

Cultural Conflict vs. Maternal Love in Amy Tan's *The Valley of Amazement*

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Abstract:

*The family is an organization of primary relationships graded by highly intricate and diverse kinship. The nature of the mother and daughter relationship plays a determining role in the communal life and psychological well-being of the daughters. The relationship between mothers and daughters are usually seen as involving closer psychic, or emotional identification than other family relationships. This paper addresses the love in mother-daughter relationships and analyzes the links among the generations of mothers and daughters across national boundaries and historical periods as they are manifested in Amy Tan's *The Valley of Amazement* (2013).*

Key Words: Amy Tan, kinship, Conflict, *The Valley of Amazement*, mother-daughter, relationships

I. Introduction

Tensions in these relationships occur depending on how the dyad interacts with and covers question of poignant closeness and cohesion or the lack thereof. The specific causes in relationship tensions include unsought advice, recurrent contact, personality differences and problems of past relationship. This rupture arises mostly when parents demand to have greater contact and provide more unsolicited advice. The mother-daughter relationship is the most complex of all, partly because mothers do not live for themselves, but for their daughters. The diverse factors that lead to schisms and tensions in mother-daughter relationships are generation gap, gender, and age.

Cultural Conflict vs. Maternal Love:

The mother-daughter bond is part of the “two relational axes within the family: the marital and the parent-child, with the related sibling axis” [5]. Fingerman views this relationship thus:

Intimacy between aging parents and grown children is defined by two characteristics: recognition of the other person as an individual with strengths and weaknesses, and a deep concern for the other party's well-being. These characteristics shape other features of this particular intergenerational intimacy (28)

Comparable to intercultural factors, intergenerational factors can trigger a wide range of intense emotions among matrilineal generations. After discussing these conflicts, this chapter will focus upon the issue of reconciliation among matrilineal generations, which is achieved due to the daughters' linguistic approach to

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their mothers. This reconciliation makes possible what Arcana calls the “mother/daughter sisterhood” which “is the consciousness we must seek to make this basic woman bond loving and fruitful, powerful and deep” [2].

Tan presents a typical theme that most parents agree with: The disappointments that both parents and their children feel when their desires are not met. Tan analyses mother-daughter relationship, and relationships among friends, lovers, and even couples. The mother-daughter relationships portrayed are, in all probability, diverse parts of Tan’s association with her own mother, though maybe a few are complete fabrications. Tan investigates the troubles in growing up as a Chinese-American and the issues of acclimatizing in the American society. The Chinese-American daughters attempt their best to end up naturalized, in the meantime casting off their legacy, while their mothers watch on, alarmed. Social pressure to settle like other Americans and not to be different inspires the daughters to detest their personality. However, many Chinese-American daughters feel that they do not quite fit in with the Caucasians, as Tan’s characters come from similar Asian backgrounds.

Chinese parents are very strict and they typically demand more from their children than American parents; the best that their children can perform often is not satisfactory. Persistent feeling of terrific parental stress, makes the lives of many Chinese-American daughters miserable. Moreover, they often grow up feeling rather out of place among non-Asian peers because of the vast difference between the Chinese and American cultures. Tan does an excellent job of portraying the problem of assimilation.

Tan’s novels depict the condition of the women who have been caught between two poles: that of the daughter and her future, and that of the mother and her past. All the mothers have different dreams and expectations for their children. These dreams and expectations manifest themselves in various forms. The mothers’ and daughters’ anxiety about failing to achieve their dreams or fulfilling expectations forms the fulcrum of Tan’s stories. The immigrant Chinese mothers attempt to empower their American daughters with their personal experiences and Chinese wisdom. Mothers and daughters are continually engaged in heated exchange of words throughout their lives, each struggling for control of the other’s life and thus, a journey begins. The mother believes that she is a martyr to an ungrateful daughter, who most often does not understand or appreciate her mother’s great sacrifice, and the communication between them breaks down.

For the mothers in Tan’s novels, China is both geographical and historical; for their daughters, it is a culture from which they are removed. A critic, Welsch explains, “The mothers use China and their memories to create myths and legends with which they intend to guide their daughters to an understanding of their lineage, their culture, their inheritance” [7]. Doggedly clinging to the memories of their life in China even as they adapt to American culture, the mothers deliberately remain suspended between two worlds and two cultures, not able to embrace the best of each world but clinging on to their old world and they hope to pass on as their legacy to their children.

The Chinese mothers in Tan’s novels show an immense love for their American-born daughters, and out of concern for their future, teach them the strategies to be applied in dealing with the issues in diverse circumstances and the skill to handle the stress caused by different social demands. Tan conveys the physical similarities between mothers and daughters, as well the mental differences which exist in their lives. This alteration in their behavioral model makes psychological studies of this relationship quite challenging. The Chinese mothers’ struggle in welding up their lives and the hardships encountered by them are explored in this

chapter. However, “Tan transforms her female characters from a delicate and weakminded mentality to a strong willed individual steadfastness” [4].

In *The Valley of Amazement*, Violet Minturn, an American girl, at the age of seven, lives with her mother, Lulu Minturn “the only white woman who owned a first-class courtesan house in Shanghai” (VOA 1). Lulu’s betrayal by the Chinese painter, Lu Shing, and subsequently her flight from America to China, force her to work as a concubine. She faces the struggle of bringing up her daughter, Violet, as an ethnic Chinese girl. After Lulu is again betrayed by Fairweather, an American lover, and forced to leave Violet, she comforts her daughter by saying, “I won’t leave until you are beside me” (VOA 93). Violet’s relationship with her mother is confusing to her because, whenever Violet thinks that her mother loves her, she gets badly depressed by her mother’s act of being a concubine. Even so, Lulu, completely devotes her life to Violet and wants her to be away from the profession. Lulu always protects Violet from the acts that the concubines perform in her home. Tan expresses Lulu’s love to Violet through Golden Dove, a friend of Lulu. She elucidated to Violet the struggles that Lulu underwent without a husband, “All her work has been for you, Little Violet. . . . Be grateful, be nice to your mother” (VOA 36).

All the mothers’ stories, which take place in China, are tragic. Through these stories, one learns that each mother has struggled because of the tyrannical societal structures in the form of patriarchy and sexism. Nevertheless, each mother surmounts life’s disadvantages by having learned the lesson of becoming strong through seeing their own mothers suffer. The woes that these Chinese mothers had in their lives, made them very vigilant of their daughters. They always strive to safeguard the daughters from the pain that they themselves encountered as girls while growing up in China. Nevertheless, the daughters habitually mistake their mothers’ fondness and leadership as unwanted interference.

The Valley of Amazement, the intergenerational transmission of schemata can be detected in mother-daughter relationships. Due to the repulsive incidents the mothers experience, they define their reality by certain emotional patterns, and their communication leads to misinterpretation. When they employ different strategies to deal with difficulties in lives, their strategies always prevent them from getting what they want.

Tan presents two different cultural contexts of the mothers and the daughters leading to complex love/hate relationship, and the daughters’ growing understanding of their maternal heritage. Each mother hopes to win the daughter’s affection by revealing her story. As Fingerman states, storytelling becomes a medium for the mothers to explain their behavior and their heritage, the means by which “parents and offspring actually share a deep and rich sense of understanding” [1].

The Valley of Amazement also presents a troubled relationship with blurred boundaries between a daughter and a mother the daughter, perceives to be powerful. Lulu’s behavior with Violet at times illustrates that she did not like her daughter. Once, Lulu cried out in tension that “If you ever betray me, I shall have nothing to do with you, I promise you that” (VOA 29), which gave Violet the notion that her mother paid little attention to her. Lulu always had time for her customers and business rather than her daughter, which made Violet depressed. Hence, out of that emotional agony, Violet yelled at her mother’s friend, Golden Dove, that her mother did not love her. Dove exclaimed, “Nonsense, Your mother loves you a great deal. Why else does she let you go unpunished for all the naughty things you do? Just the other day, you broke a clock by moving its hands

backward. You ruined a pair of her stockings by using it as a mouse for Carlotta to chase” (VOA 37). In the daughters’ vision, their makers, the mothers acquire the skill of robust goddesses who could control the daughters’ identities, make unfeasible demands, and turn their daughters into defenseless puppets.

Hence, the daughters create the scene of traditional China as a wasteland filled with superstition and uncivilized barbaric customs. The daughters felt they were biologically bound to native China, yet mentally identified with the Americans. In their dual lives, that of the home and that of society, the daughters held a cross-cultural schema. Though China and its traditions are literally remote in the geographical sense, they are cognitively close because of their mothers.

Violet struggles with feelings of alienation in *The Valley of Amazement*. She comes to know that she was not entirely American, having Chinese origin. She explodes, “I’m American. There’s nothing Chinese about me” (VOA 39). Violet hated being half-Chinese. She hates her dead father, Lu Shing, for her identity. According to Sharifian’s opinion, the knowledge that develops among the members of different cultural groups over time creates cultural cognition. The knowledge of the existence of the link between the two cultures creates cross-cultural schemata in the daughter’s mind. Tan shows the cross-cultural schemata in Violet’s mind.

They have a different lifestyle, culture, but have some similarities to the U.S. democratic system”; “They are people like Americans, but have different beliefs and lifestyles than we do”; and “I think that although our cultures seem to collide that they are people just like us. All differences are purely cultural.” And huge problem arises in the mixture of the society known to be cross cultural schemata[6]

Hence, Violet always had the cultural schemata that prevent the bonding between the daughter and the mother.

Tan focuses on the two difficult cultural contexts of the mothers’ and the daughters’ stories, the painful love/hate relationship, and the daughters’ mature understanding of their maternal heritage. Each mother hopes to win the daughter’s identification by telling her a story. For the mothers, storytelling becomes a medium to empower their daughters because it is the means by which “parents and offspring actually share a deep and rich sense of understanding” [1]. Tan’s mothers want to teach their daughters how to read situations clearly and how to stand up and fight for themselves. Maternal heritage is helpful to their daughters to reflect on their Chinese ethnicity and achieve self-assertion in America. The daughters have not experienced the cultural connectedness that sustains their mothers; they “are strangers who remember nothing of their mothers’ values” [3].

The cultural impact of Chinese mothers interacting with their Americanized daughters lead the mothers to desire that their daughters imbibe Chinese ethnicity rather than flaunt American culture in their lives. The daughters initially find it absurd to follow the dictates of Chinese culture; however, when they come to know about the hardships that their mothers underwent, the girls’ minds are swayed toward their mothers.

In *The Valley of Amazement*, Violet and Lulu Minturn had been separated because of Fairweather, Lulu’s lover. Fairweather trades Violet to a courtesan house to pay his due. She felt the pain of missing her daughter, Violet, in China. When Lulu gets the heart-breaking false news that Violet is dead in an accident, she becomes desperate. Lulu expresses her regret, “... before she died, I had shattered her belief that she had ever

been loved by me. . . . I have felt the same when love abandoned me” (VOA 526). Lulu felt bad that she never gave real care for her daughter, even though she had abundant love in her heart.

Lulu felt sorry for having left China all alone and for having neglected her son and Lu Shing. Lulu wrote in a letter to Lu Shing, “Violet is mine. She is the only child I lost. She is the only one I grieve and will spend fruitless years searching for, even though she is dead” (VOA 529). This portrays Lulu’s true affection for her daughter Violet.

Lu Shing knows that Violet is not dead and hence she sends a letter to Violet explaining that her mother is completely devastated, thinking that Violet is dead. After reading the letter from Lu Shing, Violet immediately writes a letter to her mother, assuring her that she is very much alive. Soon she loses her husband, Edward Ivory, in a pandemic disease. When she also loses her child, Flora, she could completely understand her mother’s mental state. Violet expresses with great sorrow, “I once believed with a child’s heart that you left me deliberately. I hated you. I know you were tormented that I might believe that. I feel the same torment, deeply and constantly. While I cannot forgive you completely, I don’t wish for you to be tormented any longer” (VOA 541).

Violet frequently starts writing letters to her mother, and their relationship strengthens. Now they share an intimacy. In the later part of the novel, Lulu visits Shanghai to see her daughter and granddaughter. The sharing of letters bring them closer and takes their relationship to the next level of openness. Learning of Lulu’s past and her love towards Violet bridge the generation gap. Thus a dynamic change in a mother’s storytelling heals the past wounds of loss and separation.

Tan’s mother and daughter characters initially show less emotional kinship bonds. This is consistent with the cultural schemata theory, in which the cultural identity of mothers and daughters encourages a portrayal of intercultural schemata. A cross-cultural conflict occurs in a specific cross-cultural context where the Chinese and the Chinese-American may have recognized or not recognized the underlying beliefs and value patterns of their cultural system leading to misunderstanding and conflict. This is frequently portrayed in Tan’s novels. The mother’s stories are an important element in unravelling her painful past and a sincere attempt at clarification of her behavior:

The mother’s stories are carefully selected from vast reservoirs of memories and offered to the daughters as gifts of the heart, the offerings of the soul, talismans to help the younger women confront their problems, secure in the knowledge that they have the strength of mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers behind them. [3].

These stories help the daughter start the process of re-identifying with the mother, the one earlier considered as exotic. Each daughter seems to gain a moment of insight and understanding of her mother’s good intention. After their sufferings in life and knowing their mothers’ stories, the daughters comprehend the true value of, and also the cause for, their mothers’ attitudes towards them. Though a little defiant at first, after discovering their mothers, they become more amenable to the wisdom of the mothers’ words. In fact, the identity crisis of the daughters is mainly caused by a lack of cultural knowledge rather than by the troubled mother-daughter relationships.

II. Conclusion:

Tan's novels span the present and the past, bridging America and China with an intricate plot of generational secrets of sadness. The love and hate relationship between the mothers and daughters is finally resolved through speaking stories. As researchers have observed, "The family relationships become particularly accessible during a family's transition (the transition to parenthood, to adult life, to divorce, etc.), which reveal the strengths and weaknesses of family bonds" [5].

Tan's novels exemplify Fingerman's description of the intimacy in the mother-daughter relationship with respect to the generational bonds that unites the mother, daughter, and grand daughter relationship, "Offspring enjoy hearing about their parents' earlier years and experience their own history through these stories" [1]. Thus, through the sharing of personal experiences, reconciliation between mother and daughter is reached, which Foster has described as an "old woman waiting to be invited into her daughter's life" (25). The cultural phobia latent in the daughter's minds about China is a complex cognitive system emerging out of the knowledge and wisdom shared by the mothers to their daughters and the experiential reality of the daughters in America. In this way, it can be said the cross-cultural schemata, or the cultural revulsion about China, is transferred across the ocean into America through the immigrant mothers. The daughters have not had experience in China themselves, but by hearing about the country, the knowledge developed and triggered the cultural phobia. According to Sharifian, the knowledge that develops among the members of different cultural groups over time creates cultural cognition. This knowledge a link between the two cultures creates cross-cultural schemata in the daughters' minds. The cultural conflicts faced by the daughters are clearly reflected in the novels of Tan and are resolved through the mother's wisdom.

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