The mothers | The daughters |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Suyuan Woo | Jing-mei “June” Woo |
| An-mei Hsu | Rose Hsu Jordan |
| Lindo Jong | Waverly Jong |
| Ying-ying St. Clair | Lena St. Clair |

4. Plot of the novel

Amy Tan draws the material for *The Joy Luck Club* from her own life. She weaves the lives of four mothers and their daughters and how their destinies intersect, in four sections, each devoted to one mother-daughter relationship. The Chinese immigrant mothers with pasts that are challenging grapple with their Americanised daughters after having settled in the United States. The relationships between the mothers and daughters and the gender issue, which is delineated, for example, by how the marriage is perceived by the Chinese girls, are a significant aspect of the novel, but not limited to it, as the novel has many layers. It is also about cultures and the otherness in intercultural communication: food, clothes, language, beliefs, superstitions, festivals, symbols, jewellery – the many facets of Chinese culture, find expression in the novel and unfold as one reads the text.

5. Plot of the film

The film is an adaptation of the novel and not an inspiration. The characters and situations have largely been recreated and the stories of the four mothers and daughters narrated. Instead of creating sections as in the novel, the film blends the stories seamlessly, switching over from one to the other. The major scenes from the novel are recreated, with the setting shifting from China to America. The film has a greater thrust on the relationship of the mothers to their daughters and the tension between them due to the generation gap.

The opening scene of the film shows June who has lost her mother, hesitant to be part of a group photo with her mother's friends and their daughters. June reminisces how her mother started the Joy Luck Club and played *mah jong* with her three friends for thirty years. Almost all through the film the gender roles and the relationships of the daughters and mothers are voiced either in the conversations, the dialogues or by the narrator. In China it was customary for daughters to be married early and accept their fate submissively. The film has a scene set in China in which June's mother Suyuan Woo, is promised in marriage to the prospective groom's mother on turning fifteen, something she has to accept unquestioningly.

6. Cultural Representation of China

“The East is where things begin, my mother once told me, the direction from which the sun rises, where the wind comes from” (Tan, 1989, p. 30).

Food, stories, beliefs and superstitions are interwoven into the novel to create a tapestry of China's culture. The immigrant mothers have acquired them from their mothers in China and passed them on to their daughters. Whether the daughters, who feel they are American, like it or not, the ways and words of their mothers are a part of their mental and emotional makeup. They cannot rid themselves of who they truly are.

6.1 Food

Food emerges as an important identity marker. The Chinese cuisine is a parameter of social and cultural construct. Food brings people together; it marks festivities and auspiciousness. *Ywansyau*, for instance, are sweet dumplings prepared on the Lantern festival; *Tounau* is a special soup considered good for mothers in law. In both the novel and the film, there are also references to food and table mannerisms in Chinese families. When Waverley introduces Rich, her boyfriend, to her family over dinner at their house, she senses that her mother would never approve of him for he has two glasses of wine as toast, he serves too much food on his plate and he criticises her mother's cooking for whom “cooking was how my mother expressed her love, her pride, her power, her proof that she knew more than Auntie Su” (Tan, 1989, p. 157). Not only food, but the way of partaking it is also representative of culture. In China, they do not bite the noodles, as they are said to represent longevity and biting them is a bad omen. Rich is unaware of the Chinese custom of not criticising cooking, but rather appreciating it, of not taking the second serving of a drink, and of using sticks appropriately for eating noodles. The mother displays ethnocentrism which is grounded in the belief that one's own culture is superior to that of other cultures, which results in a form of reductionism that diminishes the other way of life. “That differences in culture and corresponding behavioural preferences should be acknowledged as these differences can create barriers to understanding among people from different cultures” (Li & Karakowsky, 2001, p. 514). Differences are seen as being pronounced here, and Waverly's mother represents ethnocentrism, with the expectation that the “other, the American, adapts the Chinese ways

in order to fit in. There is an attitude of racial supremacy as, “(...) the more advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with ‘other’ cultures. So, Orientalism aided and was aided by general cultural pressures that tended to make more rigid the sense of difference between the European and Asiatic parts of the world” (Said, 1978, p.204).

6.1 I. Chinese Dishes Mentioned in the Novel

| S.No. | Terms Used | Meaning | Type | Pg. no. |
|-------|--------------------------|--|------|---------|
| 1 | <i>Dyansyin/ Dim sum</i> | Cantonese cuisine | Food | 20 |
| 2 | <i>Wonton</i> | A Chinese food item | Food | 27 |
| 3. | <i>Chaswei</i> | Sweet barbecued pork cut into coin-sized slices | Food | 29 |
| 4. | <i>Tounau</i> | Tonic (soup) | Food | 56 |
| 5. | <i>Zongzi</i> | The sticky rice wrapped in lotus leaves, some filled with roasted ham, some with sweet lotus seeds | Food | 67 |
| 6. | <i>Ywansyau</i> | The sticky sweet dumpling | Food | 21 |
| 7. | <i>Syaumei</i> | A little dumpling | Food | 48 |

6.2 Language

The Chinese words and expressions interspersed in the text, with their exact or close English translations in the same sentence, is an interplay of foreignisation which is both “source-language-culture-oriented” (Zuho, 2022, p. 60) and domestication.

We can look at the use of Chinese words and expressions in the novel from two perspectives. For the mothers, the use of Chinese is ethnocentric and therefore points at domestication. From the point of view of the readers, it is foreignisation, as the stress on the source language culture gives them glimpses into the foreign/Chinese culture. Domestication refers to “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values (...)” (Venuti, 1995, p. 20), while foreignisation is “ethnodeviant” (Venuti, 1995, p. 20).

There is code-switching as mothers shift to the use of Chinese in between sentences. They are comfortable using their language and, at times, their inadequacy in English usage makes them shift to Chinese. The daughters, on the other hand, are comfortable with English. The Americanisation mandates use of English to give the immigrants a sense of belonging in a multicultural society as “the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said, 1978, p. 5).

One of the characters in the novel named June is quite inept at Chinese: I try to think of Cantonese words I can say to her, stuff I learned from friends in Chinatown, but all I can think of are swear words, terms for bodily functions, and short phrases like “tastes good,” (Tan, 1989, p. 244) “tastes like garbage,” (Tan, 1989, p. 244) and “she is really ugly” (Tan, 1989, p. 244).

The emphasis on language is pronounced in the novel and the mothers use Chinese frequently. The daughters speak English fluently; for them it is their language. Here we see how language assumes hegemony for immigrants of one generation, belonging to other ethnicities. On the other hand, for the older generation language is about cultural rootedness, intermixed with a sense of pride, “My table was from my family and was of a very fragrant red wood, not what you call rosewood, but *hong mu*, which is so fine there’s no English word for it” (Tan, 1989, p. 21). This is also an example of non-equivalence in translation.

We come across some potent sentences in the novel which reflect the importance of language as a tool of cultural construct. The variations of accents and the varieties of dialects, bring to the fore the richness of the linguistic heritage of China. Bourdieu regards dialects, or in fact knowledge, as the “embodied cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 2016). We see the daughters considering their mothers as being language incompetent due to their fractured English, and do not quite like them speaking Chinese, as is reflected by the examples from the text given below:

- “Aiyi and my father speak the Mandarin dialect from their childhood, but the rest of the family speaks only the Cantonese of their village. I understand only Mandarin but can’t speak it that well. So Aiyi and my father gossip unrestrained in Mandarin, exchanging news about people from their old village” (Tan, 1989, p. 244).
- “I think my mother’s English was the worst, but she always thought her Chinese was the best. She spoke Mandarin slightly blurred with a Shanghai dialect” (Tan, 1989, p. 26).
- “They speak in their special language, half in broken English, half in their own Chinese dialect” (Tan, 1989, p. 31).
- “They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English” (Tan, 1989, p. 36).
- “Where we lived and shopped, everyone spoke Cantonese or English. My mother was from Wushi, near Shanghai. So, she spoke Mandarin and a little bit of English. My father, who spoke only a few canned Chinese expressions, insisted my mother learn English” (Tan, 1989, p. 65).

The mothers know that their daughters regard them as stupid because their English is fractured and they talk down to them because they can talk like the natives, the Americans.

6.3 I. Some Chinese Words in *The Joy Luck Club*:

| S.No. | Terms Used | Meaning | Type | Pg.no. |
|-------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|--------|
| 1. | <i>Hong mu</i> | Rosewood | Object | 21 |
| 3. | <i>Yuan</i> | Currency | Object | 23 |
| 4. | <i>Houlu</i> | A small stone for burning coal | Object | 198 |
| 5. | <i>ChwunHwa</i> | Spring flower | Object | 249 |
| 6. | <i>Tyandi</i> | Heaven and earth/universe | Object, Belief | 205 |
| 7. | <i>Chi</i> | Spirit | Belief | 221 |
| 8. | <i>Shemma</i> | What | Expression of feeling | 160 |
| 9. | <i>Butong</i> | Different | Expression of feeling | 17 |
| 10. | <i>Chabudwo</i> | Almost | Expression of feeling | 17 |
| 11. | <i>Mei gwansyi</i> | It doesn’t matter | Expression of feeling | 100 |
| 12. | <i>Choszle!</i> | Stinks to death! | Expression of feeling | 149 |
| 13. | <i>Syinyifu!</i> <i>Yidafadwo!</i> | New clothes all over the place | Expression of feeling | 66 |
| 14. | <i>Waigoren</i> | Foreigners | Relation | 178 |
| 15. | <i>Dajya</i> | Everyone | Relation | 64 |
| 16. | <i>Tai tai</i> | Wife | Relation | 197 |
| 17. | <i>Yi tai</i> | First wife | Relation | 202 |
| 18. | <i>Sz Tai</i> | Fourth wife | Relation | 202 |
| 19. | <i>Jyejye</i> | Sister | Relation | 240 |
| 20. | <i>Aiyi</i> | Aunty | Relation | 243 |
| 21. | <i>Ni</i> | You | Relation | 39 |
| 22. | <i>Yiding</i> | Must | Instruction | 109 |
| 23. | <i>Ni kan</i> | You watch | Instruction | 118 |
| 24. | <i>Nala</i> | Take it | Instruction | 186 |
| 25. | <i>Ching</i> | Please | Instruction | 41 |
| 26. | <i>Chwun Yu</i> | Spring rain | Condition | 249 |
| 27. | <i>Jrdaule</i> | I know | Condition | 161 |
| 28. | <i>Sz</i> | Die | Condition | 213 |
| 29. | <i>Heimongmong</i> | Dark fog | Condition | 168 |
| 30. | <i>Jandale</i> | Grown up | Condition, Quality | 243 |
| 31. | <i>Chuming</i> | Intelligent | Quality | 219 |

| | | | | |
|-----|----------------------|---|----------------------------------|-----|
| 32. | <i>Kechi</i> | Courteous | Quality | 220 |
| 33. | <i>Lihai</i> | Intensely | Quality | 215 |
| 34. | <i>Nengkan</i> | Capable | Quality | 108 |
| 35. | <i>Shou</i> | Respect for ancestors, family | Behaviour | 38 |
| 36. | <i>Pichi</i> | Temper | Behaviour | 46 |
| 37. | <i>Hulihudu</i> | Confused | Behaviour, Feeling, Condition | 168 |
| 38. | <i>Chunwanchihan</i> | Without lips teeth feel cold (dependency) | Proverb | 144 |

6.3. II. Dual Cultural Hegemony

“You Americans aren’t the only ones who know how to get rich!” (Tan, 1989, p. 245).

The view of the exotic Oriental, the westerner’s perspective for a long time, while for the immigrant’s otherness loomed large in their own perspective and the way they were viewed. The clothes, jewellery, behavioural norms and bodies, all are representative of a specific culture and ethnicity: “I’m ‘exotic’ in an unusual way, and they’re jealous that my breasts don’t sag, now that small breasts are in” (Tan, 1989, p.138).

Tan shows how the Chinese immigrant families pick- up English and the western clothes to fit in and belong in America. Eventually this becomes the normal for the second generation, who even feel uncomfortable wearing Chinese outfits. Even as a child June has the thought: “She and Auntie An-mei 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, I thought, and too strange for American parties” (Tan, 1989, p. 25), whereas being dressed in slacks, shirts, and shoes seems normal.

The Chinese ways of the mother appear uncouth for the Americanised daughters, “‘*Shemmayisz?*’ – What meaning? – she [mother] asked me when a man at a grocery store yelled at her for opening up jars to smell the insides. I was so embarrassed I told her that Chinese people were not allowed to shop there” (Tan, 1989, p. 94).

For the daughters the American way is their way, the one they want to belong to. They have gone through, to use the words of Stuart Hall, “the internalization of the self-as-other” (Hall, 1996, p.445). Waverley asserts this clearly to her mother: “‘He is American,’ warned my mother, as if I had been too blind to notice. ‘A *waigoren*. I’m American too,’ I said” (Tan, 1989, p.104).

The mothers have a sense of cultural superiority for their Chinese traditions and customs. Although dominant cultures have established hegemony and a post-colonial imperialism that marginalises minorities and indigenous cultures as being primitive and irrational, the mothers retain their ethnic and cultural pride. They learn English and speak it in their own ways, they wear western clothes, and even carry the Bible to the church classes, but they remain firmly rooted in their culture. They cook Chinese dishes, celebrate their festivals, cherish their stories and language; to them, “fourteen carats isn’t real gold” (Tan, 1989, p. 45); they believe Chinese people are very enterprising “not lazy like American people” (Tan, 1989, p. 80). Despite this cultural pride, they try to be a part of the mainstream and watch their daughters become Americanised, as is resonated by Suyuan, “I learned the Western ways. I tried to speak with a thick tongue. I raised a daughter, watching her from another shore. I accepted her American ways” (Tan, 1989, p. 222).

The inherent difference between the mothers and daughters is well brought out by the following lines: “They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters that to these closed American-born minds “joy luck” are not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren, born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation” (Tan, 1989, p. 36).

The mothers have a sense of pride and superiority about their culture which makes them look down upon not just the American way of life, but also other cultures, for example Jewish. When the Jewish way of playing *mah jong* is compared with the Chinese, it is unerringly found to be inferior:

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*. Why play? There’s no strategy. You’re just watching people make mistakes. These kinds of explanations made me feel my mother and I spoke two

different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese (Tan, 1989, p. 30).

In both the examples above, acculturation is witnessed, which has been defined as the “psychological changes induced in people due to cross-cultural imitation, resulting from the interaction with different cultures” (Varghese, 2022). The mothers depict integration as they adopt some values of the new culture, while retaining their own cultural identity. This is typical of a multicultural society and enables fluidity. The daughters initially display assimilation for they have adopted the American culture with just traces of their own culture. This is true for groups that consider fitting in as being important: “We were all blind with the newness of this experience, “a Chinese family trying to act like a typical American family at the beach” (Tan, 1989, p.109). Eventually, though the realisation of their own roots and traditions dawns upon the daughters. The mothers and their families live in them, as does their ethnicity.

The American sense of superiority surfaces when Rich Jordan introduces Waverley to his parents at a party and his mother puts it across to her directly that a relationship with her son would be detrimental to his career, that she “had nothing whatsoever against minorities” (Tan, 1989, p. 109), but others were not as understanding as the Jordans. The scene has been incorporated in the movie as well.

Another example is the way the Chinese name is changed to an American one, with a sense of the latter having greater acceptance, “My father proudly named her in her immigration papers: Betty St. Clair, crossing out her given name of Gu Ying-ying” (Tan, 1989, p. 42).

The crossing out of the name is a way to “naturalise the difference between belongingness and otherness” (Hall, 1996, p. 445). The word ‘proudly’ seems to echo a sense of ethnic pride, the giving of a hegemonic identity to assert a homogenised identity, but it does not strike out otherness and create a sense of belongingness.

6.4 Ethnicity and Sense of Belonging

“And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood” (Tan, 1989, p.256).

The ‘Chinese is internalised, the women, even though in America, and even when they claim to be Americans, have internalised ways of thinking and behaving that create a cultural otherness. Both in the novel and the film, the mothers have a firm sense of belonging and they never look upon themselves with a sense of being marginalised. The daughters have eventually come to understand that their belongingness to America cannot make them escape their ethnicity which is embedded in a person’s genetic makeup. Even when they studied and lived in San Francisco, the Chinese is there, there is no denying their ethnic roots. After all, we are all also placed ethnically and our ethnic identities are a part of our sense of identity, as Lena realises: “Most people didn’t know I was half Chinese, maybe because my last name is St. Clair. When people first saw me, they thought I looked like my father, English-Irish, big-boned and delicate at the same time. But if they looked really closely, if they knew that they were there; they could see the Chinese parts” (Tan, 1989, p. 42).

It is not just the inherited physical attributes; it is also about the way one is brought up. Chinese women are brought up with a sense of being submissive in marriage, “At first I thought it was because I was raised with all this Chinese humility,” Rose said. “Or that maybe it was because when you’re Chinese you’re supposed to accept everything, flow with the Tao and not make waves. But my therapist said, why do you blame your culture, your ethnicity?” (Tan, 1989, p.137). As she rightly contemplates, “if you are Chinese, you can never let go of China in your mind” (Tan, 1989, p.163). Marriage emerges as a powerful cultural symbol of gender roles and identities and how these are part of the mental makeup of Chinese women like Rose who “learned to be an obedient wife” (Tan, 1989, p. 51).

6.5 Chinese Beliefs, Festivals, and Superstitions

Festivals, beliefs, superstitions, clothes, gender roles, behavioural patterns and most importantly language, are used as instruments for creating otherness. A Chinese dressed up like Santa Claus does not appear real, except to the children who “were too young to know that Santa Claus was not Chinese” (Tan, 1989, p.80). Santa Claus is white, belonging to the hegemonic race and racism that “operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constructed categories...what Gayatri

Spivak calls the “epistemic violence in the discourse of the other, imperialism, the colonised, Orientalism, the exotic, the primitive, the anthropological and the folklore” (Hall, 1996, p. 445).

Beliefs and superstitions, knowledge, material belongings and festivals are powerful indicators of cultures of communities and associated with identities. Both anthropologically and sociologically, the complex dynamics of these customs and mores are rich repositories of cultures. The novel, translates “the cultural capital of other civilisations” (Bassett & Lefevere, 1998, p.11). This cultural capital each race, each community, each civilisation carries within itself with pride.

Amy Tan has represented the cultural indicators through the mothers, and how they pass on this knowledge with its wisdom to their daughters, who eventually realise the significance of their culture: from the Chinese calendar to their books, their beliefs and customs, all dwell within them. While the beliefs and superstitions would appear obsolete and meaningless to a westerner, they hold great value for the natives, making them see Otherness vis. a vis. each other:



6.6 Ancient Wisdom

Almost every community and religion has a wealth of wisdom in the form of sayings, proverbs and beliefs. Some of them are documented, while others are part of orality and reflect the rich folklore of a country. These are also repertoires of knowledge, being figurative, metaphorical or allegorical, and therefore preserved with care as they are ties to the past and part of a legacy which communities, groups and nations preserve. The novel has several layers of interpretation and talks about many nuances such as the wisdom contained in ancient sayings:

- “She has a Chinese saying for what she knows. *Chunwangchihan*: ‘If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold’” (Tan, 1989, p. 13).
- “Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, Come from South, blow with wind—poom!” (Tan, 1989, p. 78).

The mothers pass on this repertoire of wisdom to their daughters. Sayings and proverbs are coded with knowledge which are community specific and often cannot be decoded by those outside it. The source language here is Chinese and in many cases the translation to target language may not be as succinct as the original.

6.7 Concoctions

For centuries, the Chinese have been known for their herbal medicines, which are now also referred to as Chinese Herbal Medicine (CHM) and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and have become popular even in western countries. The traditional Chinese healers aimed to cure illnesses by attaining equilibrium of Yin and Yang based on an understanding of the life force or *qi* of the body. This system, said to be more than two centuries old, uses herbal formulae which work in combination with each other. The knowledge system of a country is its heritage. Tan has made use of this in the novel:

- “And every night I would cook a special tonic soup called *tounau*, which was not only very delicious but has eight ingredients that guarantee long life for mothers” (Tan, 1989, p. 54).
- “In Chinatown Li dole out onto a stiff sheet of white paper the right amount of insect shells, saffron-coloured seeds, and pungent leaves for his ailing customers. It was said that he once cured a woman dying of an ancestral curse that had eluded the best of American doctors” (Tan, 1989, p.79).
- “She was cooking a soup, pouring herbs and medicines into the steaming pot. And then I saw her pull up her sleeve and pull out a sharp knife. She put this knife on the softest part of her arm... And then my mother cut a piece of meat from her arm” (Tan, 1989, p. 44).

This scene, in which An-Mei’s mother is dying, the former prepares for her a mixture of herbs, and adds to it a piece of her own flesh, believed to be a daughter’s way of honouring her mother, has been incorporated in the film. It is a powerful way of communicating how respect for parents and elders

is held in high esteem. It also extends the thematic concern of the film that builds on the mother-daughter relationships.

6.8 Superstitions and Customs

Superstitions have been an inseparable part of human societies all over the world. In the novel, the mothers adhere to their customs, rituals and beliefs which give them a sense of security and belongingness, while for the daughters it is a threat to their ‘American’ identity. We come across some superstitions and beliefs pertaining to bad luck, good luck, the Chinese calendar, a long-married life and so on:

- “My mother unwrapped something in her lap. It was her *chang*, a small tablet of red jade which held the sun’s fire. “Is luck,” she whispered” (Tan, 1989, pp. 84-85).
- “Put it back,” whispered my mother. “A missing leg is a bad sign on Chinese New Year” (Tan, 1989, p.179).
- “A Horse, born in 1918, destined to be obstinate and frank to the point of tactlessness. She and I make a bad combination, because I’m a Rabbit, born in 1951” (Tan, 1989, p. 48).
- “That candle was a marriage bond that was worth more than a Catholic promise not to divorce” (Tan, 1989, p. 53).
- “A lot of bad luck fell on our wedding day, even though the matchmaker had chosen a lucky day, the fifteenth day of the eighth moon” (Tan, 1989, p. 52).
- “My mother had a superstition, in fact, that children were predisposed to certain dangers on certain days, all depending on their Chinese birth date. It was explained in a little Chinese book called *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*” (Tan, 1989, p.110).

The book of *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates* is a Chinese book for children who do not abide by warnings and advice of their parents. The gates of the book can also be interpreted to be doorways between cultures and languages, passing through which the Americanised daughters lose their sense of belongingness and their cultural moorings, and thus a part of themselves.

6.9 Festivals

Festivals and reverence of the sacred creates a social space within which relationships among persons are expressed, thus forming norms of conduct, as also articulating a social life and a manifestation of cultures. The Chinese New Year, for instance, is regarded as an auspicious period by the Chinese and is a very important occasion in their culture:

- “Your mother has made you new tiger clothes for the Moon Festival (...) very important day (...)” (Tan, 1989, p. 65), on which the daughter is asked to bow her head and make offerings to the moon. The family hires a boat to watch the Moon Lady and make secret wishes.
- “Five months ago, after a crab dinner celebrating Chinese New Year, my mother gave me my “life’s importance,” a jade pendant on a gold chain” (Tan, 1989, p.176).

Jade jewellery figures visibly in the film, as the characters are shown wearing it in form of pendants and earrings. The Chinese consider jade to be an auspicious stone that brings good luck. The prominent use of jade jewellery makes a statement about Chinese beliefs and superstitions.

The Novel and the Film: A Comparison

Since the cinematic experience is more auditory and visual as compared to a novel, for those who enjoy reading, the film adaptation is less engrossing than the novel, because the narrative of cinema requires alterations suited to the medium which limits the scope of expression. The question of fidelity in an adaptation always arises. While the film revolves more around mothers, daughters and their relationship,

The novel deals with subtexts like language and dialects, cultural domination, cultural and linguistic differences, acculturation, and so on. In the film, the dominant mother figures and their relationships with their daughters are centre stage. The position of women as daughters and wives and their defined gender roles in the Chinese cultural set up are brought to the fore. The turbulent and challenging pasts of the mothers, their immigration to America, and the subsequent roles the daughters

assume for themselves a powerful voice in the film. In the screenplay, the writer has sifted through the novel and chosen scenes that are engrossing for the audience. The screenplay is tight and compact since a film always has a time constraint, and yet the characters are developed enough to make them life and blood characters. The fidelity to the text is retained, but the mother-daughter bonds remain an important point of focus since “The strong matrilineal bonds are what the film tries to foreground in its delineation of Chinese American experiences” (Li, 2010, pp. 38-39).

There are many shots which have the four pairs of mothers and daughters together. There are arguments and confrontations, but in almost all cases the daughters come to realise that their mothers are part of their subconscious. There is a scene in which Waverly (daughter) and Linda (mother) are at a barber’s shop, arguing, making up, and facing each other in the mirror. This is a significant moment of realisation for Waverly of how important her mother’s validation is for her. The complex narrative of the novel is transformed into a screenplay in which there is a transition from one story to another, with the farewell party for June being the trigger for the remaining three mothers and daughters to reminisce their lives. The stories within the story are woven together by the shared experiences of the mothers in China.

The coupling of the mother-daughter narratives in the film accentuates the thematic thrust and shows their bonding. The genre specificity mandates some changes in the screenplay, which is why Rose’s marriage is saved from falling apart (which is not the case in the novel) and Lena is given a more understanding husband. The novel has many psychological undercurrents and interior monologues. In the film, these have been substituted by close camera shots to capture the intense emotions of the characters and by the use of a voice over. The stylistic techniques of cinema enable the film makers to adapt the structure of Tan’s novel: “The choice of shot figures importantly in the stylistic representation of the connection between the Joy Luck mothers and daughters” (Li, 2010, p. 43).

Gender roles in the traditional Chinese context, especially those of a wife and a daughter, are contrasted with the modern American roles in both the novel and the film. The mothers have defined themselves strongly because they belong to their roots, while the daughters are caught between two worlds, the one that is their own and the one that they have made their own.

The mediums being different, the novel has wider scope for finer details as compared to the film, like the references to dialects and the descriptions of dresses worn during festivals and on weddings.

Otherness runs throughout the novel and film. The immigrant experience of otherness is dual, as for the Chinese immigrants the host culture is the ‘other’, while for the Americans the immigrant culture is the ‘other’. This is brought out by use of cultural indicators such as language, clothes, beliefs, superstitions, festivals and food. The use of code-switching (Chinese to English) by the mothers is a way to resist the hegemony of English and homogenisation of culture.

Conclusion:

In the postcolonial discourse, the construction of identities and the concept of otherness have gained prominence, especially in the processes of recovering one’s roots. Both, identity and otherness are complex, multi-layered constructs which are not independent of each other: the Chinese American identity and cultural identity is acquired, changed, constructed politically and socially, and in the face of otherness it is relational – self versus the other. In *The Joy Luck Club*, acculturations are manifested in different ways, as for example when the mothers are depicted as being rooted in their cultural moorings and yet are flexible in terms of adapting the western style of clothing or using English words intermittently. On the other hand, the daughters are more Americanised before their mothers make them realise their cultural identities and heritage.

Otherness is rooted in differences – the language of the dominant group in America is English; Chinese is the language of the immigrants who have made the US their home. Both are ethnically and culturally different. The daughters, June, Rose, Lena and Waverly, speak English and express discomfort at their mothers’ broken Chinese mixed with English. They wear western outfits like the American counterparts and call themselves American. But a very pertinent issue in *The Joy Luck Club* is that any attempt to fill the gap between them is bound to fall short, for the ‘other’ has culture-specific identity markers and ethnic parameters embedded within and it is difficult to translate this internalised othernesses.

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