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STRUGGLE FOR AN IDENTITY IN AMY TAN'S *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

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Abstract

As an Asian-American writer Amy Tan, who has an important place in American literature, told immigrated families' adaption problems, crisis and struggle of identity in terms of mother and daughter relationship. While the daughters struggle to find and define themselves between the two cultures, mothers not only try to protect the Chinese culture and but also adapt themselves to the new culture. In this article, it has been focused on the identity challenge of mothers' and their daughters' who are stuck between two cultures. And also, the conflicts between the mothers, who try to teach their traditions, culture and the daughters, who were raised in American values, are handled. It also is going to be handled the struggle of identity and fighting for survival of mothers and daughters. And it is going to be discussed how Amy Tan created her novel, how the differences of Chinese and American identities effect on the struggle of identity.

Keywords: Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, Identity, A Struggle For Identity, Mother-Daughter Relationships, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Because of war, economic, sociological or family problems, those immigrants who had to run away from their country are "in a state of in-betweenness" (Direnç, 2005). They are stuck between their own identity and new countries' identity. On the one hand, they try to protect their own identity, on the other hand in order to adopt the other culture; they struggle for a new identity. Amy Tan, who is a Chinese-American writer, in her work *The Joy Luck Club*, presents some sections from the stories of mothers and their daughters, who try to give a meaning to their existence in far away from their country. In this article, I am going to try to reveal the struggle of immigrant women and their daughters to have an identity.

I. IDENTITY AND LITERATURE

As a general expression "identity consists of one's all characteristics". Both how one sees himself and how he is seen by the society are about the concept of identity. (Alver, 2006:32) Doubtlessly, literature is a field which has effects on identity, because literature cannot be separated from society and individual. Even though the literary works are fictional, they are the reflections of the society's background in which he or she lives. We can see all the dimensions of human life there. Human being establishes a connection with the past by means of literature and he or she may have some expectations for future or may have some life experiences for today's life. Human can find some marks in the work about him or her. In that sense, literature has a great impact on the identity of person.

The identity has been studied widely in the American literature. The ethnic pluralism has started as a result of immigration. The waves of migration started from Europe, Latin America, China and Japan. At this point, America is the central point of that wave. This variation has reflected on American literature. The writers, who are from different gender and race, have written many things in American literature so as to have a place with their identity and history. Native American, Jewish American, Asian American writers studied about the crisis of identity and the fight of the two cultures. The themes, such as the language, otherness, the ethnic structure and the conflict of generation are the main subjects of their works. Their works portray us the characters who have the crisis of identity.

Identity is a social statue that people have it in their social and cultural circle (Sevim, 2014:376). The question of identity is an answer for "who am I?" (Uysal, 2006). According to another definition, identity includes the beliefs, attitudes and moralities which represent the life style of a human (Karaduman, 2010:2886). Social life, beliefs and the way of understanding of life form the identity. Because these differences will shape each person in some way, different social forms have emerged. Coming together of those different cultures caused crisis of identity and pushed everyone to find and struggle for a new identity (Asutay and Atik, 2013: 57).

Immigrants bring about that search and struggle in the sense of culture, because his or her country's traditions, habits and language are the important characteristics of their world (Doğanay, Şahin and

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Özdemir, 2007: 14). But they realize that they have to adopt the social rules of that place in which they live. Immigrants also believe that they should change their identity to have a place and not to get lost in that foreign culture. Or exact opposite, they reject the cultural values of that country and they see their language, culture, generation as an inseparable whole. In that condition there arises a crisis of identity by running away from the society they live in (Cengiz, 2010: 188). In the light of these ideas, in *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan shows the traces the struggle of identity and the crisis because of living in America with Chinese identity.

II. MOTHERS' AND DAUGHTERS' STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Chinese immigrants and their stories are the main theme of *The Joy Luck Club*. If Amy Tan's novel is desired to be understood better, it should be seen the background of the immigrants. Because of Chinese Civil War and Japanese occupation, people had to leave their country. As a result of trying to get the power of the country, Chinese Civil War was emerged and it was a fight between the Communists and the Nationalists parties. Millions of people died during that war and Japanese army invaded China, and wanted to take the advantage of disorder in China. The two parties allied with and combined their power against Japan. When America joined the World War II, they separated their powers again. That chaos and political disorder caused Chinese people to emigrate (Flanigan, 2006: 9).

These immigrant mothers set off for great hopes to give a better life for their daughters. But that is not only a kind of immigration but also it means a new culture. Mothers cannot not achieve many things because of hardship in China. From that way, America is a land of opportunity for them. "Women struggle to fashion a voice for themselves." (Foster, 2010: 18). They aim to survive their Chinese identity and give a chance to have a better, comfortable life conditions for their daughters. But the daughters cannot adopt fully Chinese identity. Jing Mei Woo's mother thinks that her daughter will be prodigy because she "believed that you could be anything you wanted to be in America." (Tan, 1989: 130). While Jing Mei rejects what her mother tells to do, she also rejects her mother who is the representative of Chinese culture and identity. She ignores her mother to find herself and she says, "I didn't budge. And then I decided I didn't have to do what mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before, and look what happened. She was the stupid one!" (Tan, 1989: 139).

In the story of "Waiting Between Trees", Ying Ying St. Clair's name was changed with an American name and the woman's identity was neglected. Her husband saved her from the hard conditions in China but disregarded her Chinese identity by changing her name as Betty St. Clair. That changing is the symbol of her new statue in society. Ying-ying Saint Clair is imposed upon the American language and culture by her husband. The woman is forced to obey the adoption of this new culture. But that changing makes her lonely and unhappy. And now, neither her own identity nor the identity that she desires to be belonged she has got. Ying-ying is aware that she doesn't belong to that world. She expresses her feeling in that way: "Saint took me to America, where I lived in houses smaller than the one in the country. I wore large American clothes. I did servant's tasks. 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: 241).

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the daughters struggle to have a different identity in contrast to their mother. They do this because they feel they are under pressure and under control of their mother. They insult their mums and misunderstand their past and the difficulties that their mothers have experienced in China. Chinese identity and culture are the "other" for the daughters (Guillary, 1996: 133). Waverly Jong has never given importance to her mother's, Lindo's, words. Whereas she believes that America and being an American as "superior", she feels humiliated for being a Chinese and her mother. She is so ashamed that she takes her mother to the hairdresser. She wants to change her hair as well as her identity. Mother Lindo expresses her feelings in that way: "I couldn't teach her about Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities. Why easy things are not worth pursuing. How to know your own worth and polish it, never flashing it around like a cheap ring. Why Chinese thinking is best." (Tan, 1989: 252).

Ted's desire of divorcing helps Rose to find her real identity. Rose has always underestimated her desires during her marriage with Ted and she has acted according to her husband's desires. In this sense, Ted is the symbol of American identity. Whereas Ted is resembled to America which dominates, Rose is resembled to the Chinese culture and identity which is dominated. But Rose, who has adopted the American life style and behaved like them, has convinced herself to that Americanness. After many years she realizes the realities and how she cannot see the truth. Rose, who once underestimated being a Chinese and her heredity, finds the real "Rose" in her Chinese identity. Rose, who once never listened to her mother's advices, discovers that when she pays attention to what her mother says, she becomes more powerful as a Chinese woman. And now she does not obey Ted and feels more powerful and confident. She says, "the

answer, one that was important above everything else, ran through my body and fell from my lips: “you can’t just pull me out of your life and throw me away” (Tan, 1989: 195).

At that beginning of the story, we see that not only Rose but also the other girls don’t want to be thought as a Chinese person. They want to be considered as American ones. They are educated like Americans; they have the characteristics of Americans. Throughout of their life, they try to erase the traces of China. Although the mothers try to talk about their identities and characteristics, the girls choose American identity. Waverly’s mother expresses her ideas about her daughter in that way: “My daughter did not look pleased when I told her this, that she didn’t look Chinese. She had a sour American look on her face. Oh, maybe ten years ago, she would have clapped her hands – hurray! – as if this were good news. But now she wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable. And I know it is too late. All those years I tried to teach her! She followed my Chinese ways only until she learned how to walk out the door by herself and go to school.” (Tan, 1989: 251).

Although Rose struggles of having American identity, she behaves like a traditional Chinese during her marriage with Ted. She has a marriage which is controlled by her husband’s desire. In Rose’s marriage, she has no any freedom of expressing her ideas. As all Chinese women do, she also has a life which depends on her husband. In spite of the ignoring the idea of being Chinese, she has a Chinese woman in her mind just like her mother. About her marriage, Rose says: “Over the years, Ted decided where we went on vacation. He decided what new furniture we should buy. He decided we should wait until we moved into a better neighborhood before having children. We used to discuss some of these matters, but we both knew the question would boil down to my saying, “Ted, you decide. ” After a while, there were no more discussions. Ted simply decided. And I never thought of objecting. I preferred to ignore the world around me, obsessing only over what was in front of me: my T-square, my X-acto knife, my blue pencil.” (Tan, 1989: 117).

The tradition of storytelling often attracts our attention. Stories are the conveyers of the culture; they reflect the background, relationship and traditions of the family. According to the mothers, these stories help to remind who they are and where they have been coming from. The stories, mothers tell, are going to help the daughters to understand and know their past. On one hand the daughters have adopted themselves to the American life style; on the other hand they are in a struggle to give a meaning to the stories which are told by their Chinese mothers. They “develop a hybrid identity which incorporates both cultures ” (Direnç, 2005)

In the novel, in order to make Rose sleep, her mother tells the story of Mr. Chou when she is a child. Mr. Chou is the guard of the gate of the imagination world. Many times, Mr. Chou scares Rose in her dream and tells Rose to listen her mother’s words. She says, “I used to believe everything my mother said, even when I didn't know what she meant” (Tan, 1989: 184). In her adulthood, she insulted her mother and Chinese stories. She always describes herself as an American. But she decides to follow her mother and she stands up to Ted when he cheats Rose. One night she sees Mr. Chou and her mother in her dream again. And that proves us Rose, who once called herself as American, now accepts the identity of Chinese.

The Joy Luck Club has some traces from Amy Tan’s life. One of the characters in the novel is Jing Mei Woo, whose experiences as an immigrant girl, shows parallelism with Amy Tan’s experiences. Both of them were torn between choosing of American or Chinese identity. However, the environment, in which the daughters are raised and the personality which is shaped by the dominant culture, caused to become distant from the life style and thoughts of their mothers (Tanrıtanır and Tütak, 2015:14). Although the struggle of identity and searching for it directs the daughters to Americanness, their mothers believe that it is impossible for them to deny their roots and identity. For example, Jing Mei Woo hardly believes in her Chinese heritage. But her mother says, “Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese” (Tan, 1989: 265). Amy Tan also said that she wished she had had an American family in her childhood and wanted to look like other American children (South China Morning Post).

Names also are important part of one’s identity because names reflect one’s culture, past of his or her family and gender. Names describe who you are and where you are from. Jing-Mei Woo uses an American name. Whereas she is called as Jing-Mei in her family, in America out of her family she is called as June. Jing-Mei wants to create an American identity but she is in a dilemma. June is an American name and although it makes her feel like an American, Chinese identity and name are the part and past of her. Her name “Jing-Mei” means “little sister” and she has two younger sisters there in China. No matter how much she rejects, she cannot go away from her Chinese identity. Jing-Mei has adopted the American identity on the other hand she cannot reject her Chinese identity. Like June/Jing-Mei, Amy Tan has American and Chinese names as well: Amy and An-Mei. Tan had a great fight with those two identities.

In spite of all the things, both of them –Amy Tan and Jing Mei- start a journey for finding their sisters in China. That journey is also a kind journey for their inner world and gives an opportunity them to understand their mothers. Tan’s mum Daisy had to leave her daughters in China and came to America, as

Jing Mei's mother, Suyuan, left her daughters. When Jing Mei and Tan set foot in China, they realize their identity. As Tan points out that "I felt that in some way I belonged, that I found a country related to me" (Huntley, 1998: 10). They justify their mothers when they see their mothers' past, the place where they were born, grown up. And now they solve the conflict and see the reality now. When they understand and approve what their mother did for them, they start to feel themselves as having Chinese identity and culture.

In the novel there is a problem of language between the daughters and mothers. Mothers do not make any effort to learn English and insist on speaking Chinese. Language is an important part of mothers because language is the carrier of their culture, values, and beliefs. In this sense, mothers deliberately insist on not learning English very well in order to protect their Chinese identity. They also want their daughters to adopt Chinese language and Chinese identity. Jing-Mei tells mothers' feeling in that way: "In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is 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: 38)

Rose's mother mispronounces "psychiatrist" word continuously. According to her mother, Rose is the only one who can best express her psychological state and she expressed her psychological state in Chinese. She says "A psyche-atricks will only make you *hulihudu*, make you see *heimongmong*." (Tan, 1989: 186) On the other hand the daughters think and speak in English as they were raised in America. While the daughters speak in Chinese at home, they mostly speak in English at out. The daughters, who can express themselves better in English, know limited Chinese. The daughters, who were exposed to both languages, give a fight for identity.

In order not to get lost in the crowd and not to lose the language, culture, identity, immigrants come together with the people who think in the same way and found societies (Cengiz, 2015:188). *The Joy Luck Club*, which was founded by the Chinese mothers, symbolizes of struggling of maintaining the cultural heritage. In this club, they support the Chinese culture and traditions to maintain and keep them on. They cook Chinese food. They come together with Chinese families and speak their mother language. Because no matter how many difficulties they had in the past, they belong to there. And America is totally stranger for them. They feel that they lost their identity in that American system and living. And that's why they create a special circle in order to rediscover their identity which is thought to be lost. Suyuan Woo expresses her feelings in that way: "So we decided to hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year. Each week we could forget past wrongs done to us. We weren't allowed to think a bad thought. We feasted, we laughed, we played games, lost and won, we told the best stories. And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that's how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck." (Tan, 1989: 22).

In the novel, "Chinese mothers are persistent, overly critical, and hard to please." (Shen, 2010: 8). The mothers were born in China that's why they have always desired their daughters to grown up like a Chinese. They would like to get and the control of their daughters' life and direct them. But there is one missing point that the mothers underestimate, their daughters have never been to China and have never experienced the Chinese culture. In this sense mothers haven't been able to find out the struggle of identity of their daughters.

While one of the parts of the girls is Chinese, the other part is American and American side has adopted an "independent" and "separate." However, Chinese view themselves as "inextricably connected to others" (Golchin, 2011: 10). That's why; the daughters have an independent side. Waverly rejects her mother's ideas and elopes with Marvin and that proves us her independence. But after she divorces Marvin, she decides to get marry another American man but she abstains from her mother's reaction. Because her mother has strict rules as Chinese traditions have. Neither could Waverly become a Chinese nor American.

The mothers reject to the marriages with the men who are from America so as not to lose and forget their Chinese cultural heritage and wealth. According to their mothers, complying with and merging those two different identities are impossible. To their mothers, if their daughters get married to those people, they will entirely lose their Chinese identity. In the novel, Rose's mother does not agree on her daughter's getting married to Ted as he is a man who shows much dissimilarity in aspect of culture. She says he is "A waigoren." (Tan, 1989: 115) Waverly's mother shows a similar reaction. She does not want Waverly to get married to Rich Shields who is American. Waverly guesses her mother's feeling about Rich and says: "I wasn't so much afraid of my mother as I was afraid for Rich. I already knew what she would do, how she would attack him, how she would criticize him. She would be quiet at first. Then she would say a word about something small, something she had noticed, and then another word, and another, each one flung out

like a little piece of sand, one from this direction, another from behind, more and more, until his looks, his character, his soul would have eroded away. And even if I recognized her strategy, her sneak attack, I was afraid that some unseen speck of truth would fly into my eye, blur what I was seeing and transform him from the divine man I thought he was into someone quite mundane, mortally wounded with tiresome habits and irritating imperfections." (Tan, 1989: 172).

If we look at the struggle for identity from the aspect of women, we see that women's identity is determined by male dominant society. It also expected women to be silent and obedient in Chinese society. Women must obey the rules which are created by men. The man is the one who creates the rules and woman is the one who has no any choice with the exception of obeying these rules. As her family promised, Lindo Jong is forced to get married to a wealthy man. She was not asked for her opinion because Lindo is a woman. She is humiliated, battered by the man's family because she was promised to be got married. When Lindo realizes that she doesn't want that marriage, she finds a way to run away from it. She tells them a dream. In her mock dream, she says that: "Our ancestors came to me and said they wanted to see our wedding. So Tyan-yu and I held the same ceremony for our ancestors. We saw the matchmaker light the candle and give it to the servant to watch. Our ancestors were so pleased, so please...' Huang Taitai looked impatient as I began to cry softly again. 'But then the servant left the room with our candle and a big wind came and blew the candle out. And our ancestors became very angry. They shouted that the marriage was doomed! They said that Tyan-yu's end of the candle had blown out! Our ancestors said Tyan-yu would die if he stayed in this marriage!" (Tan, 1989: 62).

The ending of this marriage helps Lindo to find her own identity, because Lindo has been living according to the rules, traditions and values, since her childhood which were created by others. Until she finishes her marriage, she has had a struggle for identity. The woman who is expected to obey the norms which is created by society and the woman who wants to be free are in a fight. In that fight, Lindo finds her identity after she breaks the taboos.

Like Lindo, An-Mei's mother is a disregarded woman. An-Mei's mother was raped by a rich man and was forced to get married to him as the fourth wife of that man. She was also rejected by her family and her only choice was to accept that man's desires. She has no any right and she cannot even talk to defend herself. Her ideas are described in that way: "In the afternoon, my mother spoke of her unhappiness for the first time. We were in a rickshaw going to a store to find embroidery thread. "Do you see how shameful my life is? " she cried. "Do you see how I have no position? He brought home a new wife, a low-class girl, dark-skinned, no manners! Bought her for a few dollars from a poor village family that makes mudbrick tiles. And at night when he can no longer use her, he comes to me, smelling of her mud." (Tan, 1989: 227). Throughout her marriage she was tortured and stressed because of that she committed suicide. Honestly, that suicide is a kind of stand and being against for the male dominated society. She struggles to escape from what is thought as an identity for her.

III. CONCLUSION

Identity is a very important fact for human who tries to find his or her roots and give a meaning for his or her place in the world. Amy Tan reflects us the struggle to survive of the immigrant women and daughters in America. The first generation mothers struggle for identity in order to overcome the obstacles and find their roots. America is a bridge of hope for the mothers who experiences the worst side of the war and have to adopt the identity which did not belong to them. But they do not ignore the Chinese values in that new country where they immigrated. Despite the unpleasant experiences in China, they have aimed to survive Chinese culture, values and identity because their culture and identities make them the way they are. During that fight, they also tried to transfer their values to their daughters.

As the second generation daughters have been raised in America they are too far away to understand their mothers and this situation causes of misunderstandings and offences. They feel that there is some uncertainty between the Chinese identity which is told by their mothers and American identity in which they are raised. That being mixed up is cleared up when the daughters understand their mothers as a result of their own experiences. When they pay attention to what their mother talk about, they can make a connection between theirs and their mothers' life.

Not only does Amy Tan narrate the fight of identity because of the dissimilarities of the two identities but also she narrates the fight of identity in mothers and daughters marriage as a woman. Furthermore, with the help of the tales in the novel, Tan establish a bond with Chinese mothers and American girls. Tan expresses her own struggle of identity with the help of her own past, her mother's past, Chinese heritage and her family past.

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