

# Cultural Clash and Self-Discovery: A Multicultural Study of Amy Tan's *the Joy Luck Club*

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**Abstract---**Some scholars and theorists believe that the clash of cultures due to wars and the wave of migration is a healthy process since it ostensibly dissolves cultural differences. Yet, this article argues that cultural clashes may also generate passive phenomena due to cultural imposition which is vividly loaded with a lot of negative consequences that unveil the real aim of the colonial project. To prove the negative aftermath of such a phenomenon, Frantz Fanon's term of cultural imposition has been applied on Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* within a postcolonial context. The article also aims at showing that the imposition of a certain culture on another culture may endanger a sense of inferiority complex, stereotyping and double consciousness. The article furthermore gives the scholars and researchers a conspicuous view that the term cultural imposition can also be applied to literature alongside with nursing. The present article proves that Tan's characters suffer in a world that considers them as aliens due to their complexion, language, and even their behavior.

**Key Words---**cultural imposition, double consciousness, inferiority complex, stereotype.

## I. Introduction

Some look at colonialism as a bloodthirsty criminal who does not have limits that stop its savage actions at a certain point. Others regard colonial presence as a necessity to develop the overall style of life, free the colonized man from superstitions and helps him to transcend cultural differences. That is to say, although the perception of colonialism is often entirely negative, especially by patriots and nationalists who see it as absolute evil and often blame it for all the devastation or harm that afflicts the country regardless of the real causes. Yet, colonialism has had many positive effects on its colonies, whether these effects are intentional or merely unintentional. In other words, any neutral thinker cannot ignore the great shift made by the colonial regimes of the colonized countries.

The present article highlights the negative consequences of the colonial project which subjugates the colonized societies to boost the character of colonialism. Admittedly the clash among cultures and the imposition of the values of the stronger cultures on the weaker cultures has generated certain phenomena like inferiority complex, stereotyping and double consciousness. In other words, "cultural imposition", a term which is coined by Madeleine Leininger in 1950, appears on the surface as a result of wars and the wave of migrations. Leininger holds that "[c]ultural imposition refers to the tendency of an individual or group to impose their beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior on another culture for varied reasons" (qtd in Leininger 51). By the same token, Frantz Fanon applies the term "cultural imposition" in a literary context to show the negative impact of imposition of some norms and beliefs

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of one culture on another and the legacies of such a phenomenon. As far as the imposition of culture on another culture is concerned, Fanon articulates that the weaker culture may become as "a toy" in the hands of the dominators

who have the upper hand in determining the whole scenery? Accordingly, Fanon adequately dissected the negative impact of "cultural imposition" on the colonized periphery and how such a process endangers a sense of double consciousness, inferiority complex and stereotyping for whoever undergoes such a process.

Tan's pen craftily mirrors the real suffering and the plight of Chinese immigrants in their attempts to accustom to the new world. All her characters become a victim of alienation since they have lost that sense of belongingness, i.e. they belong to nowhere. Their desire to espouse two cultures at the same time makes them prey on what Fanon calls "double consciousness". The uniqueness of Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* lays in the way that it shows the adverse consequences of exposure to a new culture. Although all of Tan's characters settle in America, they have been treated as inferior objects by Americans. That is to say, their complexion and the way they speak have compelled them to be inferior.

## **II. Inferiority Complex and Inevitable Fate**

There is no doubt that cultural diversity, whether within a single community or in different parts of the world, has both negative and positive effects. That is to say, the clash among multi-cultures as a result of different circumstances like wars and immigration has led to a growing sense of superiority and inferiority complexes on the one hand. In this respect, Fanon believes that the feeling of being an inferior may be "created by the death and burial of...local cultural originality" (9) on the one hand. The desire to be the replica of the superior societies believing that "[t]he colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards" (ibid).

In other words, the trend toward superiority in an intention to hide the feeling of inferiority has dropped chasers for superiority in a trap of unknown.

It is noteworthy to mention that costumes and language may be regarded as one of the major factors in determining the identity of any society. In her novel, Tan casts a light on language in addition to the desire of her characters to imitate people around them to convince themselves that they belong to a superior class. But Fanon holds that "[t]he feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority" (69). In other words, Fanon believes that "[i]t is the racist who creates his inferior" (ibid) to remain as a superior and have the upper hand in making decisions. In this regard, the uniqueness of Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* lays in the way that unveils the difference between the old generation, originally born in China, and the new generation, born in America from Chinese parents. Although both generations have breathed the inferiority winds because they do not represent the true belongingness to America. Yet, the old generation has suffered more than the new generation since they experienced life in two different spaces.

The mother-daughter struggle of belongingness appears on the surface because American-born daughters lose ties with both mothers and their roots. Daughters deny any connection with China in an attempt to espouse American values and traditions. There is a generation gap that makes mothers feel inferior to both parties: their daughters and Native Americans. Jing-Mei Woo has made this issue clear when she says that "my mother and I spoke two different languages...I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (Tan 13). There is a linguistic gap that increases the sense of inferiority of mothers and generates a mental conflict for them. Mothers in Tan's novel are aware of the fact that their daughters feel shame because they consider their mothers as old-fashioned creatures who do not even master English adequately. Lindo Jong, on the other hand, clarifies the bitter truth of her feeling of inferiority when her daughter Waverly has decided to marry an American man saying:

*My daughter is getting married a second time. So, she asked me to go to her beauty parlor, her famous Mr. Rory. I know her meaning. She is ashamed of my looks. What will her husband's parents and his important lawyer friends think of this backward old Chinese woman? (144)*

This cultural chasm generates disintegration inside the family and develops a sense of isolation between mothers and their daughters. In an attempt to hide their developing sense of inferiority, daughters marry Americans to carry their names and to be counted as a superior group. That is to say, both generations have this inferiority complex and they try to exceed such a feeling by clinging to American traditions and mastering the English language. Nevertheless, mothers' broken English and their Chinese costumes reveal their origins. Imitating American's way of living, wearing American clothes and speaking the English language are all conspicuous factors that refer to the feeling of inferiority within Chinese families. In other words, mothers and daughters in Tan's novel have a strong desire to clutch to American traditions and values because they consider such a culture is superior in comparison to their Chinese culture. They, therefore, hope to experience that sense of equality. In a similar vein, Fanon asserts what Professor D. Westermann has mentioned in *The African Today* that:

*The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements. (14)*

To be more specific, Chinese immigrant parents are the ones who face a real challenge of language and traditions since they cling to their Chinese roots. In this regard, May Paomay Tung states that:

*The vast difference between these two linguistic traditions [Chinese and English], plus the language barrier, marks the distance between the young Chinese Americans and their immigrant parents. This distance and its effect on parent-child relationships and on Chinese American self-identity cannot be overstressed. (74)*

Daughters, on the other hand, strive to indulge with American traditions to decrease the cultural gap, but their attempts went with no avail because they realize that people in America still look at them as second citizens. For example, in the beauty parlor, Waverly faces the bitter truth when Mr. Rory, the barber, expresses his opinion about the real similarity between Waverly and her mother. In other words, Mr. Rory indirectly hurts Waverly's feelings when he says "[i]t's uncanny how much you two looks alike!" (145), referring to the big similarity between

Waverly and her mother. This situation reveals how Waverly has got disappointed when she knows that people in America, Rory is one of them, look at her as a Chinese woman even she masters the English language, wears American clothes and follows their traditions.

The desire to get rid of that sense of inferiority and stuck with the illusion of superiority has pushed Chinese immigrants to imitate Western style. An-mei's daughter Rose shows the fact that even their houses have been designed according to the Western-style when she says.

*We lived not too far from Paima Di, Racehorse Street, where only Westerners could live. And we were also close to little shops that sold only one kind of thing: only tea, or only fabric, or only soap. The house...was foreign built; Wu Tsing liked foreign things because foreigners had made him rich. And I concluded that was why my mother had to wear foreign-style clothes, in the manner of newly rich Chinese people who liked to display their wealth on the outside. (125)*

Admittedly, Tan in *The Joy Luck Club* mirrors the great expectations of Chinese mothers who depart their native land heading toward the US in search of a better life believing that they could find peace and safe life for themselves and their children. The will-to-achieve their dream has been declared in the very beginning of the novel when the nameless woman says:

*Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. (4)*

Unfortunately, Chinese mothers discover that all their dreams are just daydreams and all their hopes turn into a mirage. Instead of a free and secure environment for themselves and their children, Chinese mothers encounter the ugly face of the American dream in that people in America marginalize them and send them a message that they do not belong to that space. Jing-Mei in a talk with her mother illustrates the real goal of her mother in coming to America when she says:

*My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get a good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous. (71)*

Arguably, all Chinese mothers' endeavors to gain a voice in the American land went with no avail since Americans are not interested in the Chinese culture believing that they are a minority race. By the same token, Fanon holds that colonized object strives to strengthen his position in the alien space and wishes to be equal with others to live a secure life. He expresses his feelings when he says "I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man. Some identified me with ancestors of mine who had been enslaved or lynched: I decided to accept this" (85). At this point, Tan undoubtedly reveals how immigrant families suffer a state of alienation and forced to live as others in a racial society. In other words, she focuses on the fact that both mothers and their American-born daughters are seen

as foreigners in the US despite their attempts to imitate the American style of living and trying to cope with the Western system.

It is noteworthy that the impact of cultural imposition on Tan's characters is undeniable in that such an impact endangers a mental conflict for both mothers and daughters in this novel. Although American-born daughters make a tremendous effort to be accepted as Americans natives, they finally surrender to their destiny. In other words, experiencing two cultures simultaneously may lead to torture due to the lack of ability in embracing two different values and traditions at the same time.

### **III. Cultural Imposition and Double Consciousness**

The first thing that needs to be said is that imposing values of a certain culture on another culture may leave catastrophic consequences that would influence individuals who go through such a phenomenon. One of the passive consequences is "Double Consciousness". For W.E.O Du Bois, who coined that term, "Double Consciousness" "is a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others... One ever feels his twoness...two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings" (2-3). That is to say, cultural imposition creates a sense of dual existence. This means that a person who lives within two different cultures can hardly abandon one of the two cultures. Therefore, he becomes a victim of dual traditions and beliefs, which creates a psychological conflict for him resulting from his desire to adapt in two different spaces.

In this regard, Fanon holds that the colonized overwhelming desire to live up to the colonizer's level, including mastery of the colonizer's language, behavior, and traditions, believing that these factors will make him close to the colonizer's culture is just an illusion. To put another way, Fanon articulates that the colonized may reach a crossroads in which he loses the ability to choose the right path and he becomes in the middle of nowhere. Fanon expresses the real plight of the colonized people who become like a puppet in the hands of cultural diversity when he says "[n]ot yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned" (106). For Fanon the colonized man "conceives of European culture as a means of stripping himself of his race, he becomes alienated" (ibid 174). Arguably, cultural imposition compels the colonized man to "[have] two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man" (ibid 8). In other words, cultural imposition generates divided loyalty and creates that sense of double consciousness for those who undergo the experience of living within two different cultures. Admittedly, Asian-American writers, including Amy Tan, depict their experience through double lenses of American identities and their ethnic belongingness which makes their writings seem more realistic. Their will to cling to their roots and at the same time preserve the values and traditions of the homeland on the one hand. The direct and concrete impact of the American cultural system on them paves the way to what Fanon calls "Double Consciousness" on the other hand. In this regard, Tan in most of her novels strives to show the dilemma her characters live in that they behave differently according to the situation. In other words, they follow the Chinese traditions at home i.e., they eat Chinese food and speak their Chinese language. However, they behave as Americans outside their houses to indulge in the American cultural system. In such a case they become a victim to psychological conflict since they have been exposed to a new culture.

In her *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan craftily succeeds in portraying the severe struggle of immigrants who discover that they belong to nowhere. In a similar vein, Susan Muaddi-Darraj in her book *Asian Americans of Achievement* states that:

*Visiting China for the first time with her mother by her side allowed Tan the opportunity to reconnect with her Chinese heritage. It also offered her tremendous insight into her mother's personal life. Finally, it would provide her with the fuel she needed to create a spark in her fiction, which would dramatically impact the American literary scene. (11)*

Undoubtedly, the state of alienation, dislocation and bicultural issues are the core of Tan's works. The burning desire of mothers to bring Chinese values and beliefs to America and the serious attempt to cultivate such values in American-born daughters gave birth to a feeling of double consciousness for both of them. That is to say, Chinese mothers are forced to live within two different cultural contexts and at the same time, they compel their American-born daughters to face the same destiny. M. Booth Foster argues that "[r]egardless of how much the daughters try to deny it, it is through their mothers that they find their voice, their mind, their selfhood. Voice finds its form in the process of interaction, even if that interaction is conflict" (19). In most of her novels, Tan draws our attention to the non-stop attempts of mothers and daughters to lump two cultures, values and traditions together. Yet, their attempts doomed to fail and engender a sense of double consciousness for mothers and daughters.

It is noteworthy to mention that cultural imposition has a poignant impact on the behavior of immigrant families in that those families always imitate the Western style of living believing that such a style may bring them to superiority. As a result of that, they live up with double behavior, Chinese values at home and the American style of living outside their houses, which create what Fanon calls "Double Consciousness". For example, Lindo Jong has adopted the policy of the double face, Chinese and American face, in an attempt to bring the two cultures together, but her ethnic relation to China has undergone in a direct encounter with her American identity. Such an encounter, therefore, is the major factor of her mental struggle. Jong states that "I use my American face. That's the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand" (Tan 291), but she is fully aware that she is "becoming ashamed" and even her daughter "is not proud of [her]" since she looks more Chinese than American. Yet, Waverly's, Lindo's daughter, proudness being American –born female becomes shaky when the barber in the parlor told her that "[i]t's uncanny how much you two looks alike!" (ibid), i.e. people in America look at both the mother and her daughter as Chinese even they behave and wear like Americans.

Accordingly, all mother's and daughter's attempts to carve a niche in American society went with no avail and become captive of two different spaces. Lindo admits the fact that she cannot cling to one culture and "[i]t's hard to keep [her] Chinese face in America" (ibid 294), because of the effect of the new culture. Although the daughters in Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* "trying futilely to be as different from their mothers as possible in behaviour, appearance, relations with friends, lovers, children, husbands" (Arcana 9), yet, they finally discover that they live with dual loyalties. Lindo, therefore, concludes her situation when she told her daughter that "I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one,

you must always sacrifice the other" (ibid 304). The state of alienation Chinese immigrants experience and the dream of belongingness become a haunting problem for Tan's characters in *The Joy Luck Club*.

It is so obvious that in Tan's novel behavior is not the only factor in producing the feeling of double consciousness, but the spatial factor has a vital role in creating such a feeling. In other words, clinging to the roots as an attempt to create a balance between two diverse cultures has left Tan's characters in the trap of duality. In the *Joy Luck Club* immigrant families settle in a place called China town to boost the Chinese persona inside America. To be more specific, the place is considered one of the major pillars in most of Amy Tan's novels because of its impact on building the identity. In the *Joy Luck Club*, mothers preserve the connection with their native land as a strategy to bond up to two cultures. They also feed their daughters with the Chinese values and traditions to make them aware of their roots. Insistence on minimizing the cultural gap between the Chinese culture and the American culture has led to a growth of a sense of doubleness in thinking and behavior among mothers and daughters. Arguably, space is both past and present and it is the nerve through which identity formation may be determined. As far as space is concerned, Katherine McKittrick states that "[t]he geographic significance of double-consciousness emerges both from the identity it describes...and also the ways that identity calls into question the 'natural geographic arrangements' which form the basis of modernity?" (qtd in Inwood 490)

Incisive reading of Tan's novel may offer insight into the authentic relationship between the spatial factor and the feeling of twoness of thinking, behavior, and language. Suyuan Woo's daughter, Jing-Mei Woo or June has clarified the strong connection of her mother with China when she says "It's her place on the table. Without having anyone tell me, I know her corner on the table was the East. The East is where things begin" (Tan 22). That is to say, the mother's unquestionable attachment with her roots and simultaneously her desire to cope up with modernity makes her a victim of mental conflict. Therefore, this excessive attachment of mothers to their roots has reflected negatively on their daughters because mothers have transferred the fever of psychological conflict for the daughters. At home, mothers try to create an atmosphere similar at most to that of China to implant Chinese beliefs and values inside their daughters to establish a balance between Chinese and American culture. June is aware of her mother's burning desire to make her knowledgeable of the Chinese heritage. They even speak Chinese at home to force their daughters to learn the language. In this regard, June realizes that the connection with her mother is almost oscillatory and she says that "my mother and I spoke two different languages...I talked to her in English, she answered in Chinese" (ibid 23)

It is worth mentioning that the impact of cultural imposition is obvious on the behavior of the mothers in Tan's novel. In her journey with her mother to China, Rose Hsu Jordan discovers that the race of Chinese towards Western modernity is incomplete because of a desire to preserve the roots. Rose even notices that some of the Chinese houses have a double touch in that the houses have been built in a double design, a foreign and Chinese. She says "[t]he fronts of the house had a Chinese stone gate...as we walked down the walkway and get closer to the house, I saw this house had been built in the Western style" (ibid 251). Arguably, the role of spatial factor cannot be denied in creating that sense of double belongingness and the effect of such factor in generating mental conflict.

#### IV. Conclusion

To conclude, it cannot be denied that "cultural imposition" has been first applied in nursing and then has been used in literary contexts. In both fields, such a phenomenon proves its negativity and generates mental conflict. The continuous increase in the number of immigrants due to war and the desire for a better life in a Western country has led to a clash of different cultures. Such a clash, therefore, may generate different repercussions. Admittedly, bicultural issues have received notable attention by scholars, reviewers, and theorists due to its pertinent relation to identity formation.

Focusing on bicultural topics Tan intends to deliver a message to her readers that cultural diversity is not always healthy because it may affect the psychological condition of those who experience such a challenge. In most of her novels, Tan pays a lot of attention to the unbridgeable gap among cultures and the catastrophic consequences of the interactions of cultures. She is the one who can feel the real plight and miseries of immigrant families since she has undergone such an experience. The struggle between the old generation and the new generation has occupied a place in her fiction. She, therefore, gives a conspicuous interest to the fragile relationship of mothers and daughters to foreground the issue of belongingness.

The Joy Luck Club unveils the adverse consequences of exposure to another culture and its vividly impact on the formation of identity in a space that witnesses lopsided relationships. Both mothers and daughters fail to prove their selves in either lands, America and China, and they become a captive of two different spaces. Their will to belong has faded away and they experience the torture of living with no pure identity.

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