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From Alienation to
Connection:
The Theme of Alienation
Analyzed from a Socialist
Feminist Perspective in
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck
Club*

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Introduction

The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan's first novel, published in 1989, remained on the New York Times Bestseller List for nine months. The novel presents sixteen interrelated stories centering on the mother-daughter relationships of four Chinese-raised mothers (Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu and Ying-Ying St.Clair) and their four American-raised daughters (Jingmei Woo, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu and Lena St.Clair). It also describes the tensions in their own life struggles.

Tan's description of the two generations has attracted the attention of many scholars. Merle Rubin has read the novel as a "portrait of four mother-daughter relationships that endure not only a generation gap, but the more unbridgeable gap between two cultures" (np). In line with Rubin, Shirley Geok-lin Lim claims that: "admitted into the American canon, these texts [The Joy Luck Club and some other Asian American literary texts mentioned in Lim's work] become weighted as mainstream cultural products whose position in American culture is to act as a signifier for a minority identity" (47). The significance of cultural identities for immigrant females, as presented in Tan's novel, cannot be denied. Tina Suyong Om claims that *The Joy Luck Club* is "about the journey of second-generation Asian American women as they attempt to claim their identity through the critical understanding of their dual cultural makeup" (14). In relation to this, Leslie Bow argues that it is "not through the character's confrontation with the contrasting cultural values but through their recognition that matrilineal heritage transcends the generation gap caused by daughter's integration into American culture" (236). Bow's mention of motherhood offers a unique perspective for an analysis of the

complex female experiences in the novel by proposing female empowerment through the affirmation of women relationships.

The novel presents a perplexing observation, when An-mei Hsu sees her daughter's life struggles in her life, she pronounces that: "I know this, because I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness. And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she come[s] out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl" (Tan 215). An-mei's revelation expresses her astonishment as, despite purposefully not teaching her daughter the Chinese way, the daughter eventually becomes an oppressed wife as well. An-mei concludes, through her observation, that female oppression does not emanate as a factor only from the Chinese culture, but more as the result of a woman's status in a family and society. Mothers and daughters' lives in American society in the novel are analyzed from the perspective of a feminist analysis as different from the former research on the exotic origin perspective.

The existing scholarly analyses of the novel concerning feminism includes Mary Ellen Snodgrass's critique as she lambasted Tan for "a common feminist failing, the elevation of female characters and the vilification, abasement, or dismissal of males" (112). However, she argues that Tan's mothers are also seen as examples of how females, even in traditional cultural frameworks, can subvert dominant patriarchal power structures and gain power from doing so (112). In line with Snodgrass, Wendy Ho argues that,

Tan's interest is not in resurrecting imperialist nostalgia or exotica, rather, she amplifies each woman's story and enriches the stories of mother-daughter pairs by finding their social and emotional resonances in the past and present legacies...her multiple pairings suggest the affiliative links between the mother-daughter pairs as well as among a broader community of women. (150)

Tan's novel addresses female oppression in contemporary society by exploring her characters' depression and struggles. Issues are openly encountered in a place called The Joy Luck Club, where the mothers and daughters feel at ease. The Joy Luck Club provides a community where empowerment is built and supported.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan chronicles depression, vexation and conflicts between mothers and daughters as well as husbands and wives. Mothers suffer from burdensome domestic duties, childrearing and eventual extended periods of misunderstanding and estrangement from daughters. Daughters experience disappointments, frustrations in marriage and inequality in their professional lives. Female experiences within the family framework, as described by Tan, vividly correspond with the concept of alienation in socialist feminism as Tan's female characters and alienated laborers are both exploited and alienated in labor. Recognition of these similarities highlights the concept of contemporary oppression of women in a capitalist society. Socialist feminist Alison Jaggar claims "the framework of alienation links women's oppression in home with women's and men's experiences in wage labor" (317), indicating that women's alienation can be related to women's oppression in contemporary American society. Viewing the complex female socio-emotional circumstances in the novel, by first applying the

socialist feminist theories and Jaggar's concept of alienation extension, can assist in the comprehension of Tan's feminist stand.

This thesis will interpret the socio-emotional experiences of women in the roles of mother, daughter and wife from a socialist feminist perspective and the concepts of alienation will be used to contextualize the live struggle experienced by these mothers and daughters. The Joy Luck Club will be analyzed as a feminist space where reduction in the influence of alienation as a therapeutic affect occurs.

Alienation and Feminism

The traditional interpretation of alienation combines philosophy and social thought. Karl Marx argued that the premise of alienation is the increasing demand for economic needs. He begins his argument stating that: "the devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things. Labor does not only create goods. It also produces itself and the worker as a commodity and indeed in the same proportion as it produces goods" (Marx qtd. in Fromm 79). Workers are then no longer free laborers as they convert to existing as commodities themselves as part of the production process, inevitably losing control of their work. Marx defines alienation as "the breakdown of, the separation from, the natural interconnection between people and their productive activities, the produce, the fellow workers with whom they produce those things, and with what they are potentially capable of becoming" (Marx qtd. in Ritzer 22). Alienation then separates individuals from their human essence or human nature.

Three main elements constitute alienation in Marx's opinion. First, the work is external to the worker, meaning the work is not part of his nature. Second, the worker's

labor is forced and the product is not intended to satisfy the worker's needs, but only to satisfy the needs of others. Finally, the product does not belong to the worker, rather it belongs to another person or entity (Marx qtd. in Fromm 98-99). Four types of alienation in labor generally exist: alienation of the worker from the product of his labor, from working, from himself as a producer and from his essence as species (Marx qtd. in Fromm 99).

In this traditional concept of alienation, the capitalist mode of production is emphasized and alienation only occurs when the individual wage worker is enrolled in a capitalist mode of production. Marx does not qualify domestic work as productive, therefore, in traditional Marxism, women do not experience alienation as they are not included in a capitalist mode of production. Socialist feminism, however, reveals that capitalism oppresses women as workers while patriarchy further oppresses women in contemporary society. Socialist feminist, Zillah Eisenstein utilizes the phrase "capitalist patriarchy" to explain the existing interdependence of the capitalist class structure and patriarchal male dominance. She claims: "Within the present system of power, either patriarchy or capitalism causes the other to fail to understand their present mutually reinforcing system and dialectical relationship, a relationship which must be understood if the structure of oppression is to be changed" (196). The mutuality of the capitalist economic structure and patriarchal gender structure in society then is a premise of socialist feminism. Based on this theoretical framework, socialist feminism elaborates upon Marx's traditional concept of alienation to analyze female oppression under capitalism.

Socialist feminists argue that the traditional concept of Marxist alienation needs to be revised. Alison Jaggar claims that “In contemporary society, women are alienated in all aspects in their lives” (308). She extends Marx’s traditional concept of alienation, explaining the circumstances of female alienation within a capitalist patriarchal society in her book, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*.

Jaggar argues that in (hetero)sexual alienation one form of women’s special alienation is to be given explicit recognition. She explains that “economic survival requires most women to present themselves in a way that is sexually pleasing to men” (308). Women are then expected to display themselves in forms satisfying to men. Women are expected to view their bodies as products and to physically display images by highlighting and enhancing particular body parts to attract men. Fitness regimes and adornment of the body by dressing selectively seek to transform the female body into a high quality product and satisfy the “male gaze” (308). As a result, “women’s sexuality is developed for man’s enjoyment rather than for women’s” (Jaggar 309). Difficulties emerge from the dominant male culture in resisting sexual recognition. Consequently, women are not free to express their sexual preference and, more fundamentally, are not free to discover their own sexual preference. Alienation, thus, prohibits women from developing their own sexual potential (Jaggar 309).

Female competition for sexual recognition from men creates alienation from each other. Socialist feminism argues that: “the sexual competition between women often makes them unable to perceive their underlying shared interests, just as wage workers are often unable to perceive the interests they share with their co-workers” (Jaggar 310). Women’s tendencies to focus on sexual approval from men often create an intensely

competitive rivalry that frequently results in creating emotional distance and even estrangement among them.

Jaggar also discusses how women are alienated as mothers. Jaggar claims that women do not control the conditions of motherhood. Children are viewed as “products” and birthing women are viewed less as “individuals than as the ‘raw material’ from which the ‘products’ are extracted” (311). She also states, “there is no ‘natural’ or biologically determined way either of giving birth to children or of rearing them” (311). Initially, development of modern obstetrics has reduced mothers’ control over the birth process. Following childbirth, childrearing standards are often developed by fathers who act as agents imposing the standards while mothers are forced to adhere to societal patriarchal values for acceptable child behavior (Jaggar 311). Mothers often forgo their own needs to meet patriarchal expectations. In this respect, mothers’ own needs are ignored. Additionally, as socialist feminists indicate, from the twentieth century on, most middle class families have reduced in size and now include only one or two adults (Jaggar 312). Women now regularly must “face alone the enormously demanding work of children rearing” (Jaggar 312) and the mother’s condition in the domestic households, especially the working mother’s condition, “recalls the description of the alienated wage laborer whose work mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (Jaggar 313).

Similarly to sexual alienation, mothers’ alienation from motherhood alienates them from each other as well (Jaggar 315). Jaggar claims that conception of children as “products” often “makes mothers feel intensely competitive with the other mothers and in that way alienated from them” (316). The experience of alienated wage laborers, in this respect, parallels the mothering experience.

Women and workers are therefore presented in a similar way: alienated and exploited in contemporary society. The concepts of alienation applied in this thesis originate not only from the traditional Marxist concept of alienation but also from Jaggar's extension of the concept established in her book, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*.

The Alienated Mothers

The Joy Luck Club stories begin with the recollection of one of the mothers', Suyuan's, memories as she recalls various conversations among the mothers. Suyuan is depicted as a brave and "strong woman" (Tan 39), much as the other mothers are. Each mother referred to the others as "good mothers" (Tan 39). Despite the strength of the individuals and the appearance of support within the group after moving to America, the mothers begin suffering from effects of alienation when they are carrying out their domestic duties and when, as children, the daughters experienced difficulty understanding their mothers.

In the life of struggle they experienced in the feudal society of China, the four mothers revealed courage and bravery as they faced significant challenges and difficulties while tenaciously seeking to change their fates. Living under the shadow and disgrace of her mother who was repeatedly raped and bullied in her marriage, An-mei Hsu was forced to discard twin daughters, even though she was a Kuomintang officer's wife. Betrothed in an arranged marriage at her birth, Linda Jong had never felt love from her own or her husband's family. She felt nothing except an eagerness to escape. Ying-ying was born into the wealthiest family in south China but suffered from deep emotional pain

inflicted upon her from her first husband's marital infidelity. Immigration to America, the promised land, brought great hope as the choice symbolized a chance to leave behind the old memories and begin anew.

The mothers' lives in America are no better than in China, however. America, in Ying-Ying's description is "where I lived in houses smaller than the one in the country [China]. I wore large American clothes. I did servant's tasks. I learn the Western ways. I tried to speak with a thick tongue. I raise a daughter, watching her from another shore. I accepted her American ways" (Tan 251). A belief in "you could be anything you wanted to be in America" (Tan 132) is held by the mothers as they set out to journey to the promised land. The reality is an entirely different experience however as, in Ying-Ying's words, she finds nothing that ultimately satisfies her own ambitions. Lack of money alters the vision as, "they have been forced to unpack their personal archives of pain and loss and to reassess their ambitions" (Lilach 150). Survival comes first and with that the women find menial jobs with long hours and poor pay as Suyuan takes a job cleaning and An-mei and Lindo have worked in a fortune cookie factory. As Wendy Ho argues,

As working-class women of color in American society, many of the Joy Luck Club mothers do not often have the money, energy and leisure to spend 'quality time' with their young children, because they speak little or no English and have few marketable skills, a number of the Joy Luck mothers find themselves in low paying, dead-end jobs for long hours. (Ho 167)

Economic privilege is enjoyed by the male in the marketplace (Jaggar 321), rendering opportunities for women as breadwinners nearly impossible. The Joy Luck Club mothers are then economically dependent on their husbands who do not compensate for the added burden. Sociologist Julie Brines even points out that “the more a husband relies on his wife for economic support, the less housework he does” (99 qtd. in Sheba Mariam). Mothers’ domestic work then, should be considered as capitalist production according to the rules of economic exchange. Jaggar claims that freedom to move out of the household and away from particular types of work, despite deep dissatisfaction with conditions of work, is virtually impossible (217). Mothers are forced to perform daily domestic household duties outside of normal “work” hours, similar to the alienated workers who “are forced to work according to the dictates of the capitalist class” (Jaggar 308). The surrendering of social positions for the Joy Luck women also transforms their roles as, in the United States, they are no longer the “officer’s wife” or the “rich young lady” (Tan 23). The resulting absence of maids, grandmothers or aunts, etc. places the burden of the entire household on the now working mothers. Mealtime presents an example of regularly expected performance as, each time the family eats together, “as quickly as it started, the men get up and leave the table. As if on cue, the women peck at the last morsels and then carry plates and bowls to the kitchen and dump them in the sink” (Tan 32). A great deal of heavy domestic exploitation is evident as the Joy Luck Club mothers work in a machine-like manner, always fulfilling domestic demands at the expense of exhausting their own physical energy. Karl Marx’s description of alienated labor as a “labor of self-sacrificing” (qtd. in Fromm 98) is applicable to the mothers as they

sacrifice themselves in servicing the family as a result of ceaseless domestic work, and ultimately falling into a state of depression.

The dissolution of the family structure resulting from immigration processes alters the childrearing experience, as once plentiful help no longer exists. Tan's rare mention of the Joy Luck Club fathers also indicates that women do indeed face the tasks involving childrearing alone. This circumstance results in a strong mutual dependence between mother and children. As Jaggar argues, "the utter dependence of the child upon her arouses feelings of love and protectiveness but also of resentment in the mother" (314) and "children have had feelings of hostility towards their mothers" (314). This makes the mother-daughter relationship more complex than ever.

In the novel, mother-daughter relationships become the women's greatest challenge with unimaginable familial conflicts resulting as the two cultures clash. Unlike the mothers, who acknowledge a strong sense of connection with their own mothers, the Joy Luck Club daughters have difficulty accepting their mothers and consequently, tension, misunderstanding and estrangements occur. Statements such as, "I wish you wouldn't do that, telling everybody I'm your daughter" (Tan 99), "I wish I wasn't your daughter, I wish you weren't my mother" (Tan 142), attest to deep repulsion. Possibilities for mutual understanding are severely limited as the mothers suffer collaterally and deeply from these harshly pronounced opinions.

Tan's presentation awakens the reader's curiosity to wonder about the underlying reason that causes the mother-daughter relationship dynamics to breakdown. Exceptionally high expectations on daughters in mothers result in feelings of depression for the daughters eventually triggering mother-daughter tension. Additionally, the

mothers' continual comparison of the daughters evokes a sense of rejection within the daughters and culminates in actions and expressions of near-hatred from the daughters to the mothers. The mothers' immense expectations and comparisons in America are the results of alienation.

In stories of Suyuan and Jingmei, Jingmei's misunderstandings with her mother stem from her mother's belief that Jingmei can be a prodigy. When Jingmei was nine, her mother told her "of course you can be prodigy, too" and "you can be best anything" (Tan 132). Jingmei recalls: "in all of my imaginings, I was filled with a sense that I would soon become perfect" (Tan 133). However, the fact is that Jingmei can hardly meet her mother's expectations. In reacting to this, Jingmei says "I hate tests, the raised hope and failed expectations" and begins to enjoy her mother's disappointed features (Tan 134). As a consequence, their mother-daughter relationship becomes worse.

Although the mother's expectations on their daughters are often presented as a Chinese cultural tradition, the mothers' initial desire is to have a child with "the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character" (Tan 254). The realization comes, however, that "these two things do not mix" (Tan 254). "American circumstances" can be taught, but not "Chinese character" (Tan 254). Their own needs are ignored. To the mothers, the initial years in America is the period to learn how to properly rear a child as a product according to specific rules. Rules of how to rear a child, as Jaggar describes, were usually dictated by a man (312). The expectations mothers imposed on their daughters were actually the mothers' own desires to create a perfect daughter who reflected, in return, a successful mother. The job as a mother would be successfully completed by producing the perfect daughter, as the waged laborer desires a

high quality job performance to satisfy the capitalist way of production. As Philip Kain argues, “If a laborer is alienated, the worker does not even control their own activity in the process of producing these products. The work is not voluntary, but coerced. It is not work to directly satisfy the needs or serve the aim of the workers themselves” (125). Oppression is the price for the perfect product in both cases. Specifically, motherhood in contemporary American society is not to serve the aim of mothers but rather a patriarchal ideology. Therefore, a mother who unconsciously imposes certain expectations on their daughters could be viewed as alienated. The unbridgeable mother-daughter generation gap occurring as a result of alienated mothering is portrayed in Suyuan and Jingmei’s story. The conflict is described as “my mother and I speak two languages” (Tan 27). Leslie Bow argues that this phenomenon “is not shown to be a literal disjunction between English and Chinese as indicative of a cultural gap, but a metaphoric gap based on Jingmei’s inability to ‘translate’ her mother’s meaning” (237). Estrangement culminating from alienation acts to disintegrate a level of vital communication between the mother and daughter finally produces conflict.

Jaggar claims that “mothers’ feelings of ambivalence about their children result from the contrast between the enormity of the sacrifices mothers make to produce children and the small value that contemporary society places on their products” (Jaggar 314). In the novel, Suyuan trades a domestic cleaning service for a weekly piano lesson (Tan 136) to cultivate her daughter, Jingmei, as a teenage pianist. Jingmei’s performance, however, is never to Suyuan’s satisfaction and her efforts to cultivate her daughter’s skills are all in vain. On Jingmei’s piano performance, Jingmei’s father comments that “it is something else” rather than a talented show (Tan 140). Receiving no positive response

from her husband in childrearing, Suyuan's unmet needs are driven underground and emerge in depression and aggression towards Jingmei, aligning with Jaggar's argument that mothers' unmet needs could possibly manifest themselves in depression, alcoholism, child abuse and even suicide (314). Jingmei is unable to understand her mother and continues to fail to meet her expectations. Facing her daughter's rebellion against the pressure to succeed as a pianist, Suyuan claims "Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient one!" (Tan 142). Jingmei regards this as a form of autocracy and believes her mother wishes to oppress her, forcing her to become an obedient person as in Chinese traditional culture. Traditional expectations are described as, "due to the gender role emanating from the original Asian culture; their family traditions emphasize female subordination to all males and older females in a patriarchal family structure" (Lindsey 223). However, Suyuan's shouting symbolizes an outlet for desperation and an impending depression as Suyuan's sacrifice is all in vain while her daughter refuses to respect that sacrifice through focusing on her piano skills. Moreover, Suyuan is only left with "disappointment" and the feeling of depression makes her like "a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless" (Tan 142).

Alienation creates a strong impetus for mothers to make comparisons between children. As mentioned in the theoretical section, viewing children as a product, mothers "feel intensely competitive with other mothers and in that way alienated from them" (Jaggar 317). Comparisons of this type not only affect interpersonal relationships but also place immense stress on the children, promoting further estrangement between mothers and their daughters. In Jingmei's narration,

From the time we were babies, our mothers compared the creases in our belly buttons, how shapely our earlobes were, how fast we healed when we scraped our knees, how thick and dark our hair, how many shoes we wore out in one year, and later, how smart Waverly was at playing chess, how many trephine she had won last month, how many newspapers had printed her name, how many cities she had visited. (Tan 37)

Jingmei is telling this story with a tone full of reproach when recalling how her mother compared her with friends. Reproach like this causes daughters to deny relationships with their own mothers and the mothers' reactions of "self-blame and feelings of worthlessness and ruthlessness are aggravated when children refuse any maternal contact and even slander their mother" (Finzi-Dottan, Goldblatt and Cohen-Masica 318). In Ying-ying's story, she recalls, "all years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me" (Tan 67). Silence between mother and daughter is like a knife cutting off all connections between them as the mother does not feel needed and even seems to be abandoned. Wendy Ho argues that the result of their motherhood is that "they produce daughters who seem more like strangers than loving intimate allies" (171). Mothers of estranged mother-daughter relationships have rarely asserted their own needs in the mothering process, with those who were truly devoted the most to their daughters suffering the greatest from estrangement.

Alienation, as indicated in the above analysis, appears not only in work but also in the mother-daughter relationships in Tan's novel. Tan's description of the mothers'

depression suggests the new maternal condition is parallel to the alienated waged laborer whose work “mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (Jaggar 313). The damages of alienation manifest themselves both physically and mentally and create a generation gap for the women that is especially difficult for the mothers to bridge, as they are unable to control certain vital factors within the parenting process, thus developing depression in motherhood.

The Alienated Daughters

The four young American-born daughters, as in Tan’s description, are economically independent working women, yet still suffer failed marriages and unhappy marriage lives. In the novel, what is always present in the daughters’ narration is the “feeling of fears” (Tan 156). Lena, daughter of Ying-Ying, the most economically successful among the daughters, has a boyfriend whom she considers quite nice and considerate. However, worries about her boyfriend’s recognition plague her as she is continuously afraid she cannot please him:

When I fantasized about moving in with him, I also dredged up my deepest fears: that he would tell me I smell bad, that I had terrible bathroom habits, that my taste in music and television was appalling. I worried Harold would someday get a new prescription for his glasses and he’d put them on one morning, look me up and down, and say: “Why, gosh, you aren’t the girl I thought you were, are you?” (Tan 156)

Viewing herself as a product, Lena believes she must be the girl Harold believes she is. She has formed an expected image of her appearance and her behavior to satisfy Harold's fantasy, which suggests that she accepts the concept that "a woman's potential is judged by how well she fits the fantasy projected onto her" (Frankel 47). Pressure and fears are generated as she continues comparing her real self with the expected image. Jaggar, in line with Frankel, claimed that alienated females "are seen as sexual objects, evaluated primarily in terms of their physical attributes and secondarily in terms of their skill (charm) in displaying these attributes" (309). Lena's fears then stem from her lack of confidence in the ability to fascinate and satisfy Harold. She allows Harold, rather than herself, to control her appearance and behavior, ultimately transforming herself into an object for Harold's judgment. Lena's sacrifice continues in the sexual relationship as she describes the sex experience as "this feeling of surrendering everything to him, with abandon, without caring what I got in return" (Tan 160). Lena's situation is not unique in the novel, as Rose, daughter of An-mei, confesses to Lena, "your thoughts of worries are commonplace in women like us" (Tan 156), implying that sexual alienation is universal to female characters in the novel.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels once argued, "the bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation into a mere relation" (382). Lena becomes more alienated after her marriage to Harold. Rigid rules are set in place in respect to shared expenses. The couple have individual bank accounts and a balance sheet is used to detail their daily spending. Quarrels often arise when the couple deals with the settlement of the balance sheet. Harold claims that Lena should pay for the exterminators, because Mirugai is her cat and so they're her fleas. "It's only fair" (Tan

150), Harold claims. However, Lena does not like the cat, the only reason she accepted Mirugai was that Harold gave it to her as a birthday gift. Despite this, Lena later pays everything for Harold's gift.

Tan's description of the balance sheet, however, provides the reality that Lena and Harold's marriage is unequal. One of the balance sheets shows the following,

Lena		Harold
Chicken,veg,bread,broccoli,shampoo,beer	\$19.63	Garage stuff \$25.35
Maria(clean+tip)	\$65	Bathroom stuff \$5.41
Groceries(see shop list)	\$55.15	Light Fixture \$87.26
Petunias, potting soil	\$14.11	Road gravel \$19.99
Photo develop	\$13.83	Gas \$22.00
		Car smok check \$35
		Movie &dinner \$65
		Ice cream \$4.5

(Tan 160)

This one-week balance sheet indicates that Harold has already spent over a hundred dollars more than Lena. Although they reach an understanding about not including personal stuff, Harold still writes down the ice cream without noticing the fact that his wife cannot eat ice cream due to childhood trauma. Details such as this indicate actual inequalities behind their equal marital relationship. Instead of love, Harold views the balance sheet as the base of the marriage and he continues forcing Lena to follow the

rules by claiming that “So we can eliminate false dependencies...be equals... love without obligation...” (Tan 162). Emphasizing his subjective feelings, which refer to Harold’s indifference to his wife and his over-pursuits of profits, the relationship between them does not turn out to be out of care and love but to take advantage of each other’s benefits. The reason why Lena questions Harold what their marriage is really based on is that she thinks it should not be “this balance sheet” and the debate on “who owes who what [who owes what to whom?]” (Tan 165). Despite his wife’s questioning and concern, Harold refuses to make changes. Karl Marx argues the social relationship has become a physical relation between physical things. The alienated relationships, “as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things” (Marx 668). Once their relationship is measured by material things, the process of alienation is experienced in Lena and Harold’s marriage. Marriage, to Lena, becomes a source of alienation.

The flawed relationship weakens when the couple establishes their own business and become co-workers. Harold acts as the company’s president and usurps Lena’s suggestions, claiming them as his own and refusing to credit Lena with ideas that originated from her. Lena describes her work satisfaction as, “I love my work when I don’t think it about too much. And when I do think about it, how much I get paid, how hard I work, how fair Harold is to everybody except me, I get upset” (Tan 159). Her continual subjection to unfair practices by her own husband builds deep resentment in her as he provides himself with extreme rewards at the cost of her sacrifice. The gender wage gap has long been a fact in society and is clearly present in Lena’s experience as, “Harold makes about seven times more [than Lena]” (Tan 159) by performing the same job.

According to Jaggar's research, she points out the female labor is the "fastest growing" but the "lowest paid" (324). She says "the genderization of wage labor means that women wage workers suffer a special form of alienation. In order to earn a living, they are forced to exploit their physical strength and skills or their intellectual capacities; they are also forced to exploit their sexuality and emotions" (326). Lena chooses to accept her husband's treatment of her as his wife and colleague and, in fact, her position as colleague can be considered as a factor in further alienating the couple. Lena's mother observes, "they say words that mean nothing, they sit in a room with no life in it" (Tan 252). The atmosphere between Lena and Harold confirms Behnam Mirzabazade Fomeshi's argument that "in an alienated community there is a distance among the individuals, not a friendly atmosphere, intimacy, or mutual trust" (30). A vacuous marriage such as theirs could surely catalyze feelings of depression.

Rose is another daughter suffering similar marital alienation issues as Lena. Her controlling husband, Ted, holds absolute power in the family deciding over both his own private affairs and Rose's while entirely disregarding her personal preferences. As Rose narrates:

Over 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 us 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". (Tan 119)

Ted's control extends even to planning when Rose will have a baby. He alienates his wife from this initial transition to motherhood by forcing his decision upon her with no consideration of her thoughts. Socialist feminism argues that reproductive freedom must be available to all women as they are the carriers of the developing fetus. Amanda Frankel claims "a woman must decide if she wants to be a mother, how she will raise her children and how she will be seen in public; as a person, not a woman on the arm of men" (46). Rose's passive familial position, however, never allows her to reject Ted's decisions. Ultimately, Rose has deprived herself of these rights as the longer she stays with the controlling Ted, the less ability she has to reject his decisions.

Gender differences in alienation also influence Rose and Ted's relationship. The marriage develops a downward spiral when Ted's career as a surgical doctor experiences a traumatic shift, as a failure during a surgical case results in disaster. He then loses the family's economic advantages. As Tone argues, "although an employed wife contributes to happiness and well-being, when her income begins to match her husband's income, his [the husband's] sense of well-being is lowered" (225). Ted's career failure significantly damages not only his economic income but also his psychic stability as attaining faultless working performance is the fundamental goal of alienated workers. An alienated worker's self-esteem, as discussed above, is usually established by his own value of the products he has created. Ted's sense of well-being is obviously dramatically affected following his career failure and is marked by his uncharacteristic comfort-seeking as he forces Rose into the role of decision-maker. Tone argues that both female alienation and male alienation can contribute to female oppression within a family framework. She says,

For the woman, however, her place is within the home. Men's objectification within industry, through the expropriation of the product of their labour, takes the form of alienation. But the effect of alienation on the lives and consciousness of women takes an even more oppressive form. Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are essential structures of her oppression. (Tone 102)

Families of today are considered to have, "two main functions; to socialize the children into society's normative system of values and to inculcate 'appropriate' status expectations and to provide a stable emotional environment that will cushion the (male) worker from the psychological damage of the alienation" (Parsons qtd. in Barrett 189). Thus, the family functions to serve these functions only when the mother is continuously available to meet the needs of the family, placing the female under enormous burden as she strives to buttress domestic life.

The changed role of decision-maker in this family does not refer to the shift of dominant power in the family. Ted's dominant role is based on his economic income. Thus, losing superior income status seemed to have induced a total loss of power, triggering a vast and instantaneously vulnerable situation for him as an alienated man. Ted's new found vulnerability contributes to his oppressing his wife as, if Rose is now forced into the decision-making and makes wrong decisions or decisions that Ted disagrees with, Ted will grow angry and blame will be cast onto Rose. Ted ultimately controls Rose's decision-making, seizing all possibilities of autonomy from her. The

family therefore acts as an essential reflection of society's power structure. Moreover, the family in a capitalist patriarchal society models patriarchal power in the 'public' world, acting itself as a source of women's oppression.

Ted's hysterical temper originating from his sense of failing as a human being, leads to his relentless exploitation of his marriage and his wife as an individual. Ted's alienation separates him from his family members, while his wife, Rose, is left to bear the consequences: "When something that violent hits you, you can't help but lose your balance and fall" (Tan 121). Wearied, depressed and oppressed, Rose grows desperate to escape and ultimately moves to end the marriage.

The above analysis demonstrates that alienation affects the dramatic struggle to the daughters' marriages in the novel. The increasing self-sacrifice, which acts as an attempt to save the marriages, actually leads to less control and finally to the loss of self.

The Joy Luck Club as a Feminist Space

Alienation has produced an effect on both the mothers' and daughters' lives, resulting in conflict and turmoil. Elimination of female alienation as proposed by socialist feminists must involve an explicit commitment to abolition of both class and gender (Jaggar 317). In fact, the ultimate solution to female alienation is still theoretical (Jaggar 317). The mothers in the novel have succeeded in building a small community in which no class or gender differences exist. The Joy Luck Club is a place where the alienated characters can be comforted.

According to Michael Magali, "through a more symmetrical distribution of power, the Joy Luck Club retains different roles for its various members while simultaneously

rejecting a hierarchical structure” (70). For example, members vote to form operational rules for the community. Women vote, sharing an equal, democratic voice with their husbands. Jingmei presents the history and current status of the Joy Luck Club, in the first short story. Uncle Gorge begins with Joy Luck Club’s regular report: “Our capital account is \$24, 825, or about \$6,206 a couple, \$3,103 per person...” (Tan 28-29). No special classifications exist for women, men, wealthy or poor families in reference to the community property as evidenced by the terms “a couple”, “per person”. No one is in a dominated or inferior position. Members distribute equally the property they have gained together. The Joy Luck Club addresses the problem that women receive unequal wage and overall income when compared to men.

The Joy Luck Club mothers’ decision to invest in the stock market offers the hope of escaping the capitalist model of labor production. As Michael Magali points out “rather than a regular job in contemporary America, the stock market is more like a game of ‘luck’, which provides the wives and husbands with a form of equalizing collective joy luck” (53). Similar to investing in the stock market, they are also equal in their biggest leisure game—mah jong; “We got smart. Now we can all win and lose equally. We can have stock market luck. We play mah jong for fun, just for a few dollars, winner take all. Losers take home leftovers! So every people can have some joy” (Tan 30). The Joy Luck Club members are released from the capitalist product mode in this community. The equal distribution of assets drastically reduces the influence of alienation within the community. As a result, women experience control over their own lives and themselves.

The system in the Joy Luck Club enables women to gain joy, luck and hope which relieves their oppression from alienation. As Magali argues, “the formation of the Joy

Luck Club in America thus functions as a vehicle for these women not only to survive but also to control their fates in the foreign land they have chosen as the place to secure their hopes for the future” (57). The American Joy Luck Club continues the spirit of the original Joy Luck Club in wartime in China for people to overcome the difficulties and pray for the hopes (Tan 25), in a foreign land, under capitalist patriarchy. Tone points out that “Marxist and socialist feminists aim to create a world in which women can experience themselves as whole persons, as integrated rather than fragmented beings, as people who can be happy even when they are unable to make their families and friends happy” (102).

Jingmei takes her mother’s place in the Joy Luck Club at the end of novel, an indication of the daughters’ recognition of the mothers’ attempt to challenge the alienation and inequality in society. Jingmei’s action also demonstrates efforts between the daughters and mothers to reduce the estrangement caused by alienation between them.

Storytelling in the Joy Luck Club is a key tool utilized by the mothers and daughters in their attempt to reconnect with each other. The mothers artfully tell stories to their daughters enhancing the mother-daughter bond between them. Given the unavoidable alienation suffered by women as a result of the contemporary capitalist patriarchal society and the resulting estrangement caused by the alienation, a generational gap occurs that, without action taken by the mothers to bridge, will always remain. Motivated as witnesses to their daughters’ life experiences, the mothers are moved to prevent the cycle of depression, experienced by themselves, for their daughters by forming alliances with them.

Bonds begin to form as the mothers share past experiences with their daughters to evoke a mutual sense and spirit. Ulterior wishes are expressed for the daughters as the mothers describe themselves as the revolutionaries who challenge and have escaped their oppressive situations and “learned to shout” (Tan 240). Empowerment is premeditated and intensely sought as observed from the mothers’ statements in the novel, such as, “I know how to live your life like a dream. To listen and watch, to wake up and try to understand what has already happened” (Tan 240) and “I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter’s tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter” (Tan 252). Story-telling functions as a special educational device for improving the daughters’ survival and subverting the oppressive system in which they live. Marina Heung argues that “storytelling heals past experiences of loss and separation; it is also a medium for rewriting stories of oppression and victimization into parables of self-affirmation and individual empowerment” (607). Daughters can now envision the new image of brave and rebellious mothers rather than alienated and silent ones. Empowered images embolden them to face oppression as they establish the essential and growing confidence gained from a consistent support system. Remarkably, Lena and Rose begin to rethink their marital relationships as the mothers work to form strengthening bonds with their daughters, gradually forming alliances.

The sixteen small stories in *The Joy Luck Club* appear to be separate but all center on mother-daughter relationships; comparatively, just like the mother-daughter relationships in the novel, which appear to be in estrangement but are ultimately close to each other by sharing the same essence of female spirit. As mothers shared stories with

their daughters from the angle of “woman” as opposed to “mother”, the mother-daughter relationship transitioned into a “woman-to-woman relationship”. The mutual feeling of existing equally as women functioned, to an extent, to reduce effects of existing alienation between the mothers and daughters.

Conclusion

Amy Tan’s, *The Joy Luck Club*, offers a rare and unique view into the lives of Chinese female immigrants as related to women’s oppression in contemporary American society. Based on the theoretical framework of alienation in socialist feminism, this thesis analyzed the oppression of four mothers and daughters as a result of alienation with a focus on motherhood and marriage.

As first generation immigrants, the mother’s limited work and language skills place them at an immediate disadvantage, forcing them to be economically dependent on their husbands and virtually trapping them in domestic household drudgery. Daily contemporary motherhood, which now occupies the majority of their time, is even controlled by the male through strictly established childrearing rules. Encompassed in alienation, they are alienated from themselves, family members and social circles. Estrangement between the mothers and daughters acts to intensify the mothers’ oppression and leads to problematic relationship issues between them. The daughters, even as second-generation immigrants who are more economically independent and self-reliant, repeat their mothers’ patterns of behaviors as they inadvertently position themselves in oppressive situations in the family, marital relationship and in their careers.

Oppression is addressed and rejected as the mothers and daughters offer their own proposals to alleviate effects of the intolerable conditions of alienation and establish hope for social change. The Joy Luck Club establishment represents attempts to build a retreat where women go to challenge social norms, ultimately beginning to transform the social hierarchy and model of production. Shared past experiences of brave women who question rules and even successfully defeat the patriarchal rules bring enlightenment and empower The Joy Luck Club mothers, allowing them to heal the once alienated mother-daughter relationships.

Amy Tan enjoys an exceptional reputation in the field of Asian-American literature as her works have a strong appeal for many readers, especially the *The Joy Luck Club*. The powerful spirit of her characters in *The Joy Luck Club* is also available to offer a vivid exploration into how we can look for methods to combat negative effects of alienation for those who share similar problems as the characters.

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