

# Exploring Culture through Food in Amy Tan's Novel *the Joy Luck Club*

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**Abstract—** Food is the most essential subsistence for individual. It's a vital a part of culture as well. Traditional cuisine is passed down from one generation to the subsequent. It also operates as an expression of cultural identity. Immigrants bring the food of their countries with them wherever they go and cooking traditional food may be a way of preserving their culture after moving to new places. Food is a crucial topic in literature likewise. It is used as a robust imagery. It is considered as a very important mark of ethnicity. Different authors have used food imagery to explore their ethnic identity. As food reflects culture, in the same way Chinese food is a vital marker of Chinese culture and ethnicity. In *The Joy Luck Club* by playing upon the metaphor of Chinese food, Amy Tan associates it with cultural ethnicity. Food imagery plays a major role in each separate narrative of the novel, linking past, present and future, bonding families and generations, expressing community and providing a linguistic code that facilitates the retrieval of private histories from oblivion. It is a medium to bring the characters together. This paper aims to point out how Chinese food is a metaphor for ethnic connection between mothers and daughters.

**Indexed Terms—** Food, ethnicity, identity, metaphor

## I. INTRODUCTION

While many people view food as only a part of their diet, it actually contains many aspects that require to be carefully taken under consideration. From food numerous meanings is acquired about other culture. Food has been one among the first components of cultural expression. Human existence depends on food, which also continues to shape cultural traditions that change from generation to generation. Manufacturing and appropriating cuisine from various cultures is permissible in the modern food sector and has over time become the standard. It makes sense that individuals use food to define their social identities because it gives them a way to stand out from the crowd. Expatiate on food makes food discussion more

diverse and as a result of these discourses, research within the topic keeps growing.

The connotation of food has been a field of study that attracted many literary critics in recent years. Scholars like Deborah Lupton, Sarah Sceats and E. D. Huntley have given us theoretical tools to apprehend the relationship between food and culture. As pointed out by Deborah Lupton in *Food, the Body, and the Self*:

Food and eating are central to our subjectivity or sense of self, and our experience of embodiment, or the ways that we live in and through our bodies, which itself is inextricably linked with subjectivity. As such, the meaning, discourses and practices around food and eating are worthy of detailed cultural analysis and interpretation (1).

In *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Sarah Sceats opines that for every individual their primary activity is eating. It is essentially the first action they do, the main source of enjoyment and annoyance, and the setting for their very first learning and assimilation. The primary necessity for living and integral component of social interaction is food. Human civilization requires an understanding of what people eat, how they eat, and with whom they eat. It also requires an understanding of how and what they feel about food. However, eating has primarily symbolic meanings rather than physiologic ones.

The metaphor of food is an important image in the novel *The Joy Luck Club*. According to E. D. Huntley, "Food imagery plays a significant role in each separate narrative of the novel, linking past and present and future, bonding families and generations, expressing community, and providing a linguistic code that facilitates the retrieval of personal histories from oblivion" (58). There are a lot of references to food ceremonies on different occasions: the dinner party to

entertain Rich, the crab feast to welcome the Chinese New Year, the family outing to celebrate the Moon Festival, June making soup for her father, An-Mei making wonton, and June and her father and his families eating American food in Guangzhou. And finally, there's the Joy Luck Club making the foremost effective food in China and so in the US.

Food carries great significance within the Chinese culture. In Chinese history due to food shortage, starvation, famine, and war, Chinese people have often been without food and were forced to migrate to other countries. In this novel, Tan describes how the Japanese invasion has created a food disaster so badly that Suyuan has to abandon her two daughters; starving dogs run down streets with half-chewed hands dangling from their jaws; Lindo's mother has got to marry off Lindo early so her family can have food to survive the flood. However, food isn't just the only means for people's survival; it's an indication of human existence and ethnicity, and Tan uses them to explore the relations among mothers, daughters, and other women in society. For example, one among the interesting qualities of the Joy Luck Club is that the super food they cook for the community. One amongst them would organise a celebration each week to enhance morale and collect money. The hostess had to serve special 'dyansyin' foods to everyone to spread luck to all in any walks of life. These included 'dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons', and definitely 'lots of good luck oranges' for a prosperous, good life (10).

Good cooking habits continue even in US when Suyuan has new members for the club. They also consider cooking as the most effective way to entertain each other. For instance, An-Mei is noted for her skill in making wonton. Lindo is nice at making red bean soup, and Suyuan speciality is black sesame soup. By offering their best food to the community, they demonstrate the strong unity of the community. However, the preparation of the simplest food doesn't rule out conflicts among the mothers. Tan uses the metaphor of food to explore the conflicts among them. Such as, the conflicts between Lindo and Suyuan in comparing their daughters are reflected in their rivalry in cooking. Lindo wants to beat Suyuan in her cooking skills. She tells Waverly

that Suyuan "can only cook looking at a recipe. My instructions are in my fingers. I know what secret ingredients to put in just by using my nose" (195).

Yet the misfortune turns for the better when the mother and daughter decide to use this opportunity to remediate their relationship. Suyuan reveals to June that her high expectations are for her good and she loves June very much; June reveals to her mother that she appreciates her sacrifices. It seems that both have more in common than they previously acknowledged. Therefore, the crab party is an effective scene to draw the mother and daughter together. It is used to see what changes they'd make to accommodate one another. The party turns out to be an identity negotiation and formation ceremony for June and Suyuan.

Another food episode that is explored in detail by Tan to demonstrate the complicated relationship between mother, daughter, and son-in-law is Rich's first dinner party with Waverly's family. Tan uses this party to demonstrate how people from different cultures might react during such an occasion. Instead of sipping wine, Rich gulps it down; instead of using a fork, he makes a fool of himself by demonstrating that he can use chopsticks well when he cannot instead of picking up small portions of dishes, he takes big portions of his favourite dish and ignores the dish that he does not like; however, worse than any of these is his ruining the favourite dish Lindo cooks: "But before we could do so, Rich said, "You know, all it needs is a little soy sauce." And he proceeded to pour a riverful of the salty black stuff on the platter before my mother's horrified eyes" (197).

Rich's behaviour at the Chinese party and the mother's response to it reveals the conflicts between the Caucasian and Chinese cultures. But to reveal the cultural conflicts are not Tan's point. She is more interested in bringing these cultural differences to the table and bridging them rather than exploiting them for other purposes. Tan treats Rich's clumsiness at the party with humour and tolerance, for she sees that there is common ground between Rich's Caucasian culture and Lindo's Chinese culture. At the end of the novel, Rich and the Jong family do reach an understanding, and Rich and Waverly plan to travel to China to spend their honeymoon. The dinner party is therefore not a battleground for Tan to defeat the other

party and take over more land; it is an opportunity to build up hybrid cultures and identities for the characters. Tolerance and accommodation are the qualities that are essential in forming transnational identities in the contemporary era.

Again, on another occasion when June was preparing food for her father June took pride in the Chinese food in turn take pride in her ethnic identity as well. She said that since her mother's death, her father hasn't been eating properly. So, she is making dinner for him. She is chopping tofu. She has decided to prepare him a hot bean-curd meal. Her mother used to explain to her how hot objects can heal the health and spirit. But she is mainly doing this because she is aware that this is a meal that her father likes, and she knows its method of preparation. She enjoys the smell: ginger, scallions, and a spicy red sauce that makes her nose tingle as soon as she opens the jar (235-236). In this short passage, Tan demonstrates that June is not just cooking some Chinese food; she is showing her father that she has inherited from her mother the Chinese heritage, that she has changed from one that resists anything Chinese to one who can balance her American and Chinese characteristics. It is a case of successful negotiation of different cultures and ethnicities.

#### REFERENCES

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