INVISIBLE BORDERS AND TRAUMA IN *THE JOY LUCK CLUB* BETWEEN AMY TAN'S NOVEL (1989) AND WAYNE WANG'S CINEMATIC ADAPTATION (1993)

Oussama BENSLAMA* / Hichem SOUHALI**

Abstract: This research paper is an analytical, comparative study of Amy Tan's twentieth-century diasporic novel, *The Joy Luck* Club (1989). It investigates the impact of invisible borders on both mothers and daughters in their cultural fluctuation between Chinese roots and American novelty. The boundaries that separate the two worlds can become so blurred out when one decides to move beyond topographical and physical terrains. In a Chinese-American milieu, there is the heavy weight of cultural limitations and taboos that are unspoken of in the midst of the immigrants' hybrid lives. While the differences between book and screen adaptation have previously been described as minor sub-plot deviations, these changes still hold great significance in how Western societies perceive other cultures. The aim is to assess the level of intergenerational trauma Tan's characters have sustained through a set of socially imposed borders and the ways they have decided to deal with it in both novel and film adaptation. The research relies on Hannah Arendt's socio-cultural theory of the seemingly stateless identity and its correlation with the immigrants' intergenerational trauma to examine how this kind of pressure put upon the characters affects their lives in the United States.

Key Words: Amy Tan, invisible borders, intergenerational trauma, film adaptation, stateless identity.

AMY TAN'IN ROMANI (1989) VE WAYNE WANG'IN SİNEMA UYARLAMASI (1993) ARASINDAKİ KARŞILAŞTIRMADA *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*'DAKİ GÖRÜNMEZ SINIRLAR VE TRAVMA

Öz: Bu araştırma makalesi, Amy Tan'ın yirminci yüzyıl diasporik çalışması olan *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) analitik, karşılaştırmalı bir çalışmasıdır. Çalışma, Çin kökenleri ve Amerikan yeniliği arasında kültürel dalgalanmalar yaşayan anneler ve kızları üzerindeki görünmez sınırların etkisini araştırmaktadır. İki dünyayı ayıran sınırlar, biri topografik ve fiziksel alanların ötesine geçmeye karar verdiğinde oldukça belirsiz hale gelebilir. Çin-Amerikan ortamında, göçmenlerin hibrit yaşamlarının ortasında dile getirilmeyen kültürel sınırlamaların ve tabuların ağır bir yükü vardır. Kitap ile ekran uyarlaması arasındaki farklar daha önce ikincil konu sapmaları olarak tanımlanmış olabilir, ancak bu değişiklikler Batı perspektifinin diğer kültürleri nasıl algıladığında büyük bir öneme sahiptir. Amaç, Tan'ın karakterlerinin bu sosyal olarak roman hem de film uyarlamasında bununla nasıl başa çıktıklarını incelemektir. Araştırma,

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ORCID ID : 0009-0008-6369-7104* /0000-0002-2102-8446**
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*Lounici Ali University of Blida 2.
**University of Batna 2.

Hannah Arendt'in görünüşte devletsiz kimlik kültür teorisine ve göçmenlerin kuşaklar arası travmasıyla olan ilişkisine dayanarak, bu tür baskının karakterler üzerindeki etkilerini Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki yaşamlarına nasıl etkilediğini incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amy Tan, görünmez sınırlar, kuşaklar arası travma, film uyarlaması, devletsiz kimlik.

Introduction:

Amy Tan's novels have garnered a lot of popularity in recent years. One potential reason for such a rise of interest in the author's stories is the vivid connection that exists between Tan's fiction and her own experience amidst her family in China. When asked in a 2017 "PBS Hour" interview if her characters were semi-autobiographical, Tan argued that all novels are in a way connected to the author's personal life, "…people who have impacted your life and made you who you are, that's who you put in your stories (…) Fiction makes [personal events] happen faster" (PBS News Hour, 2017, 4:12-5:28). Her 1989 debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club* can be described as a kaleidoscopic form of narrative, where the reader would jump from one background story onto another until all the personal experiences the characters recount are interwoven into a large tapestry of universal struggle, shared not only by Asian American citizens but also by most immigrants and refugees across the world. The mothers of the four families, Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu, and Ying-ying St. Clair, are all forced to flee from their bitter past, choosing San Francisco as a fresh start and hoping to offer better lives for their daughters. Unfortunately for these women, the damage of their past sufferings is handed down to the younger generation. Feeling their mothers' inadequacies as their own, the daughters express their insecurities and self-dismissal in various manners while trying to please their caretakers. "I had always thought that we were apart [my mother and I]," Tan exclaims, "and what I realized in writing this is that we were almost dangerously, like, symbiotic twins. That there was almost a pathological need to (…) understand each other, which I realized became part of my skills as a writer" (PBS News Hour, 2017, 2:38-2:56). The author reveals how dangerous it had felt to see her mother in her own personality. She witnessed the abuse and the psychotic behavior her father had manifested in her childhood toward her mother while the latter sank further into a state of depression and self-loathing. Her statement makes sense as to how much she wants to avoid a similar path and how seemingly difficult it is for her to do so. This dreadful memory is also what inspired her to try and capture this maternal struggle—and, in turn, her own struggle—in writing. Through her fictional Chinese aunties of the mah-jong "*Joy Luck Club*," Tan distributes fragments of her pain in the form of memories. In doing so, she emphasizes the maternal strength that comes as a result of the mothers' survival. It is an important,

gained attribute that the four of them use to raise their daughters under better circumstances.

The novel also highlights the restricting borders imposed on Chinese immigrants. From the apparent historical and physiological differences that set them apart from Caucasian Americans in the form of ostensible demarcations to the less evident social and cultural ones that people would not be able to recognize at first glance, Hanna Arendt believes that these differences contribute to the widening of borders between cultures. "They are at the center of the stateless refugee's issue," she contends, "…the predicament of the stateless as featuring simultaneity of two pathologies of political action and citizenship: Public invisibility and natural visibility" (Arendt, 1958, p. 198). Her political views on the inequality and the extreme prejudice that are directed toward alien immigrants have often been used in cross-cultural studies to better understand the struggles of diasporic living in Western countries. In this research, I will explore the contradictions that exist between Western constitutive principles aimed at protecting human rights, including those of hybrid citizens, and the public reality that singles out these immigrant families and treats them as "the other" making them naturally transparent human beings without the qualities of American citizenship. Additionally, I will investigate the unconscious effects of essentialist native conventions on first-generation immigrants, which despite having contributed to their traumatized identities, are still bestowed upon the new generation under a desire to preserve Chinese roots.

In the last section of my paper, I will compare the original work of Amy Tan and the 1993 film adaptation, which included a Western contribution to the screenplay, thus adding a new perspective to Tan's story. The film is the product of a collaboration between the author and the American screenwriter, Ronald Bass. The latter played a major role in altering some of the book's events. The changes that made the final cut might not be representative of the general American perception surrounding the Chinese immigrants' struggle, but they remain essential keynotes in understanding the extent of difficulty and hardship that Westerners usually attribute to Asian immigrants, especially Chinese refugees. By scrutinizing the adjustments made to Tan's narrative, I will look at the subtle hints of discrepancies that might contribute to the reinforcing of the larger stereotypical image surrounding Asian cultures.

Cultural and Generational Borders:
Between Essentialist Conventions and Survival Attributes

The Italian Philosopher Massimo Cacciari states that "borders are not only [the boundaries], the fences, and walls that separate us from each other, they are also the spaces between contact zones" (Cacciari, 2002, p. 73-84). These

zones make borders not just a way to separate one nation from another, permanently keeping each country isolated from the rest of the world, but rather a way to create more distance while maintaining contact between nations. In regard to social interactions between people of diverse origins, borders serve, in this case, as liminal tools. Each party that is involved in a discussion can have a moderate social form of public communication while keeping certain personal matters private, enclosed, and hidden from public access. No general consensus is outlined on what one must share about his or her own culture, ethnicity, or religion. In a racially mixed environment, this not only creates an untraceable gap between citizens of different backgrounds but also instigates misunderstandings that could potentially transform, over time, into solidified stereotypes about people based on the superficial knowledge others have conceived around them. Consequently, immigrants become the target of racial profiling. They are inferiorized and alienated in their adopted countries, not only because of their skin color but also due to the invisible cultural distance that exists between them and the "more established" native citizens of Western countries.

In Tan's novel, these cultural borders become less and less visible for the hybrid, American-born generation. The four daughters cannot figure out which path to choose. They feel that their Chinese background creates a minefield of cultural obstructions in the US. Things that they are constantly warned to be careful of feel like they will always remain out of reach. Waverly Jong is always confused by her mother's seeming disapproval. Her complaints about her hairstyle, her American mate's freckles, and even her house put Waverly in an unnerving mood. She feels an invisible tension that she cannot fathom—always looking for the sources of her mother's dissatisfactions while sensing a tyrannical pressure put upon her, constantly egging her to do better. The character feels strongly confined by the way this authoritative figure constantly throws passive-aggressive social cues at her, not knowing exactly what she disapproves of or why. Later in the book, when we are presented with her mother's version, Lindo's viewpoint, we understand that the relationship between the two is built on misunderstandings and Lindo Jong is not the oppressive mother that Waverly depicts her to be but rather a protective one. When her daughter finally confronts her about her cynical comments and reproachful attitude, Lindo replies: "…why do you think these bad things about me? (…) So you think your mother is this bad. You think I have a secret meaning. But it is you who has this meaning" (Tan, 2006, p. 195). Tan uses this kind of misunderstanding between mother and daughter as an important thematic pattern throughout her story. She directs her readers' attention to the unsteady

relationships that exist in most immigrant families, oscillating between a parental fear for their children in this alien, Western life and a new generation's precautious nature fed by a superficial interpretation of their lineage.

The fear of losing contact with their past ancestral tree makes the Chinese mothers concerned for their daughters' future. As absurd as it might seem to them, they still cannot help but imagine themselves gradually fading from their daughters' memories while the younger generation continues to let itself be engulfed by the American ways, not caring for the struggle their mothers had to go through to reach this new world in the first place. June Woo observes these presentiments on the faces of the Joy Luck Club aunties, unspoken yet felt out loud. She writes:

> They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation. (Tan, 2006, p. 25)

Both concepts of "joy" and "luck", in which they believe, make the four of them feel more attached to their ethnic past. These two abstract ideals may not hold much meaning to their daughters, but for them, they are the virtuous Chinese attributes that helped them overcome their past tribulations. The mah-jong club's name is a token of their survival and a warm reminder of the good that can still be cultivated from their past. "*The Joy Luck Club*," as Ben Xu describes it, "[is] a magnificent table (…) at its centre is an expression and embodiment of that survival mentality and its strategies of psychic defence" (Xu, 1994, p. 6). It is mainly why this first generation wants to preserve and share its past knowledge. The members of this club believe that they have learned valuable lessons from their traumatic past so that when the need arises to help their daughters face their own adversities, they would re-open their old wounds and reach down to conjure up the wisdom they have stored for years to come. Xu describes the characteristics they would pass on as more than self-sufficient virtues. "Hard work and persistence [among other important qualities] are with the mother-and most diligent Chinese immigrants (..) the means and conditions of survival (…) they are the attributes of a winner in life" (Xu, 1994, p. 8).

On the other hand, this maternal bond is also considered as a generational curse for the American-born children. Their connection to their Chinese mothers is symbolic of the overbearing, strict traditions and conservative views that they believe still linger over their shoulders. Because the good also comes with

the bad, separating all the virtuous, supportive Chinese qualities from the restrictive, domineering ones is not as easy as it seems. The hard work that Lindo wants to instill into her daughter, Waverly, becomes almost suffocating to the point where she wants her to lose fewer chess pieces in her games while still maintaining her win streak. Waverly constantly expresses her irritation with her mother's meddling:

> "Next time win more, lose less."
> "Ma, it's not how many pieces you lose," I said. "Sometimes you need to lose pieces to get ahead."
> "Better to lose less, see if you really need."
> At the next tournament, I won again, but it was my mother who wore the triumphant grin. "Lost eight piece this time. Last time was eleven. What I tell you? Better off lose less!"
> I was annoyed, but I couldn't say anything. (Tan, 2006, p. 84)

This might be interpreted as a lack of knowledge on her part about the strategies of chess, but it shows a relentless desire, nonetheless, to dominate the game. These excessive expectations eventually put Waverly under a lot of pressure until she regretfully quits playing chess altogether (Tan, 2006, p. 71). There is an indistinguishable line between a passionate mother and a dragon one, who coerces her children into becoming perfectionists. This extreme competitive spirit is also seen between Aunt Lindo and Suyuan, who both want their daughters to be not just good but to become the best at what they do. While Waverly at least excels at chess, June fails to deliver when performing on stage as a promising pianist. Even then, her mother is not deterred by this failure. June is only pressed further to continue her piano practice (Tan, 2006, p. 125). These unconscious obsessions with control seem to latch onto the attributes of survival and the wishes to guide and assist the new generation. Furthermore, as shown by the mothers' strong aspiration to make of them winners in life, this goal comes with its flaws when unconsciously reaching extreme depths.

Tan frequently hints at these control-based, essentialist motherly inclinations to which the new generation is submitted. The daughters are expected to adopt this strong demeanor that their caretakers have gained by surviving the unfortunate social and historical prisons of their past environment. Born with this heavy burden, they recognize the reluctance in their parents' tone to adapt to the new ways, often ushering warnings that are laced with naïve superstitions meant to barricade their children from any danger or making subtle remarks about their daughters' relationships while expecting any potential foreigner husband to greet and converse in the traditional, Chinese-like manner. These overly protective and conservative boundaries put them at a severe halt

in their personal lives. Struggling to make decisions regarding the future of their relationships or careers, they sometimes feel a sense of ineptitude and even helplessness when trying to understand their mothers' complex nature. This also makes them reduced to being sub-par citizens of the United States. Unable to escape some of their family's traditional Chinese bearings, they cannot entirely convert to an open, indulgent American lifestyle. Not only are they affected by cultural restrictions, but they also carry their parents' Asian physiological looks; as Lena Saint Claire exclaims:

> …if [people] looked really close (…) they could see the Chinese parts. Instead of having cheeks like my [English-Irish] father's sharp-edged points, mine were smooth as beach pebbles. I didn't have his straw-yellow hair or his white skin, yet my coloring looked too pale (…) And my eyes, my mother gave me my eyes, no eyelids, as if they were carved on a jack-o'-lantern with two swift cuts of a short knife. I used to push my eyes in on the sides to make them rounder. Or I'd open them very wide until I could see the white parts. But when I walked around the house like that, my father asked me why I looked so scared. (Tan, 2006, p. 91)

Such visible traits inevitably give them the peculiarities of non-Caucasian Americans, because of thm, they are forced to inhabit a political space, or what Hannah Arendt calls "a space of appearances" "the space where I appear to others as others appear to me" (Arendt, 1958, p. 198-199). Arendt recognizes the stereotypical nature of the adopted country, a place full of judgment and prejudice that immigrant families have to adapt to. Despite being born in the United States and having little knowledge about their mothers' homelands, the second generation still cannot escape their genetic heritage. In the eyes of Westerners, they are seen as reflections of their mothers, marked as Asian refugees, stateless intruders and illegal immigrants. Rose Hsu suffers from this derogatory treatment when meeting with her future mother-in-law, Mrs Jordan. The latter thinks Rose is of Vietnamese descent. She tries to sway her from marrying Ted by blatantly pointing out how Rose's Asian upbringing would look bad on her son's career resume (Tan, 2006, p. 86). Ted's mother is a representative character of white supremacy in the United States. Such supremacy creates a sense of enclosure and gatekeeping. As a result, the second generation is bordered by disparaging entitlements, almost framed as outsiders who can never belong to the myth of American purity.

Often characterized as not being American enough to belong to the rest of the US population, immigrants face the risk of getting dispossessed from their identity or even deported. They are often seen as the disposable proportion of any Western country and treated as political tools that can be blamed and lashed out at afor the faults and mistakes of others. By current standards, to

describe immigrants as the punching bag of the West is an understatement. They are artificially American, blending with other unseen marginalized groups until a crisis arises. When that happens, they are only recognized by their homosapien degeneracy, treated as criminals, and chastised severely. Arendt argues that the hybrid is only visible in Western societies when charged with a crime; only then does he register as a real citizen in his adopted country, marked permanently by the justice system (Arendt, 1958, p. 286). The criminal charges would then only further highlight their alien descent. Their ethnic background is stressed as the root of their deplorable deeds; it is the handicap that keeps them from ever belonging to any mainstream, elitist community.

Suyuan Jong almost loses her authority as a landlord. When she tries to evict her second-floor tenants, a white, middle-aged couple. To help shelter her relatives who are coming from China, Jong has no choice but to ask the couple to find another place. Her tenants not only refuse to leave the apartment, but they demand to see proof of the supposed new lodgers' arrival. In the following weeks, they begin to treat her with revengeful hostility despite no mention of any past cordial interactions to begin with. Disregarding her position as the rightful proprietor, the couple falsely accuse her of killing the missing neighbourhood's cat (Tan, 2006, p. 176, p. 185). In their eyes, the mother of June became a stereotypical Asian immigrant the moment she mentioned her Chinese roots. Already framed as a sub-par American citizen, the couple attempts to overturn her position of power from a landlord to an intruder, and from an American citizen to an illegal immigrant who does not belong there.

Marieke Borren stresses this worldwide issue. She contends that immigrants can suddenly lose their nationalities at any moment in their lives. Based on Arendt's concept of the stateless, she believes that the hybrid, even in our current time, is forcefully subjected to a continuous, fluctuating visibility, "Such Politics frames the [hybrid] subject as either relevant or negligible through the processes of shifting the threshold of what is worthy of being seen and what is not" (Borren, 2008, p. 84). This not only refers to the unsettling, pending risk of the second generation's exclusion from their adopted country but their ancestors' homeland as well. The lack of knowledge about their parents' native culture denies them the possibility of ever truly belonging to the first generation's place of birth. Having to carry a piece of each world, the Asian looks that they inherit from their parents, and the character that is nurtured by American standards, the daughters feel cursed with their socially cemented, "incomplete" identities.

Adhering to a myth of purity in this day and age means denying the existing hybrid nature of people around the world. In his way of denouncing the endeavor to eradicate the idea of an interracial lifestyle, Edward Said explains in

his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) how futile these labels have become. He writes:

> No one today is purely one thing. Labels like [Asian], or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental (...) Survival in fact is about the connections between things (...) this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how "our" culture or country is number one. (Said, p. 336)

Said believes that a classless, borderless, cosmopolitan life is possible if one is willing to give up the fight for power; however, borders, both visible and invisible, will remain an ultimate, stagnant feature in human life. They are a natural construct that people will always be predisposed to create and maintain. We are, after all, "geographic beings for whom the creation of places [also distance], and by consequences the process of bordering seems natural" (Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, 2012, p. 1). Ironically enough, the borders humans create are constantly shifting back and forth. They are difficult to trace and thus to completely erase if globalization is the desired destination. It does not mean that we cannot fantasize about a borderless, utopian world because in doing so, there will always be something that will get us —if not almost there—closer to the real thing.

Intergenerational Trauma:
The Reclusive Self and the Burden of the Voiceless

Ying-ying St. Claire is one of the characters that could be argued had suffered the most in the book. Born in a wealthy family, she is first depicted as having a fortunate, privileged childhood. But, the relaxed, free-spirited, and somehow talkative girl of the early chapters is soon replaced with a voiceless older woman who is inflected by the deep lacerations of a first, abusive marriage in later chapters. The audience soon realizes that Ying-ying harbors a tragic and devastating secret, that of her first child's abortion. When talking to her daughter, Lena, she spills out what was locked deep down in her heart for so long:

> The night [my first husband] planted the baby, I again knew a thing before it happened. I knew it was a boy (…) [Later] I found out from my youngest aunt that he had left me to live with an opera singer. Later still, when I overcame my grief and came to have nothing in my heart but loathing despair, my youngest aunt told me of others. Dancers and American ladies. Prostitutes. A girl cousin younger even than I was. She left mysteriously for Hong Kong soon after my husband disappeared. So I will tell Lena of my shame (…) I will tell her of the baby I killed because I came to hate this man so much. I took this baby from my womb before it could be born. (Tan, 2006, p. 217)

This tragic past that she decided to swallow down like a bitter pill made her lose her joyful, sociable persona. Instead, she developed a new, muffled-down identity in her second marriage to Clifford St. Claire. This one spurred not out of love but out of convenience. She chose a safer future for the sake of her daughter. However, Lena eventually inherited her reclusive personality as well. The daughter developed a water-like character, an empty shell ready to contain the self-centered, aloof yearnings of her husband, Harold. Lena soon finds herself trapped in a similar oppressive relationship. Her American husband exploits the Western values of gender equality in his favor. The two agree to split their house spendings, but Lena does not consume or ask for any luxury. Harold, on the other hand, continues to buy magazines and ice cream that he alone would a few indivudials consume. She pays the price for these commodities because she is made to believe that he brought them for her. Their expenses keep growing without end, but while her savings grow thinner, his do not. She is bullied into this submissive state and manipulated for her lack of voice. When she tries to protest for the first time, Lena finds it difficult to put her thoughts into words. The passage reads as follows:

> "I just don't think you should get credit for *your* ice cream anymore."
> He shrugs his shoulders, amused. "Suits me."
> "Why do you have to be so goddamn fair!" I shout.
> Harold puts his magazine down, now wearing his open-mouthed exasperated look. "What is this? Why don't you say what's really the matter?"
> "I don't know. . . . I don't know (…) I start to cry (…) because I realize now that I don't know what the point of this argument is. Am I asking Harold to support me? Am I asking to pay less than half? (…) Maybe Harold is a bad man. Maybe I've made him this way. (Tan, 2006, p. 143)

Lena continues to fumble over her words, questioning her judgment about Harold after being made to believe that she is the one to blame for her unhappiness. Fortunately enough, her mother comes to the rescue. She gives her enough strength and encouragement to defend herself by bringing up her past: "I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear.

And then my fierceness can come back, my golden side, my black side. I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose" (Tan, 2006, p. 221).

Rose Hsu suffers from the same blemish, voiceless personality. In her marriage with Ted, she is always reluctant to express her opinions. While assuming the role of a shadow, Rose wants to please her husband by being amenable to every suggestion he makes, thinking it is the best way to protect her marriage from falling apart. She instead puts her relationship at risk as Ted grows annoyed with her lack of firmness in making decisions by herself. Again, using the same formula, Tan opens up the mother's painful past to break the daughter's malediction. An-Mei Hsu remembers the suicide of her mother by recounting the event, "My mother whispered to me that she would rather kill her own weak spirit so she could give me a stronger one (…) and on that day [the day my mother passed away], I learned to shout" (Tan, 2006, p. 210). Rose eventually reconnects with her personal needs and desires. She finds the strength to break through her feebleness.

This intergenerational pattern of the reclusive Chinese-American identity is half attributed to the idealness by which Asian minorities are defined. They represent "the model minority myth; a problem-free, successful [class of] immigrants, grateful to be in America (…) [this myth] bolsters the narrative of American exceptionalism and benevolence" (Cai and Lee, 2022, p. 236). Trapped into the illusion of having been rescued from their collective traumatic history of great oppression and war, Asian Americans as a people are made to feel indebted to their rescuers. Their past suffering is trivialized by the temptations of potential success and acquirable dreams in this imperial new world. Consequently, both Lena and Rose are swept into this grand narrative. Feeling a sense of inferiority in their relationships because of the supposed superior, purer American background that their husbands have, they unconsciously follow their lead.

When paired with Arendt's notions of "natural visibility" and "political space," the daughters who live under the imperial roof of the American society become segregated by both visible and invisible borders. They are afraid to speak up in their households mainly because they are concerned about the risk of being seen and marked as alien citizens, less civilized, and more affected by their ethnic background. Shown by what might be characterized as their deplorable, outdated side, that which does not align with Western values, they turn into ungrateful Asian immigrants in the eyes of their husbands.

Furthermore, Lena and Rose are also affected by the traditional Chinese perceptions of marriage. Having developed a certain idea of their parents' expectations before engaging in communication, they again feel an unexpressed

cultural obligation set upon them. When Rose and Ted's relationship starts to crumble, Rose considers what kind of advice her mother would give her based on the understanding she has about her traditional way of thinking: "waiting for the right moment to tell her about Ted and [I], that we're getting divorced. When I tell her, I know she's going to say, "This cannot be." And when I say that it is certainly true, that our marriage is over, I know what else she will say: "Then you must save it" (Tan, 2006, p. 102). This self-consciousness about the strict cultural ideology Chinese people have on women in general, and on housewives in particular, makes the second generation feel an intangible set of gender limitations they should not, or sometimes must not cross. Haunted by their assumptions of cultural constraints, they unconsciously adopt this obedient, soft-voiced identity, renouncing the war in their relationships before even engaging in battle.

Later, An-mei Su disperses the presumptions her daughter has built up about her by encouraging Rose to find her own voice, "I am not telling you to save your marriage," she protested, "I only say you should speak up" (Tan, 2006, p. 117). The empowerment that her mother provides is Tan's solution to overcome this traumatic curse and regain confidence. To break through these social barriers, Tan opens up lines of conversation between mother and daughter.

Acknowledging that Asian Americans are inflicted by this intergenerational silence, a 2020 study conducted on a sample of Vietnamese Canadian Immigrants suggests a resolve through communication between parents and children. Just like Tan's opinion on the necessity of sharing the past to educate present generations, the research recognizes the futility and even damage that could culminate from keeping secrecy about personal trauma. The study encourages a transparent form of conversation between generations of immigrant families, even if the topic at hand is the percussive, painful memories of the parents. Such transparency may allow children to better understand and reconnect with their roots (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020, p. 4-p8). Tan affirms that gateways to family interchange can be opened by diving into her characters' undisclosed, private thoughts. She believes it to be a healthy therapeutic way that allows the second generation to reconcile with its ambivalent nature. Only then will the children be able to re-construct their identities by embracing their hybridity.

It appears to be the logical solution for the younger generation to move forward in their decisions. However, less favorable results were presented by Laurie L. Meschkea and Linda P. Juang in their 2013 study on the obstacles to opening communication between Hmong parents and their children. The research considers a class of less understanding parents who use their traumatic

experiences as a scale of comparison between their circumstances during their adolescence and those of their children. Instead of sharing their trauma as a thread of connection or a way of bonding, their past misfortunes are put on display as an exemplary model of discipline and tolerance. On such occasions, the adversities that the younger generation goes through are dismissed by the closed-mindedness and conservative views of Asian parents. When trying to find guidance by reaching out, these teenagers instead suffered from "parental judgment, intimidation," which was not of help to them, "no benefits in communicating with [them] were also noted [as a part of the] communication obstacles. These barriers resulted in young adults feeling shut down when communicating with parents..." (Meschkea & Juang, 2013, p. 12).

The four mothers Tan imagined in her story seem to fit the understanding type of Asian parents. However, to overgeneralize open communication as the solution to this intergenerational dysfunction is to ignore the intermediate attachment the first-generation immigrants still feel to the essentialist aspects of their culture. Furthermore, there exists an unequal level of severity in the plethora of traumatic experiences that the parents had gone through, so sharing some of the mildly uncomfortable memories of the past can be less challenging compared to other more profound and agonizing experiences. Therefore, it is not always possible to break the silence, even amongst family members. In such dire cases, these private thoughts remain part of the elusive boundaries that set the two generations apart. Their involvement in this intergenerational cycle of the traumatized Chinese American identity should not be disregarded as the mere personal issues of but as the diverse, yet at the same time collective, interconnected shattering of a people.

American Perception of the Chinese Culture in the Cinematic Adaptation

In a 1993 Washington Post Interview, only a few weeks after the film's release, the American screenwriter Ronald Bass expressed his prior admiration for what Tan had accomplished in her novel. He was determined to preserve all of the components that helped establish the novel's success in his screenplay. Both of them believed that the adaptation accomplished just that. "Thematically," says Bass, "it was important for us to make the parallels as strong as we could. The idea of using all four families was to show that this is everyone's story". Bass's vision of the adaptation hinted at a desire to achieve a universal story that touches a human note inside the viewers instead of having a single community as the primary target audience. "Both [Tan and Bass] hasten to emphasize that [the film] should not be segregated in the public's mind as

an Asian-themed movie. It's just a movie about people who happen to be Chinese" (Howe, Bass, 1998). In another interview, Tan makes a similar statement about her intention behind writing her stories. When the interview shifts to a talk about her previous work, *Joy Luck*, she states:

> …I had always wanted to avoid anything that had to do with me being a Chinese-American. I didn't want to be labelled. These stories I tried were so unsuccessful that I decided I would start to write a story about a Chinese-American girl and see where it would take me. And I found this different voice coming out. (Davis & Tan, 1998, p. 98)

It seems that both artists wanted to avoid the political overtones that could be excavated from the story by critics and audiences alike. In their eagerness to project their personal agendas, both readers and spectators would eventually find *The Joy Luck Club* a tempting outlet for their racially-charged rants. Bass and Tan cannot be blamed for trying to deter the unwanted attention. The story was first meant to bring enjoyment through its thrilling sub-plots and happy, wholesome closure, but it is difficult to ignore the diasporic nature of Tan's narrative. Its focus on the differences between Chinese and American cultures was bound to bring its share of political criticism. This only made the production of the adaptation more challenging for Bass.

The assignment at hand required of him to make significant cuts and adjustments for the story to fit the silver screen while also trying to preserve its soul. However, entire sections of the novel were removed. This greatly impacted the cultural context related to some of the shot scenes. The ones omitted, more specifically, would have provided background information on Chinese principles and beliefs in the film. They helped the book readers understand the choices that were forced upon certain characters.

Ying-ying's decision to have an abortion is perhaps the most prevalent example of such adjustments. In the novel, Rose's Mother wanted to remove any connection with the man who continued to oppress her for years before leaving unannounced. It was a hard-felt decision, especially for a pregnant Chinese housewife who had to choose between two equally devastating fates. She either had to face the shame of a single mother raising a child without his father and bear the besmirching judgment of her community alone or abort a life secretly and live with the permanent guilt that comes with it. The film avoids the Ying-ying conundrum because of its political nature and instead opts for an accidental death of an already-born child. In the film, the mother lets her guard down while bathing her baby. Distracted by the treacherous deed of her husband, her mind drifts away, leading to the child's drowning (Wang, 1993). This controversial scene could be argued to be unnecessary if the intention was to avoid drawing any political criticism. Instead, the drowning dramatizes this

version of events for the sake of appealing to the excitement of American audiences. As cruel as it might seem, the unexpected death would give more thrill to that proportion of viewers, keeping them at the edge of their seats. The focus had shifted from depicting the source of the Ying-ying trauma to extracting as much thrill as possible from the child's morbid death.

Another major adjustment made in the movie concerns the past of An-Mei. An-Mei's mother pleads her case in front of her family in the film. She is seen at her parents' doorsteps, begging them to take her back in. The night before, she was tricked by one of the wives of a Chinese, wealthy man; she was raped and left drowning in her sorrow. When she tells this to her parents, they become infuriated not at the male assaulter but at their daughter. Not believing a word she says, they shut the door and neglect her existence altogether. She is left with nowhere else to go and no other choice but to marry that very same man, becoming one of his wives (Wang, 1993). In this tragic scene, American viewers sympathize with An-mei but also develop great spite and even disgust at her parents' behavior. The text, however, gives a slightly different outlook on An-mei's tragedy. She never goes back to her parent's house after suffering from her aggressor's attack because she already understands the consequences of losing face and dishonoring a family in a Chinese community. Family is the most important institution in China. It is a cultural priority to preserve that institution's reputation and never to dishonor family members. The omission of a contextual information essential to the audience's understanding of how the Chinese culture has its own bedrock rules is bound to make insinuations about Chinese people. Suzanne Green points out that "because [America] is not an honor-motivated society concerned with saving face, a kind of cognitive dissonance exists for the [American] viewer, a dissonance that readers are less likely to feel" (Green, 1996, p. 215).

The film does not shy away at times from the oppression and harassment that Chinese women have to tolerate. It goes at length about the restrictions that arranged marriages impose on Chinese women. When recounting Lindo Jong's memories, the screenplay criticizes the cultural tradition of arranged marriages, depicting the tradition as a tragic fate that robs the daughters of impoverished, hungry families in China. Lindo is forced to marry a spoiled boy to save her family from this extreme poverty. She is expected to conceive his child when he has not even reached the age of puberty. This scene condemns what is perceived as the malpractices of rich families in China while showing how resourceful and quick-witted women can be to get out of such circumstances. Lindo makes use of an imaginary ancestral relative, turning him into a ghost who brings prophesized warnings about their marriage. Because she observes the signs of pregnancy in the house's maid, she tells the family of a

nightmarish apparition that occurred to her in her sleep. It was Tyan-yu's grandfather, almost casting a curse upon her. He orders them to cancel this marriage, or he will ruin the teeth of the bride. He tells them that the maid is the true spiritual wife of the boy and that she already carries his child. The family is persuaded by the prophecy even more after the servant girl confesses her pregnancy, which was, in reality, the result of her secretly bedding a young delivery man. Through this well-thought-out ruse, Lindo is granted an exit from her imprisonment and enough money to start a new life in the US (Wang, 1993).

The screen adaptation puts into focus the feminist theme of the novel, but in doing so, it takes a stand against one of the oldest Asian traditions that is deeply rooted, not just in China but in other Eastern countries as well. The original text, while doing the same thing, does not exude as much judgment about arranged marriage as the adaptation does. It shows that some people, like the Huangs' family maid, are willing to accept this kind of destiny as a blessing that would promote them to a higher social position and a more comfortable lifestyle. Lindo thinks of how happy the maid must have become after her plan succeeded:

> You can imagine how happy [the servant girl] was when they forced her to tell the truth about her imperial ancestry. I heard later she was so struck with this miracle of marrying Tyan-yu she became a very religious person who ordered servants to sweep the ancestors' graves not just once a year, but once a day. (Tan, 2006, p. 59)

This film's scene shows a Westernized portrayal of Tan's version of events. The adjustments again prioritize the sentiments of American audiences over Chinese ones. By relying on American values of emancipation while considering them as the ideal, must-have social constructs of any society, the film promotes the empowerment of Chinese women at the cost of condemning Chinese practices. "…The Chinese code of honour as foreign to most American viewers as the Chinese language," according to Green, "is clarified significantly in the novel. The screen adaptation does not provide the same information and therefore creates an uninformed tension for viewers" (Green, 1996, p. 215). When such cultural details are lost into translation. The script indicates an unconscious sense of entitlement to reprimand a foreign culture while portraying certain characters under an indigenous, uncivilized light.

Brushing off these contextual elements as trivial scraps that would not affect the direction of the author's message is a popular trademark of Hollywood's way in managing diasporic productions. Due to its corporate nature, the industry of American cinematography is more focused on producing Box Office hits than producing faithful adaptations. If reaching such an end

means meddling with the cultural context of the story itself to satisfy the reception of American audiences, then that is a bargain film producers are often willing to take. Moreover, it is not just Hollywood that gives little regard to non-American cultures, as Hardt and Negri argue:

> …there is already under way a massive centralization of control through the unification of the major elements of the information and communication power structure: Hollywood, Microsoft, IBM, AT&T, and so forth. The new communication technologies, which hold out the promise of a new democracy and a new social equality, have in fact created new lines of inequality and exclusion, both within the dominant countries and especially outside them. (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 300)

This international spread of American mainstream culture through these big industries means a great extension of borders between societies and audiences from around the world. Despite claiming otherwise, Bass's adjustments to Tan's narrative are incentivized by corporate decisions. They are not only part of the adaptation process; on some level, they also control the narrative's direction. As a consequence, it almost feels like there is a lack of interest in Chinese reception and a stronger focus on reaching a threshold of revenue by targeting American viewers instead.

A sequel to Tan's story is expected to be released in the next couple of years, and while a follow-up could reveal itself to be a great surprise that could give an opportunity for new Asian American actors to make their debut on the scene (Truffaut-Wong, 2022), it is less likely going to follow a corrective path, and more likely to implement further corporate decisions. While creative liberties are always encouraged in cinematic adaptations, they should not steer away from the source content when a culture unfamiliar to mainstream audiences is put at the center of its narrative.

Conclusion

The intergenerational struggle in Tan's work does well by capturing the tensions that exist between the members of Chinese immigrant families in the US. Stuck at the crossroads of two cultures, the daughters' fragmented identities are proof of the invisible and intangible demands imposed by the two societies. These illusive social expectations, which issue judgment from afar, represent a larger distance added to the one already maintained by the visible borders recognized between cultures. The burden to figure out and watch out for such unclear constraints is bound to make the younger generation lose its voice, retreating into submission.

Afraid of failure, these women almost surrender themselves to the lead of their husbands. Only by bringing traumatic memories of their surviving moth

ers can they recollect their strength to face their tribulations. A form of open communication allows a bonding between the two generations. Through her novel, Tan encourages a transparent disclosure of the past. She portrays the sharing of the mothers' trauma as an important healing factor for the daughters as it helps them dismiss the false impressions they have about the first generation's intentions. Her characters reconnect on a human front that the author believes is attainable in any hybrid society as long as there is the will to recognize the flaws in pre-conceived judgments. The work, thus, suggests this as a plausible solution to the deeply rooted, traumatized identities of Asian American families. Open communication, although not free from potential setbacks, is a step closer toward untangling the complexities of diasporic living.

To resist the stateless position that defines immigrants in a Western society, Tan believes that an attempt at cultivating the best qualities out of the two worlds can help the younger generation come to terms with their own identities. However, her story makes this message seem easier portrayed on paper than achieved in reality. A Cosmopolitan world through the eyes of hybrid immigrants is nothing but a dream. It is still, to this day, being ruined by the fruitless aspirations and the clinging of supremacists to the myth of purity. Moreover, due to the corporate nature of the adaptation, Tan's message loses some of its strength as the film moves beyond the depiction of trauma. It exerts a more judgmental focus on Chinese culture. The adjustments made to the screenplay indicate signs of meddling that are often known to create a misrepresentation of non-American cultures. This also reveals a willingness on the part of the American film industry to desecrate foreign cultures for the sake of increasing profit instead of showing a genuine desire to explore and familiarize American viewers with Chinese values and traditions through Tan's characters. While *The Joy Luck Club* is by no means the first nor the most affected diasporic work by the amendments made in favor of an American audience, it is still one of the novels whose original message is greatly deemphasized on screen.

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