

# Awakening of Female Consciousness in *The Joy Luck Club*: An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan as Two Illustrations

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**Abstract:** Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*, with the awakening of women's self-consciousness as one of its themes, revolves around the lives of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their four American-born daughters. Taking An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan in *The Joy Luck Club* as two illustrations, this paper aims to explore the internal and external causes leading to their awakening. After analyzing the embodiment of the female consciousness in these two characters, this paper points out that the internal factors involve their traits and personalities and the external factors deal with their mother-daughter bond and the differences between Chinese and American culture: An-mei, encouraged by her mother's silent rebellion against Chinese feudal patriarchal society, eventually achieves self-discovery and independence by struggling out of the dilemma and immigrating to America; Rose, a second-generation immigrant, keeps seeking for her own identity while facing both the racial and gender discrimination from American society and, with the help of her mother, succeeds in seizing the power of discourse in her marriage and in shaping her independent personality.

**Keywords:** *The Joy Luck Club*, Female Consciousness, Sense of Identity

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Amy Tan and *The Joy Luck Club*

Amy Tan, born in Oakland, California 1952, is regarded as one of the most acclaimed writers in contemporary Chinese American literature. Most of Tan's works explore mother-daughter relationships and are full of oriental characteristics.

After the deaths of Tan's elder brother and her father, Tan's mother decided to move the family to Switzerland. During that time, Tan heard that her mother had a former marriage in China and had four children, three daughters and a son, and her mother's only son died at a very young age. This story forms the basis for her first representative work, *The Joy Luck Club*, which was published in 1989. The novel, which won many awards including the 1989 National Book Award and Los Angeles Times Fiction Prize, has been translated into more than twenty languages.

*The Joy Luck Club* is a real club founded by four Chinese immigrant mothers, where they gather together to eat, to play and to chat. The novel tells the stories of these immigrant

mothers and of the Joy Luck children, the American-born daughters. An-mei Hsu is one of the immigrant mothers in the club. She reviews how she struggles against the feudalism and the traditional Chinese patriarchy and how she comes to realize her true nature and awakens her female consciousness. Rose Hsu Jordan, An-mei Hsu's daughter, narrates the conflicts and communications between her mother and her. She recalls how she suffers from the divorce and is awakened to speak up and fight for freedom and equality.

### 1.2. Introduction to Female Consciousness

"Female consciousness, recognition of what a particular class, culture, and historical period expect from women, creates a sense of rights and obligations that provides motive force for actions different from those Marxist or feminist theory generally try to explain" [1]. It activates women to pursue independence, initiative and creativity, and centers on the rights of gender, on social concerns and on survival.

*The Joy Luck Club* was created in the 1980s, when second-wave feminism in America was about to end. As the starting point of second-wave feminism and a major work of feminist philosophy, *The Second Sex*, by Simone de

Beauvoir, laid the foundation for feminine literature afterwards. Tracing the poignant destinies of two generations of tough and intelligent women, Amy Tan attempted to arouse people's attention to the oppression of women. She wanted to change women's position as the second sex by awakening their female consciousness.

## 2. Literature Review

*The Joy Luck Club* has gained much popularity for its amazing depiction of the real bittersweet ambiguities of four Chinese American mothers and their daughters. In general, the research topics on the novel are of four kinds: cultural conflict, mother-daughter bond, marital view and feminism. In the thesis *On Conflicts and Integration of American and Chinese Cultures in Joy Luck Club from Perspective of Intercultural Communications* [2], two authors concluded that when facing cultural conflicts, instead of accepting one while abandoning the other, four Chinese immigrant mothers and their daughters all learnt to reconcile those two different cultures so as to better adapt to the mainstream of American society. In addition, Guo Huiqin analyzed the characters' different views of marriage in the thesis *Differences of Marital View between China and America in The Joy Luck Club under Cultural Dimensions Theory* [3], aiming to clarify the differences between traditional Chinese marital view and modern American marital view from the perspective of conjugal purpose, spouse selection and different situation the spouse stay in after marriage.

More and more attention having been paid to women, there has been an increase in the number of researches of the novel from the feminist perspective.

In his dissertation *Escape from the Other — the Feminist Awakening in The Joy Luck Club* [4], Huang Ping discussed the construction and reconstruction of female images and the characters' awakening as the "Other" in the book.

In the article *On Feminism of The Joy Luck Club*, Zhou Yan analyzed the characters' female consciousness from three aspects: their "resisting the masculine authority, struggling for female discourse rights and the gender consciousness" [5]. She also pointed out that for Chinese immigrant women race and gender were the two factors that must be taken into consideration together while fighting against discrimination.

As for the factors influencing their awakening, A. T. Lima mentioned in her dissertation *Living Liminality: A Study of Second Generation Immigrant Identity* [6] that it was important for second-generation immigrants to have the ethnic awareness and sense of identity when facing the traditional ethnic culture and the mainstream culture in the country of immigration.

Moreover, in the thesis *The Struggles of the First Generation on Women Stereotypes in The Joy Luck Club Novel*, Riana Permatasari and Muhammad Fajar found out "there were three ways done by the first generation of Chinese immigrant women in order to face the stereotypes including being active, breaking the silence, and storytelling"

[7].

Based on previous researches, this paper tries to explore both the specific embodiment of the awakening and the factors behind, such as the culture clash and the sense of identity, in other words, how and why they are awakened to stand up and to fight for their own.

## 3. An-mei Hsu

### 3.1. Embodiment of Female Consciousness

#### 3.1.1. Her Being Aware of Her True Nature

Having been raised by her Popo (grandmother), An-mei Hsu has little memory about her mother. Popo tells An-mei that her mother is a ghost, something forbidden to talk about, though alive. Her uncle's family also express their distaste for her mother, blaming her mother for being the Fourth Wife of Wu Tsing, a wealthy businessman. Later her mother becomes a widow and is called "decayed flesh, evil, rotted to the bone" [8] (216). All the time, An-mei's mother has been condemned, scolded and even cursed by her family. However, when Popo is terribly sick, An-mei sees clearly what a filial daughter her mother is. An-mei sees that her mother cuts flesh from arm to save Popo just because in their hometown, an old saying goes that if the daughter cuts her flesh for her mother to eat, her mother will not die. It is at that moment that she comes to understand her mother and begins to recall a few memories. An-mei says, "Here is how I came to love my mother. How I saw in her my true nature. What was beneath my skin and inside my bones" [8] (48). She feels respect, honor and filial piety in her mother, and also in herself. Following her inner thought, An-mei realizes that she herself is such an independent individual with true nature that she may have her own decision. She finally chooses to go with her mother regardless of all the obstacles. And all these leave the eternal spirit in her heart.

#### 3.1.2. Her Fighting Against Chinese Patriarchy

An-mei's grandmother often tells her some eerie stories after her mother has left. For example, a ghost will take away those little girls who are disobedient; a girl who refuses to listen to her elders will have a white ball which falls from her head when shaking. The purpose of grandma's telling these stories is to urge An-mei to become an obedient girl without her own thoughts and viewpoints. However, An-mei does not want to live according to their will; instead, she sticks to her own autonomy and discretion. Her uncle warns her that she will never lift her head again if she leaves with her mother, but An-mei tries to lift it and she succeeds. Her lifting the head marks her fighting against the feudalism. Just as she decides to go with her mother regardless of the family's prevention, she believes in her own understanding of her mother rather than the influence of the Chinese patriarchy.

On the way to Wu Tsing's house, An-mei imagines a new world, where she can live as a princess and enjoy the Western life style. However, the reality punches her heavily and forces her to face the fact that she and her mother have no position in this big family. Second Wife tries to trick An-mei

by giving her a beautiful pearly strand at their first meeting, however, An-mei's mother finds out the necklace is a fake and reminds An-mei not to easily lose herself to something false. Year after year, An-mei's mother suffers from the dilemma and even her own son is taken away by Second Wife. Finally, An-mei's mother commits suicide, sacrificing her own life to earn a better life for her daughter and son. An-mei finally flares up.

"And on that day, I showed Second Wife the fake pearl necklace she had given me and crushed it under my foot.

And on that day, Second Wife's hair began to turn white.

And on that day, I learned to shout "[8] (240).

The crushed pearls symbolize that old social system has also been crushed in An-mei's mind and no longer has any influence on her. Having obtained courage from her mother, she learns to stand up and to fight against this feudal patriarchy for freedom.

### 3.1.3. *Her Changing from Reliance on God to Self-redemption*

An-mei Hsu has had faith in God's will for many years. Her daughter Rose says, "As proof of her faith, my mother used to carry a small leatherette Bible when she went to the First Chinese Baptist Church every Sunday" [8] (116). However, things have changed a lot after an accident of her youngest son, Bing. An-mei helps her husband catch fishes that day and asks Rose to care for her younger brothers. However, Bing is a four-year-old naughty boy, and in an unguarded moment, he falls into the sea from the edge of the reef and disappears. All the family members keep shouting and waving for many hours but cannot find him. The next day, An-mei brings the Bible to the spot where Bing has disappeared and keeps praying, time and time again. Her faith in God leads her to the vision of Bing three times, but after dozens of attempts she finds out that those are just bubbles. At that moment, An-mei gives up both the hope of finding her youngest son and the belief that "she could use faith to change fate" [8] (130). Since then, tucking away the Bible under a too-short table leg, she has no longer had blind reliance on things of unquestioned certainty. She learns to face the reality, coming to realize that she should believe in herself and keep the fate within her own hands. An-mei wakes up from her illusion and achieves the competence of self-redemption.

## 3.2. *Influential Factors*

### 3.2.1. *Internal Factor*

An-mei's disposition or her temperament can be the internal factor which influences her awakening of female consciousness. Unlike others in feudal China, An-mei is sensitive and insightful. She recalls the past like this, "I felt our house was so unhappy, but my little brother did not seem to think so" [8] (43). What's more, she is independent and self-assertive. For example, An-mei has been told many strange stories when she is young. She is confused, but never gets restricted by the stories. An-mei used to be tricked by Second Wife of Wu Tsing but after her mother's warning, she

sees through the lie and quickly adjusts her own state of mind.

An-mei not only has a steelyard in her mind to weigh out all the things but also has a mirror in her heart to tell right from wrong. Once she catches sight of any signs of truth, she will grasp them firmly and trace them until she gets the fact. This kind of personality helps An-mei Hsu stick to her principles and it also plays a positive role in the process of her awakening.

### 3.2.2. *External Factors*

#### (i) Traditional Chinese Patriarchy

Since An-mei has grown up in feudal society, the traditional Chinese patriarchy inevitably influences An-mei to some extent.

In old China, women were supposed to conform to the so-called moral standards, Three Obediences and Four Virtues:

"The Three Obediences enjoined a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband's death. The Four Virtues decreed that she be chaste; her conversation courteous and not gossip; her department graceful but not extravagant; her leisure spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home" [9].

It can be seen clearly that An-mei's mother violates the first virtue in that she becomes the fourth concubine of Wu Tsing after the death of her first husband, which is regarded as unchaste. The whole family just abuse her and deprive her of staying with her children. Before getting reunited with her mother, An-mei is indoctrinated with many feudal patriarchal thoughts like these.

However, An-mei witnesses the fact that when Popo is terribly sick her mother returns to the house and cuts flesh to save her dying Popo. Even so, her mother still cannot get the forgiveness from the family. "But because she was a widow, she was worthless in many aspects. She could not remarry" [8] (236). In view of the moral standards imposed upon women, An-mei's mother suffers a lot throughout her life. An-mei thinks that it is not her mother's fault, instead, her mother's tragedy is caused by the feudal patriarchy. An-mei comes to realize how seriously the feudal morality oppresses women. Women are considered to be inferior to men and have no rights and no power. It is her mother's death that awakens An-mei to utter her voice and to fight for fair rights and freedom.

Although living in feudal China, An-mei sees the essence through the phenomena. From the ruthless family, she realizes how decayed the old system is; from her brave mother, she finds out her true nature and learns to be strong enough to speak up and to fight. Therefore, the traditional Chinese patriarchy cannot prevent the awakening of An-mei's female consciousness, instead, it promotes her to be determined to make some changes on her own.

#### (ii) Modern American Culture

Years after her mother's death, An-mei immigrates to America for a better life and has seven children there. Since

An-mei has her values formed in China and the friends whom she gets on with in the U.S. are all Chinese, the modern American culture does not influence her too much, except the Bible. It is mentioned several times in the novel that An-mei is faithful to God and relies much on Him. However, when her youngest son Bing gets drowned in the sea, An-mei keeps praying for God's help hundreds of times till she is exhausted, but she still cannot bring her son back to life. Not until that time does she realize that the fate cannot be changed by faith and the only person she can believe in and rely on is herself.

## 4. Rose Hsu Jordan

### 4.1. Embodiment of Female Consciousness

#### 4.1.1. Her Free Choice of a Spouse

Rose Hsu Jordan, An-mei's third daughter, was born in America. In her college, Rose meets Ted Jordan in class, who becomes her husband afterwards. As a typical white American, Ted is brash, assured and determined, and different from those Chinese boys Rose has ever met. These characteristics attract Rose so much that she seizes any chance to date with Ted. Rose's mother An-mei, however, is chagrined and keeps warning Rose that the boy she is dating with is an American. Because in An-mei's mind, Rose is still a Chinese American and the racial gap is not going to be easily narrowed. She thinks Rose should go to meet some Chinese boys from church, just like her sisters. But not willing to follow her mother's advice, Rose sticks to her own choice. Her free choice of a spouse means that she values her own feelings. Her insistence on her own decision reflects her female consciousness.

#### 4.1.2. Her Notion of Self-reliance

After Rose and Ted establish a relationship, they are satisfied that they belong to each other and believe in "two halves creating the whole: yin and yang" [8] (118). Regarding Ted as her hero, Rose totally relies on him. Even several years after their marriage, Rose still looks upon Ted as her leader, who is responsible for making any decision in the family. Things have changed since Ted loses the lawsuit. Having seen himself as a failed protector, Ted refuses to make any decision or take any responsibility. He blames Rose for her mildness and indifference and their love gradually fades away. Later that evening, Ted asks for a divorce, which causes great pain to Rose. Rose suffers a lot and finally gets through it.

"When something that violent hits you, you can't help but lose your balance and fall. And after you pick yourself up, you realize you can't trust anybody to save you—not your husband, not your mother, not God. So what can you do to stop yourself from tilting and falling all over again" [8] (121)?

The answer is obvious — trust yourself. Rose is just like her mother: after a series of trials, she figures out the importance of believing in herself and finally develops her notion of self-reliance, doing her utmost to be an independent woman.

#### 4.1.3. Her Seizing the Initiative in the Marriage

Beauvoir proposed in *The Second Sex*: "The curse which lies upon marriage is that too often the individuals are joined in their weakness rather than in their strength, each asking from the other instead of finding pleasure in giving." [10] In Rose and Ted's marriage, Ted is always the one who dominates everything and enjoys acting as the center of the family, while Rose enjoys the role of being protected and guided. She is obedient to her husband unconditionally.

Having failed in litigation, Ted is determined to divorce Rose and keeps pressing her to sign the divorce papers. Not knowing which choice is right, Rose starts to panic. She finds it difficult to handle the situation on her own, so she turns to a psychiatrist for help and consults her friends, Lena and Waverly, in the Joy Luck Club, but she seems to be even more confused. It is Rose's mother An-mei that encourages her to speak up and helps her to get out of trouble. For the first time, Rose meets the inner self who is so calm, determined and uncompromising. Having announced her decision without any fear or anger, she feels something blooming in her heart. Rose completely changes into another person, who bravely seeks freedom and independence with the initiative in her own hands.

### 4.2. Influential Factors

#### 4.2.1. Internal Factor

Rose Hsu Jordan has a contradictory personality. Sometimes she can be self-determined, but sometimes she can also be dependent. However, most of the time she is passive. She refuses to take any responsibility or make any major decision. There are too many options available to her, which also means too many opportunities for her to make the wrong decision. She thinks that making no decision at all is better than making a bad decision. Her mother once tells Rose that a girl is like a young tree, which must stand tall and listen to its mother because this is the only way it can grow strong and straight. In her mother's mind, Rose is without wood and that's why she is so confused all the time and listens to too many people. Rose's unique character indicates that on her way to the awakening of female consciousness, there will certainly be plenty of hindrances for her to break through.

#### 4.2.2. External Factors

##### (i) Traditional Chinese Culture

The Chinese immigrant mothers and their American daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* usually conflict with each other, which, to some extent, reveals the culture clash between them. However, they are also firmly related to each other through not only certain blood ties but also some invisible connections. As Wang once analyzed, "this mother-daughter bond is based upon mutual understanding and interdependence as women, and their sharing similar experiences as women makes them feel closer to each other." [11] (103) Therefore, the American-born daughter Rose is undoubtedly under great influence of her Chinese American mother An-mei Hsu, let alone the Chinese heritage

which has been embedded in all the ethnic Chinese's minds. In other words, it can be considered that the Chinese culture exerts influences on Rose through her mother An-mei's words and deeds.

Rose learns from her mother the filial piety in the Chinese tradition: a daughter should honor her mother, forget all the pains and remember what is in her bones. Rose has something gentle and soft in her genetic makeup, just as what she says: "I was raised with all the Chinese humility" [8] (156). Fatalism in the traditional Tao can also be found in her, which advocates that one should accept his/her fate no matter what happens. However, after Rose's mother An-mei turns herself from a fatalist to a self-reliant woman, the spirit is naturally passed on to Rose. Whatever comes up in life, you will find a way out. Therefore, afterwards, both of them bravely choose to face the reality and to fight against their "fates" as women.

Rose absorbs the traditional Chinese culture in a positive way and awakens her self-awareness. She squarely grasps the essence of Taoism: "those who can discard fame, title, deed, flesh, and desire can obtain complete freedom and happiness" [11] (104). She becomes courageous enough to discard all the superficiality and to speak out what she needs and how she really feels inside.

#### (ii) Dual Discrimination from American Society

The twentieth century was a century of major changes. It began with a society in which discrimination was a common attitude of treating those who looked different, but ended with a society that condemned discrimination. Rose lives in the latter half of the twentieth century, when social norms have progressed with time but racism and sexism are still pervasive in America.

Racism or the ethnic discrimination in the United States has been a major issue since the colonial and slave era. For Chinese Americans like Rose, there was a black legacy: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Chinese people were banned from immigrating to the U.S. and those who had already settled in the United States were also affected. Although the Act was repealed in 1943, a lasting impact still remained. It came from decades of discrimination against Chinese and initiated decades of exclusion of Chinese. On top of that, Native Americans, Latin Americans, African Americans and Asian Americans are all victims of White Supremacy.

When Ted's mother meets Rose for the first time, mistaking Rose for a Vietnamese, she does not allow them to get married because she cannot accept the fact that her son might be commented upon because of his Asian wife. Although she says she has "nothing whatsoever against minorities" [8] (118), her attitudes show everything. No wonder Rose gets really angry and feels that she has been humiliated. Rose is a typical second-generation Chinese American. The Chinese gene is deep in her bones, but she is also saturated in the American atmosphere. Unlike their mothers, it is easy for the second-generation Chinese Americans to feel confused about their identity. They cannot find a sense of belonging. What Ted's mother says has aroused Rose's ethnic awareness so much that she wants to

defend her identity --- a Chinese American, an American citizen of Chinese ancestry. This sense of identity stimulates her self-cognition and her awakening of female consciousness.

For Chinese American women, the racial oppression and gender oppression can never be discussed separately. Their awakening should be based on their emancipation as both ethnic Chinese and women. After they succeed in finding their sense of identity, there is still a long way to go to fight against the sexism.

The gender discrimination has a long history not only in China and America but also in other countries of the world. However, as Beauvoir proposed, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" [10] (267). Women are different from men because of what they have been taught and socialized to do and to be. For thousands of years, women are perceived as "others" in the patriarchal society, second to men, which are considered and treated as the "first" or default sex. Although the second-wave feminism ended in the second half of the twentieth century, female immigrants still suffered the injustice from the mainstream American society.

As Woolf said, "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" [12], in spite of the tough situation, women never give up their pursuit of freedom and equal rights. Rose is absolutely one of these great women, who turns pressure into power and resolutely fights for her own though living under the dual discrimination in America.

## 5. Conclusion

*The Joy Luck Club* depicts the immigrant mothers' bewilderment at American culture and their struggles to instill in their daughters remnants of their Chinese heritage. It also vividly narrates the lives of those second-generation immigrants, their seeking for culture identity and their own voices. Based on the analysis of An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan, it is self-evident that they have awakened their female consciousness. An-mei finds out her true nature, stands up to fight for freedom and finally becomes a persevering and self-reliant woman. The obsolete social system and the new religious belief do not set her back but push her to a higher level where she can see everything clearly. With the help of her mother, Rose seizes the initiative in her marriage and keeps struggling against the dual discrimination of race and gender from American society. Rose finally shapes her own independent personality. The growth of the female consciousness runs through these two generations. Deceptively simple, yet inherently dramatic; their stories can stand alone, but together they deepen the impact and meaning of the whole. Their mother-daughter bond and the sharing experience as women under oppression contribute to the sublimation of the theme. To emancipate a woman is to let her have her independent existence. Amy Tan gives the sayings to the female characters and lets them tell their own stories. She creates a women-centered world in the book for the sake of attracting attentions to the current

situation of Chinese American women. This paper is designed to inspire all the women that are irrespective of their backgrounds and races: they should be brave enough to break the silence and to speak up; they should strive for their freedom and equality. There may be some hindrances on the way, however, as long as they dare to take the first step, they will finally achieve their goals and have a better future.

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