

The Miniature of *The Second Sex* in *The Joy Luck Club*

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Abstract: *The Joy Luck Club* written by Amy Tan describes the stories of four mothers and daughters in which the concept the Other raised by Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* is indicated as they fought for themselves.

Keywords: Feminism; Gender Equality; Independence; Awakening

The Second Sex was written by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949, concluding that the popular definitions of femininity, an ideal regarding women are fragile, had been used to suppress women, while *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan's 1989 debut novel, depicting mothers' suppression by the fixed norm, which even passed to their daughters, finally being released by them and they eventually had a say for themselves. The characters in *The Joy Luck Club* reject all the labels conceived of them like being fragile and being the Other.

1. Feminism Embodied in Lindo's Story

One renowned sentence from *The Second Sex* must be 'One is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman.'¹ meaning that women are characterized by men as the Other in opposition to men, which is ambiguous at the first sight but is the truth referring to the personal experience of character Lindo in *The Joy Luck Club*.

Lindo was born and reared in a poor family in China. When Lindo was a child, she was vowed by her mother to be a child bride to Mrs. Huang's son Tyan-yu when she turned an adult. Therefore, during the period of her growing up, her mother always treated her like the Other, the concept which had been raised by De Beauvoir to describe those who have lost self-consciousness, being under the control of other people or environment (cf. Zhu, 2007:11). Her mother constantly conveyed her the idea of behaving well and being a perfect girl regarded by others, which means to be someone others expect you to be. "My family began treating me as if I belonged to somebody else." (Tan, 1989:45)². This exactly reflected the point written in *The Second Sex* by De Beauvoir that women have to follow external cues to seek validation of their worth.³

However, Lindo did not live up to her mother's expectation to be a well-behaved daughter-in-law of Mrs. Huang. At the very beginning, she was obedient as she followed her mother's instruction to be a docile daughter-in-law of Mrs. Huang and a pleasing wife of Tyan-yu as her mother told her that "Obey your family. Do not disgrace us. Act happily when you arrive. Really, you are very lucky." (Tan, 1989:27)⁴ She did whatever a good wife and a fantastic daughter-in-law should do, but what she received was scolding for not conceiving a baby. After she felt the misfortune of her life doomed to her, she was the one who took the initiative to change her life with wit by predicating the nonexistent omen which frightened the Huangs and fled to America, unfolding her brighter life and future. Her story indicates that women can have the freedom to escape their context and determine their own destiny by recognizing many of these 'social norms' as construction and by rejecting the label the Other by others, which had been mentioned in *The Second Sex* by De Beauvoir.

2. Feminism Embodied in Ying Ying's and Lena's Stories

Ying Ying is another character in the book of *The Joy Luck Club*, who was taught to be meek since she was a child. She was taught not to ask questions even though she was bewildered of things happening around her. As time passing by, she had been repressing her emotions. Thus, she became the Other, a perfect woman from others' eyes. In several years, she had been treated unfairly and cheated in the marriage by her husband. It was desperation that awakened her to live for herself rather than others. She hated her husband and wanted to ruin everything he cherished so she was deliberately undergone an abortion to implement her revenge, a sign though being cruel indicating she turned a blind eye to the so-called 'social norm' and would live for herself afterwards.

Ying Ying's daughter Lena who was born and raised in the America upheld 'splitting the bill' with her boyfriend. She said, 'Everything 50/50, so our love is always equal'. But that is exactly how she got exploited by her boyfriend. As De Beauvoir mentioned 'Working class women led women to the path of true independence, but there was also a problem that women were paid far less than men at that time.'⁵, going Dutch is a transformed way for men to exploit women. It is mentioned in the book that Lena's boyfriend was paid seven times more than her, but he requested Lena to pay something even she would never use. Ying Ying told Lena to quest what she really deserved because she foresaw her daughter's doomed future in that dilapidated house without hope, which just like her own's. Eventually, the consciousness of self-identity arose in her mind, getting rid of the subordinate position in the relationship and leaving her boyfriend. She found her Mr. Right at last.

Lena's story is vivid enough to prove why De Beauvoir advocated that to seek the equality among disparities is the goal of achieving gender equality and freedom.⁶ There is no absolute equality existed in the world but there are ways to achieve comparable and relevant equality. Lena was paid 7 times less than her former boyfriend, so that is definitely unfair for her to be asked to pay everything 50/50. If Lena was requested to pay the amount she could afford regarding her own income, that is comparable gender equality which can be achieved.

3. Feminism Embodied in An Mei's and Rose's Stories

An Mei is also one member of the joy luck club. She witnessed how her mother was oppressed by the family where she remarried. The ultimate death of her mother made her realize the importance of having a say and independence.

An Mei's mother was deceived to be the fourth concubine of a merchant, being regarded as disgrace to her family so that An Mei was forbidden to meet her mother when she was a child. Only after she got a chance to live with her mother did she realize that her mother was submissive to be a concubine without making herself have a say for herself or getting rid of the scandal. The bravest thing An Mei's mother did was her anticipation to give An Mei a stronger spirit by sacrificing herself as An Mei stated that "When the poison broke into her body, she whispered to me that she would rather kill her own weak spirit so she could give me a stronger one." (Tan, 1989:271)⁷ After mother's death, An Mei learnt that being active is the way to have her get rid of the subordinate position so she acquired to shout to express her feelings. (Tan, 1989: 272)⁸

As what is indicated in *The Second Sex*, for so long mothers had been exposed to the society dominated by men so it is inevitably impossible for daughters to stay immune to the inferior status set to women. An Mei's daughter Rose could not escape it.

Rose sacrificed the higher education and her career to be a housewife, obeying everything her husband raised. It was not Rose's husband's patriarchy but her own subordinate and inferior self-identity that made her looked down upon. She once wanted to win her husband's heart back by conceiving a baby, which reflected the ideology appeared in *The Second Sex* that "The reason why a woman wants children is that she lacks love, career or opportunities to satisfy homosexuality."⁹ After having known the problem of her daughter, An Mei taught Rose to recognize her own value and to rectify the self-identity by telling her mother and her own story. Finally, Rose returned to herself and it was her being herself that won her husband's heart back.

4. Conclusion

What can be seen from *The Joy Luck Club* is the miniature of the ideology and philosophy in *The Second Sex*. Amy Tan was so familiar with the Chinese social background in the 20th century when western feminist theory was first introduced into China.¹⁰ The circumstances and outlets of women which had been logically raised by De Beauvoir were vividly embodied in several stories of *The Joy Luck Club*.

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