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FASHION AS A COMMUNICATOR OF IDENTITY IN AMY TAN'S THE JOY LUCK CLUB ▼



Fashion as a Communicator of Identity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

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Abstract

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Fashion as a Communicator of Identity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

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Abstract. In this paper, I would like to explore the significance of fashion as a symbol of cultural identity in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*. Being a symbol of cultural identity, fashion also functions as a communicator of identity. By analyzing the clothing and accessories the characters wear, I demonstrate that fashion accentuates the generational and cultural differences between the Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters. In so doing, I investigate how fashion reflects the characters' identities, as well as communicating them to others. The findings show that in this novel, fashion illustrates the complex interplay between culture, identity, and self-expression. This interplay offers insights into the characters' experiences as immigrants and their struggles to reconcile their cultural heritage with their new lives in the U.S.

Keywords: Fashion, identity, intergenerational differences, immigrants

1 Introduction

Asian American literature refers to the literary works written by Americans of Asian descent. It emerged as a literary movement, initiated by Asian American writers and activists in 1970s, when Asian American writers and activists sought to challenge stereotypes and promote the representation of Asian Americans in literature. The publication of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* in 1974 inaugurated the academic study of this genre [1]. Asian American literature is worth exploring because it challenges the stereotypes of Asian Americans and promotes the representation of Asian Americans, who, according to Lee, "have histories distinctive to their presence" [2]. It offers a counter-narrative to the dominant Western literary canon, which has historically marginalized or ignored Asian American perspectives.

One major subject that Asian American literature depicts is cultural exploration. Asian American literature often exposes problems related to identity, assimilation, biculturalism, and intergenerational conflicts. It shows how Asian Americans navigate their life, which is characterized by living in multicultural worlds. A literary work that sheds light on the challenges that Asian Americans face in negotiating their cultural heritage and American society is a novel written by Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, which was first published in 1989. It was adapted into a movie in 1993.

The Joy Luck Club [3] consists of sixteen interlocking stories about the lives of four Chinese immigrant women and their four American-born daughters. In 1949, they met at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco and agreed to continue to meet to play mahjong. They call their mahjong group the Joy Luck Club. The stories told in this novel revolve around the Joy Luck Club women and their daughters. Through a series of flashbacks and anecdotes, the mothers recount their difficult lives in China, marked by war, loss, and oppression. They also reveal their hopes and dreams for their daughters, who struggle with their own conflicts and dilemmas as they navigate the complexities of growing up as Chinese-Americans.

The Joy Luck Club explores the relationships between mothers and daughters. This finds support in a number of scholars who write that this relationship seems to be the focus of this novel [4]. The mother-daughter relationship, as the novel shows, is complex particularly because there are generational gaps between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. As a result of cultural differences and conflicting expectations, the mothers and the daughters have problematic relationship. Through interconnected stories and alternating perspectives, Amy Tan examines how the mothers' experiences of growing up in China and their struggles with traditions and hardships in their lives shape their relationships with their American-born daughters. The daughters, on the other hand, navigate how to live in the worlds, that is, their Chinese heritage and American upbringing, which often results in feeling torn between the Chinese and the American world. Although this novel has been discussed a lot, there are other aspects in this novel that can be explored further.

In this paper, instead of analyzing mother-daughter relationship, I will analyze the use of fashion in *The Joy Luck Club*. I argue that fashion serves as the signifier of the cultural and generational differences between the mother and the daughter. Treating fashion as a signifier as such, in the analysis, I show that fashion functions as a communicator of identity.

2 Methodology

In investigating Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, I use qualitative approach, and specifically the method I choose is textual analysis. Textual analysis is a data-gathering process for analyzing text data. According to Mike Allen,

Textual analysis is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences. Visual, written, or spoken messages provide cues to ways through which communication may be understood. [5]

I use this method as a tool for opening up the text, in this case, *The Joy Luck Club*, to an exploration of specific ideas under the topic discussed in this paper. It is suitable for analyzing a piece of literary work because it investigates the structure, content, and meaning of a text, and how the text relates to the historical and cultural context in which it was produced. By using this method for examining *The Joy Luck Club*, I can uncover

the various elements of the novel, such as characters, plot, language use, symbolism, and narrative structure, all of which can give me insights into the underlying meanings, themes, and patterns present in the novel.

3 Discussion

3.1 Fashion and Literature

People usually see fashion as an important aspect of consumer culture. Despite the fact that many make daily choices regarding what they wear, they often fail to notice that fashion can serve as a crucial element of self-expression. This finds support in Jennifer Baumgartner's statement that our clothing is the outward expression of our thoughts, feelings, and aspirations [6]. It occurs because fashion can be perceived as a cultural phenomenon that revolves around the realm of meanings and symbols, functioning as a form of visual communication. Through the utilization of clothing, accessories, and various physical elements, fashion allows individuals to visually express their true selves, aspirations, as well as their social affiliations, while also indicating those groups with which they do not align. According to Diana Crane, fashion is like a language where clothing styles function as signifiers [7]. One thing that fashion signifies is identity.

Fashion molds and articulates identity. This happens because fashion extends beyond garments and can encompass elements such as hairstyles, makeup, accessories, and even items unrelated to clothing. That is why the term "fashion choice" encompasses more than merely the clothes people choose to wear. It encompasses the image or identity they choose to present through the way they dress. In her article, "Fashioning a Feminist Style, Or, How I Learned to Dress from Reading Feminist Theory," Astrid Henry writes,

No one can dress in a way that signifies nothing. One may be "fashion indifferent," an "anti-fashionist" or crazy about fashion. But regardless, writes Gibson, "whether [people] follow current trends, ignore them and create their own style, are relatively uninterested in 'fashion' as such, or have little, if any, money to spend on clothes, they nevertheless, by the simple act of getting dressed in the morning, participate in the process of fashion." [8]

In other words, the fashion style individuals choose may reflect the message they want to communicate and the identity they opt to portray. Consequently, fashion serves as a valuable lens through which, the communicator of identity can be examined.

Fashion, as a form of communicator of identity, plays a significant role in the realm of fiction. Authors often use it as a tool for exploring characters' identities and highlighting the social dynamics. McNeil, Karaminas, and Cole describe fashion in fiction, which they label as a semiotics of bodily adornment and personal accessory, as a means of getting to know the characters in the literary work, and as a sign of the social and cultural changes [9]. Thus, fashion in fiction goes beyond superficial descriptions of

clothing. Instead, it becomes a vehicle through which authors communicate themes and messages they want to convey in their works.

a. Fashion, Social Phenomenon, and Personal Narrative

Fashion is frequently seen as problematic. It is connected to an obsession that submits women to patriarchal expectations of beauty and physicality as influenced by the overarching male gaze [10]. This occurs for the reason that “[fashion] positions women to be looked at; it promotes an ideal image of femininity... it positions women as objects and body parts” [11]. It does not receive the proper attention it deserves because it is “linked with outward appearance and women,” which perpetuates the idea that “fashion emerges out of the desire to be beautiful” [12]. In reality, fashion can be used to represent various aspects of individual’s identity. That is why people overlook the fact that fashion is a culturally significant social phenomenon.

As a social phenomenon, fashion is an important subject for scientific inquiries in the domain of cultural studies. Fashion, according to Kaiser and Green, “highlights the multiple intersections and entanglements among gender, race, ethnicity, national identity, religion, social class, sexuality, body size, dis/ability, and other facets of our identities” [13]. It means that fashion intersects with some significant subject matters of cultural studies, among others, dynamics of identities, patterns of production and consumption, and social distinction. For this reason, fashion in cultural studies not only analyzes the aesthetics and symbolism of clothing, but also investigates the broader social, economic, and political implications of fashion. Hence, the cultural studies of fashion can offer valuable insights into the variety of aspects of the relationship between fashion and society.

From the perspective of cultural studies, fashion can be seen as a language that facilitates communication and meaning-making within a cultural context. Barnard writes that fashion can be considered as a kind of nonverbal form of communication [14]. Accordingly, it is like a language that communicates many social and cultural aspects in individuals’ lives. It can serve as a means of communication, which allows individuals to express their ideas and identities without uttering a single word. In the way they dress and the clothes they choose, people show their personal style, which “enables a sense of subjectivity in a visual and material way, representing some tentative idea about who [they] are and are becoming, both to [themselves] and others” [13]. Through this personal style, individuals convey messages.

The personal style of fashion can create individual’ narratives. It allows them to communicate their messages through the choice of fashion. Like an author who uses words to craft his story, individuals curate their appearance to communicate their ideas, experiences, and aspirations. In Barnard’s opinion, “man needs goods for communicating with others and for making sense of what is going on around him. The two needs are but one, for communication, can only be formed in a structured system of meanings” [14]. These two needs have two implications. Firstly, “fashion and clothing may be used to make sense of the world and the things and people in it, that they are communicative phenomena.” Secondly, “the structured system of meanings, a culture, enables individuals to construct an identity by means of communication” [14]. That is why

fashion becomes a visual language through which personal narratives are woven, reflecting individual tastes, cultural influences, and life experiences. Each garment and/or accessory contributes to the overall narrative, conveying messages about one's personality, values, and self-expression. This finds support in Wilson, who writes that "in all societies, the body is 'dressed', and everywhere dress and adornment play symbolic, communicative and aesthetic roles. Dress is always 'unspeakably meaningful'" [15]. She writes further that "dress, in general, seems then to fulfill a number of social, aesthetic and psychological functions; indeed, it knots them together and can express all simultaneously" [15]. Thus, through their choice of fashion, individuals create their personal narratives which create meanings and make a statement to others.

Fashion and personal narratives play an integral role in the construction of identity. Fashion acts as a means of communication through which individuals can express their identities. By carefully selecting and combining different elements of their fashion style, individuals create their personal narratives in which they communicate to others who they are and how they wish to be perceived. Fashion and personal narratives, thus, become a tool for individual self-presentation.

In his seminal work on the theory of self-presentation, Goffman, quoted in Shulman, writes that people are motivated to create positive impressions, maintain social desirability, and align with social norms [16]. They present themselves strategically in order to create desired impressions and control how others perceive them. Self-presentation theory believes that people are constantly engaged in impression management, considering the expectations and evaluations of others in order to present themselves in a favorable light. To do so, they use various strategies, among others, to control their physical appearance. One way of doing so is using fashion. Fashion choices play a crucial role in this process, as people select clothing and styles that align with their desired self-image and present themselves accordingly.

The interplay of fashion and personal narratives, which is used for self-presentation, serves as my theoretical underpinning in analyzing Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*. I use the idea that fashion is like a language in my analysis. In the analysis, I show how fashion is used to create a personal narrative that highlights self-presentation. Self-presentation, then, functions as a signifier that signifies the identities and the way the characters in the novel communicate them.

b. Fashion in *The Joy Luck Club*

Fashion is not just the style or trend in clothing and other personal adornments. Instead, it is a symbol of culture. According to Cordwell and Schwarz, fashion helps us understand more the fabrics of culture and the threads of human nature [17]. The notion of fashion as such fits with the way Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, uses fashion in its plot development. In this part, I examine how the main characters' fashion is used as a communicator of identities.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, fashion is indexical to identity. Fashion in Amy Tan's literary works "has *two major functions*: to signify cultural confusions and collisions, and to signal concealment, subterfuge, or the performance of a feigned or manufactured identity" (*italic is mine*) [18]. Like the semiotic perspective on language, fashion is a system

of signifiers or symbols. It suggests that fashion goes beyond the ordinary function of clothing. According to Roach-Higgins and Eicher, fashion helps people establish identities of themselves and others [19]. This can be seen in the case of the main characters' choice of fashion.

Ying-ying St. Clair is one of the mothers who shares her story as an immigrant from China. She is not explicitly depicted as coming from a rich family, but the information about her background suggests that she comes from a privileged and wealthy family. Ying-ying St. Clair is introduced as having been born into a prominent and influential family in Wushi, a city in China. Her family's social status and wealth are indicated by references to her family's big house and a lot of servants his family employs. While she does not describe the house in detail, readers can conclude that Ying-ying's family belongs to the upper class and has a significant level of prosperity through the details of the clothes she and her family wear.

Describing her garment when she celebrates the Moon festival with her family, Ying-ying says that her mother has prepared "new tiger clothes." She explains,

That day, instead of dressing me in a light cotton jacket and loose trousers, Amah brought out a heavy yellow silk jacket and skirt outlined with black bands "No time to play today," said Amah, opening the lined jacket. "Your mother has made you new tiger clothes for the Moon Festival." She lifted me into the pants. "Very important day, and now you are a big girl, so you can go to the ceremony." [3]

These clothes have matching yellow and black color. The color of these clothes are similar to tiger skin. Hence, they are called "new tiger clothes." Besides that, the pattern on a tiger's forehead is similar to the Chinese character for "king." So, the Chinese believe that the tiger, as the natural-born king, represents dignity and bravery. Thus, the clothes that Ying-ying's mother has prepared for her signifies the social class of the family.

Talking about a family outing during the Moon Festival celebration, Ying-ying says, "Everybody was dressed in important-looking clothes. Baba was in a new brown-colored gown, which while plain was of an obviously fine-quality silk weave and workmanship. Mama had on a jacket and skirt with colors" [3]. The phrase "fine-quality silk weave and workmanship" signifies wealth and social status because only the rich could afford to buy expensive clothes. Not only does the patriarch wear expensive clothes, but other family members wear clothes of similar quality, as reflected in Ying-ying's statement, "Everybody was dressed in important looking clothes." In short, the clothes Ying-ying and her family wear communicate their identity as Chinese who come from a high social standing.

Another immigrant mother, Lindo Jong, is also depicted as very Chinese through her fashion and personal adornment. When her family moved to another city due to a natural disaster and she was sent to live with her future parents-in-law at the age of twelve, she really treasures a necklace made out of a tablet of red jade. It was the only thing she carried when she left her husband. She brought it when she immigrated to the U.S., and gave it to her daughter, Waverly, during a chess tournament. Waverly says,

During my first tournament, my mother sat with me in the front row as I waited for my turn. I frequently bounced my legs to unstick them from the cold metal seat of the folding chair. When my name was called, I leapt up. My mother unwrapped something in her lap. It was her change, a small tablet of red jade which held the sun's fire. "Is luck," she whispered, and tucked it into my dress pocket. [3]

In Chinese culture, jade is considered to be a lucky stone. It symbolizes good luck and prosperity [20]. As a Chinese, Lindo somewhat believes that jade can bring good luck, although her American-born daughter thinks that it is just a superstition.

Suyuan, another mother, also subscribes to the idea that jade can bring good luck. Jing-mei, her American-born daughter, tells her mother's belief about jade when the mother gave her a jade pendant, which she said it was her mother's "life importance" [3]. Jing-mei says that she does think that she is going to choose it. In her opinion,

The pendant was not a piece of jewelry I would have chosen for myself. It was almost the size of my little finger, a mottled green and white color, intricately carved. To me, the whole effect looked wrong: too large, too green, too garishly ornate. I stuffed the necklace in my lacquer box and forgot about it. (*italic is mine*) [3]

This jade pendant does not suit Jing-mei's American taste, and that is why she is not going to wear it.

The American-born daughters are depicted as preferring to wear clothing and accessories that are associated with American taste. This depiction symbolizes their assimilation into American culture, unlike their mothers, who are still very Chinese. When they went to go shopping to Chinatown, Jing-mei thought that the way her mother dressed was weird. "And my mother—wearing light-blue polyester pants, a red sweater, and a child's green down jacket—she didn't look like anybody else" [3]. The clause, "she didn't look like anybody else" implies that in Jing-mei's opinion, her mother is different from other Americans because of the way she dresses. Jing-mei also thinks that the mothers look funny when they wear Chinese dresses during their weekly meetings to play mahjong. She says, "She and Auntie An-mei were dressed up in *funny* Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and *too strange* for American parties" (*italic is mine*) [3]. She thinks that Chinese dress looks funny and strange to wear. All these statements reflect her cultural identification with American culture.

Lena, who was born and bred in the U.S. received criticism from her mother when she designed her house according to American style and aesthetics. She describes her mother's reaction when the latter visited her new house.

.... now she is visiting my husband and me in the house we just bought in Woodside. And I wonder what she will see. ... During our brief tour of the house, she's already found the flaws. She says the slant of the floor makes her feel as if she is "running

down.” She thinks the guest room where she will be staying—which is really a former hayloft shaped by a sloped roof—has “two lopsides.” [3]

Waverly, another American-born daughter, was criticized by her mother when she cut her hair, following the fashionable style at the time. In her mother’s opinion, this trendy style was terrible.

When we met at the Four Directions Restaurant, she eyed me with immediate disapproval. “Ai-ya! What’s the matter with your hair?” she said in Chinese. “What do you mean, ‘What’s the matter,’” I said. “I had it cut.” Mr. Rory had styled my hair differently this time, an asymmetrical blunt-line fringe that was shorter on the left side. It was fashionable, yet not radically so.

“Looks chopped off,” she said. “You must ask for your money back.”

I sighed. “Let’s just have a nice lunch together, okay?” [3]

By sighing, Waverly showed her exasperation at her mother’s criticism. She thinks that her mother does not know about what is fashionable and trendy in the American society where they live.

Fashion as a signifier of cultural dislocation in *The Joy Luck Club*. Huntley writes that “characters who are unable to integrate their two cultures or who are experiencing some form of cultural dislocation tend to be recognizable in Tan’s novels by the way they dress” [17]. As narrated by Jing-mei,

This was the year my mother and father left China with one stiff leather trunk filled only with fancy silk dresses. There was no time to pack anything else, my mother had explained to my father after they boarded the boat. Still, his hands swam frantically between the slippery silks, looking for his cotton shirts and wool pants.

When they arrived in San Francisco, my father made her hide those shiny clothes. She wore the same brown-checked Chinese dress until the Refugee Welcome Society gave her two hand-me-down dresses, all too large in size for American women. [3]

Suyuan Woo arrived in the United States in 1949. She did not carry anything, except one trunk full of fancy silk dresses, which, according to her husband, were not suitable for her new life in the U.S. That is why her husband asks her to hide those dresses. She has to wear second-hand dresses, which are too big for her.

Ying-ying St. Clair is also depicted as experiencing cultural dislocation, which is also depicted through the way she dresses. Lena, her daughter, says

In this picture, you can see why my mother looks displaced. She is clutching a large clam-shaped bag, as though someone might steal this from her as well if she is less watchful. She has on an ankle-length Chinese dress with modest vents at the side. And on top, she is wearing a Westernized suit jacket, awkwardly stylish on my mother’s small body, with its padded shoulders, wide lapels, and oversized cloth

buttons. This was my mother's wedding dress, a gift from my father. In this outfit, she looks as if she were neither coming from nor going to someplace. [3]

A picture of Ying-ying St. Clair taken after her release from the Angel Island Immigration Station depicts an Asian woman wearing a Westernized jacket combined with a traditional ankle-length Chinese dress. This strange combination is the visual description of the cultural dislocation she experiences.

c. Fashion in *The Joy Luck Club*

In *The Joy Luck Club*, fashion illustrates the complex interplay between culture, identity, and self-expression. It signifies the generational and cultural differences between the immigrant mothers and the American-born daughters. There are obvious contrasts between them. The memories of the youth in China still linger in the lives of the immigrant mothers, and this affects the way they navigate their new life in the U.S. They appear to have been settled on the outside, they are not completely assimilated into American society. They do not speak English properly. They still carry out their traditional Chinese rituals and traditions. Their Chinese cultural orientation is exemplified through the fashion they choose. The American-born daughters, on the other hand, are very American, by birth, by education, and by inclination. The cultural differences between the mothers and the daughters are so big that the latter often make little effort to hide their annoyance with things Chinese their mothers do. This can be seen in the style of the fashion they choose, which reflects American aesthetics. The immigrant mothers and the American-born daughters present themselves in ways as such because of their identification with Chinese culture for the mothers, and American culture for the daughters. To sum up, through the interplay between culture, identity, and self-expression, as illustrated by the choice of the fashion of the characters, Amy Tan offers insights into the characters' experiences as immigrants and their struggles to reconcile their cultural heritage with their new lives in the U.S.

4. Conclusion

In *The Joy Luck Club*, fashion illustrates the complex interplay between culture, identity, and self-expression. It signifies the generational and cultural differences between the immigrant mothers and the American-born daughters. There are obvious contrasts between them. The memories of the youth in China still linger in the life of the immigrant mothers, and this affects the way they navigate their new life in the U.S. They appear to have been settled on the outside, they are not completely assimilated into the American society. They do not speak English properly. They still carry out their traditional Chinese rituals and traditions. Their Chinese cultural orientation is exemplified through the fashion they choose. The American-born daughters, on the hand, are very American, by birth, by education, and by inclination. The cultural differences between the mothers and the daughter are so big that the latter often make a little effort in hiding their annoyance with things Chinese their mothers do. This can be seen the style of the fashion they choose, which reflects American aesthetics. The immigrant mothers and

the American-born daughters present themselves in ways as such because of their identification with Chinese culture for the mothers, and American culture for the daughters. To sum up, through the interplay between culture, identity, and self-expression, as illustrated by the choice of the fashion of the characters, Amy Tan offers insights into the characters' experiences as immigrants and their struggles to reconcile their cultural heritage with their new lives in the U.S.

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