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Faculty of Arts
Department of English

Memory
In
The works of Amy Tan

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By:

Engy Salah Tawfeek Saleh

Under the Supervision of:

Professor/ Ekhlas Azmy

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Preface:

From Childhood, Amy Tan had a close acquaintance with death and trauma. It has left her with an abiding sense of danger- but also a sense that benign presences are helping her to write. The result has been a series of novels with enormous popular appeal.
Maya Jaggi, *The Guardian*, 1.

The thesis aims at investigating the role of memory in nourishing the first generation Chinese American women with a sense of continuity, and endowing their daughters with the criteria necessary for a process of self reconstruction. This thematic framework is considered in much detail in Amy Tan's four novels: *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1993), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001). References are made to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), *The Bluest Eye* (1984) and *The Song of Solomon* (1977) to show that memory acquires a special significance when it is dealt with in the works of minority novelists. Though this thematic content is thoroughly discussed and analyzed in relation to characters, structure, imagery and motifs, it is used purposefully by the researcher to prove that not any work written by a minority writer is a mere ethnography.

In 19 February 1952, Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California with two names: an American name, Amy, and a Chinese one, An-mei, which means 'blessing from America'. Her parents are John and Daisy Tan who came to America in the late 1940s escaping from the communist takeover in China. In America, John who earned a scholarship to study engineering, refused it and enrolled in Berkeley Baptist Divinity School to become a minister. As for Daisy, whose Chinese maiden name is Tu Ching, she became a vocational nurse. Amy has two brothers, Peter (1950) and Jr. John (1954). At five, Amy was forced by her parents to take piano lessons and at six, an education study concluded that Amy was good

enough to become a physician. From that moment on, Tan "was led to believe that [she] would grow up to be a neurosurgeon by trade and a concert pianist by hobby" (Hubbard 150). Thus, she has never expected to be that famous writer.

Amy's family moved many times from one place to another. Speaking about this experience, Tan says, "I remember trying to belong and feeling isolated. I felt ashamed of being different and ashamed of feeling that way" (Merina 9). When she was eight, Amy joined a writing contest for which she patterned an essay after one of her father's sermons. She won and the essay was published by the Santa Rosa Press-Democrat. However, her parents and teachers encouraged her in scientific subjects and steered her away from English and writing, but she used to prefer literary subjects because, as she explains in her essay "Mother Tongue", "Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for [her] at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience" (200).

Actually, Tan was not a cheerful, but a gloomy child. At six, she used to have suicidal thoughts. Her first and last suicidal attempt was by a butter knife that hurt her in such a way that she decided not to do it again. However, her suicidal attempt means that her mind was full of ideas that "were not healthy" (S.Valley 3, 5th. Quest). In her interview with Sun Valley, Tan adds that she was brought up oppressed because fear was the way that Chinese people thought they must bring their children up with. Tan remembers that at five, her mother insisted that she must go with her to one of her playmate's funeral; Rachel, a girl who had died of leukemia. There, she took her to see Rachel, leaned over the dead body and said, "This is what happens when you don't listen to your mother" (Valley 1, 2nd. Quest.). Moreover, what helped in intensifying that sense of oppression was that Tan grew up imagining that she would never be able to please her parents because whatever she did

aroused her mother's criticism. For example, while the father of one of her friends was pleased because his son got a "C" giving him money to get a candy bar, Tan was scolded because she got a "B".

Amy suffered, very early, from a cultural conflict, something that pushed her to deny her Chinese identity and to change her Chinese features. Thus, she used to spend some time sleeping with a clothes pin on her nose before realizing that this would result in nothing but a sore nose. She also used to answer in English about whatever her mother asked about in Chinese. Amy later refused the idea of America being a melting pot because she knew that living in America necessitates giving up what is not American. She found out that in the process of trying to be accepted, she was intentionally "choosing the American things-hot dogs and apple pie-and ignoring the Chinese offerings" (Wong 69). This implied the feeling that she liked to be with her friends than to be with her family, something that she knew would hurt her mother. She even went further when she was 14 years old to become infatuated with a non-Chinese Mexican boyfriend. When she invited him to dinner on a Christmas day, she felt embarrassed with the way her Chinese family received him. First, instead of serving a turkey, her mother served raw fish. Instead of waiting for the food to be passed, her family members reached across the table to help themselves, and it ended with her father finishing the meal with a loud belch, a polite Chinese custom to show that one is really satisfied.

At 15, Amy passed through great sufferings seeing her older brother Peter and her father dying within about six months of each other suffering from brain tumors. In such conditions, Amy experienced a conflict between Baptist ideas about God's will and her mother's Chinese concepts of luck and belief in superstitions trying to find a reason for what had happened to her family. After the death of the husband and the son, Daisy Tan decided to leave Santa Clara and go to Switzerland. Just before leaving, Daisy made

a shocking confession about having three other daughters from her first marriage in China. Commenting on this incident, Tan says, “Three obedient daughters, beautiful girls who could speak Chinese, I was crushed. I didn’t see them as anything but competitions” (Hubbard 150).

All these tragedies that Amy faced affected Tan deeply. Hence, she was involved with a bad crowd and started to date a young man who had connections with well -known drug dealers. Worried about her daughter, Daisy hired a private detective who discovered that this man was involved in drug trafficking and that he was an escapee from a mental hospital in Germany. Daisy then arranged a big drug campaign in Montreux and did not hesitate to bring her daughter before the local magistrate as a witness. Amy remembers how she was about to be killed then by her mother who brought a blade’s edge within an inch of her throat, and cried "I'll kill you and Didi [John] then myself, and we'll go where Daddy and Peter are, and you won't be ruining your life" (Jaggi 2). This incident shows the mother’s will power and determination to bring up her child according to her norms of respectability.

Amy changed her major from medicine to a double major in English and linguistics. For six months, Amy and her mother did not talk. Daisy felt disappointed in her daughter whom she had brought up to be a neurosurgeon. In 1973, Amy earned her BA in English and linguistics, and in 1974, she got her MA in linguistics and married Lou De Matti, a tax attorney. She then left the university in 1976 before earning her Ph.D. and started her career as a language consultant for disabled children in the Alameda County Association for Retarded Citizens. Then she was appointed as a project director in the education department in California. About this position, Tan says, “I was at that time one of the few Asians in the field, the only minority project director in the country for the Bureau of Handicapped children” (Pearlman 17). However, Tan resigned from

this administrative work and worked for "Emergency Room Reports", a company publishing educational newsletters for doctors. In 1983, Tan left this position and began her own business as a freelance technical writer. In 1978, Daisy Tan decided to visit China after the tensions between the United States and China had eased. This decision bothered Amy because she was afraid her mother would not return. But when she returned, Amy "was so relieved that [her mother] still loved [her], that she was happy that [Amy] was her daughter" (Wachtel 278).

As a freelance writer, Amy forged for herself an American identity through choosing a non-Chinese pseudonym, May Brown. She wrote sales manuals and business proposals for companies such as AT&T, IBM and Bank of America. Tan succeeded in her new field to the extent that she was working ninety hours a week. Her friends called her a "workaholic", but she did not agree on that name because, for her, workaholics, unlike her, enjoy what they are doing. Amy then needed the help of a psychiatrist whom she left after six months when he fell asleep in three sessions while she was speaking about some of the good things that brought her happiness. Therefore, she decided to help herself by decreasing her working hours to fifty hours a week and joined jazz piano lessons.

The idea of her first short story "Endgame" came from an article she had read in *Life Magazine* about two chess prodigies. She sent the story to a fiction writers' workshop in California and she was accepted as a writer. It was first published in *FM Five* and then reprinted in *Seventeen* in 1986 under the title "Rules of the Game". Tan's second short story was rejected by *The New Yorker*. In 1987, she joined a study group where she used to read her stories out loud just to be criticized by the other members. However, she left the group after hearing one of the members saying, "Well, I believe we're all good writers, and that we should not criticize each other, we should just support and encourage each other" (Somogyi 31).

Actually, Tan had joined the group to improve her writings, not to be just praised and encouraged.

In 1986, Tan had an experience that influenced all of her personal and literary life. She was summoned to the hospital to see her mother who was suspected of suffering from a heart attack that turned to be an angina attack. There, Daisy, thinking that she was dying, asked her daughter about what she would remember about her after her death. It was then that Tan made a vow that if her mother recovered, she would take her to China, and that she would write a book about her. When her mother became better, Tan had to fulfill her promise. In October 1987, Amy left with her mother and husband to China, where she first met her other two half-sisters. Commenting on this, Tan recalls, "There was an instant bond. The way they smiled, the way they held their hands, all those things connected me. I had family in China. I belonged" (Hubbard 150). After returning to America, Tan wrote an essay entitled "Watching China", published in *Glamour magazine*, in which she wrote about her visit.

A new stage in Tan's literary career started when agent Sandra Dijkstra read her "Rules of the Game" and proposed to represent her. Tan was then in a bad need for an agent after her story had been translated and printed without her permission in an Italian magazine. Tan refused at first saying that she was not ready to employ or to pay her, but Dijkstra was willing to work by commission and not to take any money until Tan sells her first book. Tan then sent Dijkstra all of what she had written i.e. three stories. Dijkstra suggested that Tan should write a book of interrelated stories in all of which there were "characters [who] would discover something about themselves" (Somogyi 26). Tan called the book Wind and Water, but Dijkstra suggested *The Joy Luck Club*, a title of one of the stories included.

Dijkstra found a major publisher for Tan's book with $50000

advance, and in December 1987, Tan signed the contract and started to have writing customs. For example, she begins writing by setting a mood, lighting incense and listening to music getting herself ready to move to another world with people coming to her "telling [her] stories. It was like people telling [her] the stories and [she] would write them down as fast as [she] could" (Lew 23). Internalizing the discouraging words of her boss in "Emergency Room Newsletters" when he told her that the worst thing about her is her writing, Tan tried to prove the opposite i.e. that she has mastered English, by using difficult and vague words. But later, this turned to be a problem in her writing style. To overcome this problem, she imagined that she was writing to her mother. Thus, she had to use simple and easy words. After *The Joy Luck Club* was published, Tan and her friends formed their own investment club, which they called "Fool and His Money". Though *The Joy Luck Club* was called a "tear-jerker", its stories are really told with humor.

The Joy Luck Club has surprisingly succeeded to the extent that one of the reviewers, in *Los Angeles Times* writes, "The only negative thing I could ever say about this book is that I'll never again be able to read it for the first time" (C. See 4). Reviews proceeded to prove the novel's success and many radio and television interviews were made with Amy Tan about the novel and her life. Before these reviews came out, Tan had never considered *The Joy Luck Club* but a collection of short stories. She had not thought of the work as a novel till critics and reviewers called it so. Tan dedicated *The Joy Luck Club* to her mother who remained busy for a long time going to bookstores to see if they have the book; otherwise, she would scold them. *The Joy Luck Club* is really speaking what a lot of mothers want to tell their daughters and what some daughters want to confide to their mothers. Therefore, it is a chance for each to tell the other about what they have not been able to express. Each starts to mark passages in the book and gives it to

the other to read.

The Joy Luck Club also was a finalist for the National Book Award for fiction, a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association, and it was translated to a minimum of ten languages. Later, in September 1993, a movie version of *The Joy Luck Club* was released. The screenplay was co-written by Amy Tan and Ron Bass, and was directed by Wayne Wang. This huge success caused Tan much worry when she started writing her new book developing a pain in her neck that radiated down her back. Working on her second book, she wrote eighty-eight pages of a book about a young woman who accidentally killed a judge before she gave it up and started another one that took place during the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. In total, Tan attempted six books and discarded them before starting her novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*.

In “Lost Lives of women", Amy wrote about the photograph that inspired her while writing her second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*. The photograph was taken at a Buddhist ceremony in 1922 and it gathers several of Amy's ancestors with her mother who was then still a child. This photograph has inspired Tan with many stories related to the number of women it includes. Tan writes, “This is the picture I see when I write…. These are the secrets I was supposed to keep. These are the women who never let me forget why stories need to be told” (90). Daisy believed that it was her own mother, Jing-mei, who was inspiring her daughter, Amy, with all of her stories. She imagined her standing behind Amy dressed as she would have been in 1926 telling her what to write and what to delete. Commenting on this tendency on her mother’s side, Tan mentions that sometimes she finds it true, though it might sound silly. Ghosts play a very important role in Amy Tan's life. She was brought up hearing her mother always speaking of ghosts and curses. Tan admits this fact in one of her interviews, when she says,

I was raised with a sense that I could communicate with

> ghosts, and it did seem to come from something other than myself. I can still find rational ways to explain these things-as repressed memory or the Jungian collective unconscious. But I've gotten so much help in my writing that it's hard to pass these off-it's like being ungrateful; denying the existence of a force greater than oneself.… To me, it's not about physical bodies before birth or after death; it's a continuous consciousness and a form of love. It's benevolent, not frightening. (Jaggi 1)

Amy lost her mother in November1999 after she had suffered a lot from Alzheimer. Twenty-four hours after Daisy's death, Amy said that she saw her. She says, "I don't think of this in a spooky sense; I think of it as a continuation of love. I saw what looked like a hologram of her, and my dog was barking. I said, 'What's the matter, Bubba, did you see a ghost? And then my husband saw the same light" (J. McGuire 1). This is considered part of Amy's exotic nature that extends to include her "reputation for inexplicably gumming up machinery and electronic devices"(McGuire 1).. When she is around, Tan observes that machines and electric devices tend to misbehave where strange sounds come from strange places. John M. McGuire refers to these incidents when his computer screen went blank after his phone interview with Amy Tan. That is why Tan is known to enjoy dual personalities, one of them is the well known literary figure, and the other is a friendly, but a mysterious person who could walk, while promoting her books, with her Bubba Zo wiggling away in a black nylon bag. She would get you confused when she tells about the footsteps she hears in her San Francisco flat, and when she insists that it is her yin friends who told her about the names of her best friend's killers four days before they were arrested.

The Kitchen God's Wife was published in 1991 dealing with the course of Tan's mother's life with some modification. The novel

achieved a great success and received good reviews. In *Time magazine*, Picolyer writes, “Tan has transcended herself again, triumphing over the ghosts, and the expectations, raised by her magnificent first book” (67). Amy’s third work was a children picture book, *The Moon Lady*, published in the spring of 1992. The story of *The Moon Lady* had appeared before as a story in *The Joy Luck Club*, but it was rewritten to suit children. The illustrations for the book were made by Amy’s friend Gretchen Schields. It was followed in 1994 by *The Chinese Siamese Cat*, another children picture book the inspiration for which was Tan’s own seventeen-year-old Siamese cat, Sagwa, which was dying by that time. In the same year of this book’s publication, Hollywood Pictures decided to make a movie based on *The Kitchen God's Wife*, with the same trio who brought *The Joy Luck Club* to the screen. Meanwhile, Tan was working on her third book, *The Year of No Flood*, a book that was never finished because, for Tan, it was spoken about too much in advance. This was intended to tell about a missionary from Ohio and a young Chinese boy during the Chinese Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Then came Tan’s actual third book, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, published in October 1995. This was followed in 2001 by Tan's fourth novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

Though Daisy Tan has never fully controlled Amy’s life, she has become her muse for a very long time, even after her death. Tan believes that her novel *The Joy Luck Club* is an answer to her mother’s question, ‘what do you know about me?’. In her essay, “Mother Tongue”, Tan writes, “apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: ‘so easy to read’ (201). Though she is not much interested in fame, Tan finds fame a useful tool to compensate her mother for her hard life. In an interview with Lavina Melwani, and answering her question about the best part of becoming a famous writer, Tan says, that it is

directly related to her mother as "[t]here were so many years that she was not respected by people and it made me ashamed of her. And I was so ashamed later on that I was ashamed of her. And now this sort of success has made other people treat her with respect" (6, Ques. 13).

Although Tan loves children, she has decided not to have any for many reasons. First, she would be kept in constant fear of losing them. Throughout her life, she has experienced much pain losing many of those whom she loved. Second, she does not think that she and her husband have enough time to take care of their children. They "never felt a strong compulsion to duplicate [their] genetic structure; what's in [her] that [she]'d have wanted to pass on is already in the books" (Jaggi 2). She believes that her novels are the children she has never born. In fact, this belief comes as a direct result to the way Tan was brought up. Daisy has brought her daughter up on the ultimate importance of working first for her career and of being self-sufficient, so that, she is never obliged to stay in a marriage that she hates just for money; and without babies, Tan has the absolute freedom to leave at any time. Third and most importantly, she was afraid to become the kind of mother Daisy has once been. She does not want to cause her children the same pain and frustration her mother has unintentionally caused her. Amy and her husband used to share their house with a cat, Sagwa, and a dog, Mr.Zo, and now they are living with a pair of tiny Yorkshire terriers, Bubba and Lilliput.

Since Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976), no other Chinese-American writer has made such a big commercial impact on the American publishing scene till Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* was published in 1989. However, upon publishing *The Kitchen God's Wife* in 1991, other Chinese-American writers have joined Tan on the spring publishing lists. In 2001, Tan fell ill and she started to suffer from hallucinations and excessive fatigue. Her