

Breaking the Silence: an Analysis of *The Joy Luck Club* from the Perspective of Postcolonialism

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Abstract: Postcolonialism is a cross-cultural critical theory that has emerged since the 1970s. It is a criticism with distinctive anti-colonial and anti-racist ideas, focusing on the search for decolonial paths while criticizing cultural hegemony. This paper attempts to analyze the novel *The Joy Luck Club* of the Chinese American female writer Amy Tan from the perspective of postcolonial criticism. As women from the third world country, Chinese American women are subjected to triple oppression in American society from the race, gender, and women of the first world countries, moreover, they become the Other marginalized by the American mainstream culture. As one of the Chinese American women, Amy Tan tries to break the silence of them and speaks for them by writing, in order to seek for a path of decolonization.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; Chinese American women; *The Joy Luck Club*; Amy Tan

1. Introduction

Postcolonialism is a cross-cultural critical theory that has emerged since the 1970s. It is a criticism with distinctive anti-colonial and anti-racist ideas, focusing on the search for decolonial paths while criticizing cultural hegemony. In 1978, the Palestinian American scholar Edward W. Said published *Orientalism*. This book was an immediate sensation in western scholarship and became a seminal text in the research of postcolonialism. In 1993, the publication of Said's *Culture and Imperialism* extends the study of postcolonialism to the field of literature. Through the analysis of different texts, postcolonialism reflects on the colonial history and its continuity from a cultural perspective, revealing the phenomenon of hegemonic cultural infiltration, and it is a theoretical weapon for resisting the cultural hegemony. After Edward W. Said, the Indian American scholar Homi Bhabha published his book *The Location of Culture* in 1994, in which he emphasizes more on "the intermingling and mixing of the Eastern and Western cultures brought about by the era of colonization and imperialism".^[1] But both Said and Bhabha ignored a very essential dimension in their research, which is gender. The Indian American female postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak firstly introduces gender issues into postcolonial criticism, and "Spivak's research is very much concerned with the situation of disadvantaged classes in the third world countries, especially the status of third world women".^[1] Her research focuses on the struggle for third world women's right of discourse and the reconstruction of women's subjective consciousness, and her theory attacks back on the traditional patriarchal culture and the western colonial hegemonic culture.

There have been many pieces of research which combine postcolonial criticism and *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) since the early 1990s. Amy Ling's book *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990) claims that Amy Tan has set up a positive model in Chinese American culture.^[2] Harold Bloom also appreciates the multiculturalism in the stories that made people from different cultural background came together in collisions without any cultural discrimination in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (2009).^[3] In Jun Wang's "Chinese American Women's Literature and Postcolonial Criticism" (2007),^[4] and Yi Zhang's "Literary Criticism and Identity Construction of Chinese American Female Literature in the Postcolonial Context" (2018),^[5] both of them show an affirmative attitude towards Amy Tan and her works, and state that women, especially women from the third world countries belong to status under the reign of men, and they are usually marginalized and try very hard to find their identities. However, at the same time, other voices come out with critical ideas that Amy Tan has distorted Chinese culture. She reproduces and deepens the former impression of the Other from westerners towards Chinese culture, which causes Chinese culture even more subdued to American culture than before. Frank Chin, in his book *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991),^[6] states that Amy Tan has

deliberately depicted Chinese culture as the Other in order to cater to the prevailing orientalism. Chinese scholars as Aimin Chen also criticizes Amy Tan for her inclination of orientalism in his article “Chinese American Literature from the Perspective of Orientalism” (2006).^[7]

This paper attempts to analyze the novel *The Joy Luck Club* of the Chinese American female writer Amy Tan from the perspective of postcolonial criticism, especially Spivak’s theory which attaches more importance to the condition of the third world women. As women from the third world country, Chinese American women are subjected to triple oppression in American society from the race, gender, and women of the first world countries, moreover, they become the Other marginalized by the American mainstream culture and lose their right of discourse. Under this circumstance of being forced to be silent for a rather long period, as one of the Chinese American women herself, Amy Tan tries to break the silence of them and speaks for them by writing. She uses her stories to fight against the cultural hegemony, patriarchal society, and the oppression from the first world women, in order to seek for a path of decolonization for Chinese American women.

2. Face to cultural hegemony

Having totally distinct appearances from the white Caucasians, Chinese Americans are always treated as permanent foreigners and it is really hard for them to integrate into the American society. Even though they accept the behaviours and values in the mainstream society, they are still only regarded as model ethnic minorities and the Others who suffer from a subordinate status compared with the dominant western culture. They are not allowed to express themselves freely, for even if they are allowed, their voices are too small to be heard by the American society. Meanwhile, the stereotype from the Occident is too hard to break—for them, the Oriental is “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’”, while the Occident is “rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’”.^[8] As time passes, this condition of long-term marginalization has already resulted in the mentality of Chinese American to be accustomed to the stereotype of being an Other. Always represented and dominated by the Occident, the Others from the Orient have no any opportunities to express themselves.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Ying-ying St. Clair is a typical victim of patriarchal culture. When Ying-ying arrives in America, Clifford arbitrarily plans what he thinks would be the best for her without asking her opinions. As what their daughter Lena describes: “My father proudly named her in her immigration papers: Betty St. Clair, crossing out her given name of Gu Ying-ying. And then he put down the wrong birthyear, 1916 instead of 1914. So, with the sweep of a pen, my mother lost her name and became a Dragon instead of a Tiger”.^[9] Therefore, because of Clifford’s random revision, Ying-ying completely loses her name, her homeland, and her identity. Whatever important to Ying-ying is just nothing for her husband, and could all be changed easily by himself. But in Clifford’s mind, he thinks that it was him that “saved her from a terrible life there, some tragedy she could not speak about”.^[9] Said points out in his *Orientalism* that some Occidentals argue that “Orientals require conquest”, and they find it “no paradox that a Western conquest of the Orient was not conquest after all, but liberty”.^[9] The Occidentals take it for granted that whatever conquests they have done to the Orientals are out of goodwill, that they take pride in bringing civilization and liberty to the barbarians and undeveloped areas in the East. In this way, what Clifford does to Ying-ying is another kind of ideological conquest, which he himself firmly believes could benefit her, and he may even feel quite proud about the comfortable and steady life he provides with Ying-ying without considering how she truly feels. The relationship between them is a typical epitome of the marginalized Others and the strong mainstream society.

Ying-ying has been forced to keep this silence state like a “ghost” for several years, until she realizes the problem in her daughter Lena’s marriage. Born and raised in such an unbalanced family with a silenced oriental mother and a self-righteous occidental father, Lena also does not know how to speak for herself when facing her opinionated American husband. She unconsciously inherits her mother’s silence, and turns in to an Other herself. Out of a mother’s love, this time Ying-ying chooses to break the silence. She feels “now I must tell my daughter everything”,^[9] otherwise Lena will be an Other forever. In order to alert Lena, Ying-ying pushes over the already tumbledown table in their house which symbolizes Lena and Harold’s unbalanced marriage. Eventually, Lena ends this relationship and wins her life as well as freedom back. Amy Tan sets Ying-ying to break the silence bravely and help Lena to get away with her terrible marriage. Living in the American mainstream society, silence has already gradually become one of the Chinese American women’s traditions. Nevertheless, by narrating Ying-ying and Lena St. Clair’s stories, Amy Tan clearly shows her attitude that this tradition should not be passed to the next generation. It needs to be broken, and it could only be broken by Chinese American women themselves.

3. Defend themselves from the patriarchal society

Apart from being subordinate in the race, Chinese American women are also the Others in gender issues. Overall, men are much more fortunate to have “had greater opportunities than women to act and live autonomously”,^[10] and for a rather long time in this patriarchal society, they are endowed with higher social status and more freedom than women. Growing up in a male-dominated family, Lena St. Clair has already been used to the experience that her father always represents her mother’s will. She may subtly feel that this kind of relationship is not right, but she does not know how to change the situation between her parents. It is this mentality which makes Lena unconsciously subdue to her husband Harold when they meet. She automatically puts herself at a lower position and deems that she is not good enough for him. When Harold puts forward the unreasonable proposal: “as long as we keep the money thing separate, we’ll always be sure of our love for each other”,^[9] Lena wants to protest at first, yet being afraid of losing him, she chooses to agree with this unfair arrangement silently. They “just continued that way, everything right down the middle”, and she “encouraged it”.^[9] As a result, Lena involuntarily let Harold decide everything for them as well, including deciding her position, salary and the style of their home: “as Harold explains, it would not seem fair to the other employees if he promoted me just because we are now married”, even though Lena enjoys her career and works even harder than others; “we’re equals, except that Harold makes about seven times more than what I make”,^[9] nonetheless, they share the bills as ever, which Lena often pays more. Lena keeps being the disadvantaged side in her relationship with Harold all the time, and she feels “surrendering everything to him, with abandon, without caring what I got in return”.^[9] Like many other Chinese American women, including her friend Rose, they are short of a sense of security in their marriage, thus, they sacrifice, and in this way, they demonstrate their devotion in this relationship.

Lena’s friend Rose Hsu Jordan is also trapped by her silence and sacrifice in marriage. At first, she craves for love and wishes to be saved from the condition of being silenced as the disadvantaged side in gender. However, at that time she does not realize that this silenced condition could be only be ended by herself rather than rely upon a man to provide her the right of discourse. In Rose’s wishful thinking, they “became inseparable, two halves creating the whole; yin and yang. I was victim to his hero. I was always in danger and he was always rescuing me. I would fall and he would lift me up”.^[9] This kind of wrong mentality drives Rose to see Ted as her saviour, so, she tends to rely more on Ted, and lets him decide nearly everything for them. If something needs her opinion, she just continuously asks Ted, “what should we do”?^[9] In her opinion, this shows her love and respect towards Ted, nevertheless, this ambiguous attitude finally annoys Ted and fractures their relationship, until Rose means nothing for him.

Fortunately, both Lena and Rose get the help and support from their mothers. When Rose is struck down by the divorce agreement, An-mei calls to soothe her:

“Why do you not speak up for yourself?” she finally said in her pained voice. “Why can you not talk to your husband?”

“Ma,” I said, feeling drained. “Please. Don’t tell me to save my marriage anymore. It’s hard enough as it is.”

“I am not telling you to save your marriage,” she protested. “I only say you should speak up.”^[9]

An-mei tells Rose her mother’s story, and points out directly that keeping silent cannot bring Rose happiness. If she wants to win her happiness and right of discourse back, then she has to speak up for herself, and only she could speak for herself. When Ted requires Rose to move out, Rose firmly answers him thrice, “I’ve already found a place, here.” “I said I’m staying here.” “I say I’m staying”.^[9] Her answers are signs of challenge from Chinese American women to the male-dominated society. By protesting her husband boldly, Rose breaks her status of a silent submission, and regains the right of discourse, which is also what Amy Tan expects every Chinese American woman to hold and defend.

4. Fight against the oppression from the first world women

Last but not least, being women from the third world countries, the oppression which the Chinese American women need to suffer comes from not only the mainstream society or men, but also from the women of the first world. Thus, compared to American women, it is clear to see that Chinese American women have to endure with a more miserable and awkward position in the American mainstream society. Spivak reflects on the problems in international feminist theory from a postcolonial perspective.

When analysing the French feminist scholar Julia Kristeva's study of women's issues in China, Spivak criticizes feminist studies like Kristeva's for "being overtly Western feminocentric".^[1] Spivak points out that the first world women take their identity for granted all the time, and "western women have never reflected on how their superior status as the first world middle-class women came to be".^[11] Little by little, Chinese American women become more and more passive, more and more silent, and at last, they are completely represented by women from the first world countries.

When An-mei points out to Rose that Ted is American, Rose confidently says, "I'm American too",^[9] on the contrary, Ted's mother, Mrs. Jordan definitely does not think so. When Ted for the first time introduces Rose to his family, Rose could immediately sense a feeling of cold welcome. Mrs. Jordan takes Rose's hand and invites her friendly to go for a walk away from the crowd, but Rose feels that Mrs. Jordan "squeezed my palm warmly but never seemed to look at me".^[9] Mrs. Jordan tells Rose that she and her husband "personally knew many fine people who were Oriental, Spanish, and even black",^[9] which already shows her condescending attitude towards people from other race. Then Mrs. Jordan continues to euphemistically assure that she has "nothing whatsoever against minorities" and talks about "how unpopular the Vietnam War was" to dissuade Rose from marrying Ted,^[9] which she may not even realize could strongly hurt Rose. This attitude draws a clear line between Orient and Occident, as "no matter how a single Oriental can escape the fences placed around"—like Rose, nevertheless, in Mrs. Jordan's view, she is still "first an Oriental, second a human being, and last again an Oriental".^[8] Facing this obstinate prejudice, though Rose is on the verge of shouting to refute Mrs. Jordan, she could do nothing but merely explain softly that she is not Vietnamese. Yearning for leaving a favourable impression on Ted and his family, Rose does not dare to speak for defending herself. Amy Tan uses Rose's experience to make a sharp contrast between white women and Chinese American women, which shows her unsatisfied attitude towards the authenticity of these women from the first world countries. Rose loses her right of discourse and becomes silent the day she marries with Ted. She sacrifices all her chances to express herself, but finally treated worthlessly by her husband. With the support and guide from her mother, she breaks her silence to regain her rights to speak up for herself from Ted and his family, which is also a sign of challenge and subversion towards the Western feminocentric.

5. Conclusions

Suffering from the triple oppression in American society from the race, gender, and women of the first world countries, Chinese American women need to break their silence in order to seek for a path of decolonization. As a part of Chinese American women herself, Amy Tan speaks up for them by writing their stories, showing their experiences, and expressing their feelings. She may not be able to change the status of Chinese American women in American society completely, but her endeavour will inspire more and more Chinese American women to break the silence and strive for their own rights. For nowadays we could find a great many outstanding Chinese American women appear in the American society, not only like Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Celeste Ng who have talents in the field of literature, but also shine in the scientific circle like Flossie Wong-Staal, in the political circle like Elaine Chao, the first Chinese American female to join in the United States Cabinet. Their stories and spirits will pass from generations to generations, and influence more and more Chinese American women to express as well as achieve themselves freely.

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