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The pursuit of the American Dream in Asian-American Fiction: A study of select novels of Amy Tan and Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

The American Dream has been studied as a belief that, regardless of one's background, caste, or class, or place of birth, one can achieve success and a better life through continuous hard work. Apart from the materialistic fulfilments, the American Dream also seeks one's complete achievement, which encompasses happiness, liberty and opportunities. The notion of the American Dream is not only about success, but also about failures, unfulfilled expectations, identity crises, cultural compromises, etc. These diverse and complex aspects are evident in the works of Amy Tan and Jhumpa Lahiri. Amy Tan, in her novel *The Joy Luck Club*, talks of the generational conflict, identity crisis, cultural loss, misunderstanding due to cultural differences and struggle with the pressure to succeed. Similarly, Jhumpa Lahiri, in her novel *The Namesake*, depicts the economic success of the first generation but at the cost of cultural loss, which led to the identity crisis of the second generation. This paper aims to explore the nuances of the American Dream in the works of Amy Tan and Jhumpa Lahiri, which will enable the readers to think of varied and complex aspects of the functioning of the American Dream. Here is an attempt to explore the values of the American Dream, which are exemplified in the circumstances confronted by the characters in both novels.

Keywords: The American Dream, Amy Tan, Jhumpa Lahiri, Asian-American literature, identity crisis, cultural loss, generational conflict

Introduction

The American Dream is an ideology, rooted in American ideals of democracy, liberty, equality, and opportunity, that rejuvenated the consciousness of the times, influenced all walks of life and gave a more holistic sense of a better world. The American Dream, a popular term, was coined by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*, published in 1931. Adams has emphasised the possibility of upward mobility, prosperity, and success for anyone who works hard, regardless of their background or circumstances. But eventually the idea has evolved, and its interpretation is debated as the focus has been shifted to that of material wealth, such as owning a house or buying a car, and achieving financial prosperity by an individual. For many families, the idealized vision of the American Dream clashes with harsh economic realities, thus leading to internal conflicts. The differences in experiences and expectations might result in deep rifts between parents and their children. The notion of the American Dream is still evolving towards the cultural and generational conflict because of changing and varying definitions of success. The various aspects of the great American Dream have been depicted by a number of American writers like Edward Albee, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, Sam Shepard, John Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams, and Mark Twain in their remarkable literary creations. Besides, some diasporic writers have successfully attempted to portray the same with a touch of sociocultural challenges faced by the immigrants that complicate their pursuit of the American Dream. The Asian-American writers Amy Tan and Jhumpa Lahiri have notably brought these facets of the American Dream to the surface in the select novels.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Born in Oakland, California, Amy Tan is a Chinese-American author. Her parents were Chinese immigrants. Her father was an engineer, and her mother belonged to a wealthy

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Shanghai family. After the death of her brothers, she and her mother moved to Europe and later returned to California. Her debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, was published in 1989 and instantly became a huge success. In this novel, she explores the generational and cultural experiences, experiences of being Chinese-American and more of a mother-daughter relationship. Soon, her best-selling book was adapted into a movie in 1993. From the perspective of Amy Tan, the notion of the American Dream is a complex ideology that is multifaceted, providing a different point of view from the perspective of immigrants and a different one from their American-born next generation, often leading to generational conflict. This generation and cultural conflict is very well depicted by her in her debut novel. In her novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan talks of four Chinese women and their daughters who had recently immigrated to San Francisco. The book is divided into four parts: Feathers from a Thousand Li Away, Twenty—Six Malignant Gates, American Translation, and Queen Mother of the Western Skies. The first part discusses the childhood memories and experiences in China. There, they recall the relationships with their mothers and their concerns for the future generations, reflecting upon the cultural loss and influences. The second part talks of their daughters' recollection of childhood memories and experiences in America and their relationship with their mother. In the third part, the daughters narrate their adulthood concerns, like career and marriage, within their American culture. They also attempt to come up with possible solutions to the cultural challenges. The fourth and final part depicts mothers' youth in China in parallel to their daughters' youth in America. It also talks of the challenges faced by mothers to support their daughters with solutions to the cultural challenges.

The title, *The Joy Luck Club*, reflects the idea of the American Dream as a more complex theme represented through elements such as hope, success, freedom, struggle, and the merging of Chinese cultural influence and the American upbringing. The Joy Luck Club refers to a club formed by the four immigrant mothers to support each other through daily life challenges and to maintain their cultural identity even in a foreign soil, which also adds to the sense of belonging. This group of four women plays mahjong, which requires luck to win, which gradually evolved in the form of investments in the stock market, seeking economic expansion. The club functions as a support system for them. The novel shares a similar understanding of the American Dream of the pursuit of prosperity and success, having equal opportunity, hoping for freedom and social mobility, but through a complex portrayal of cultural and generational conflicts depicted through the characters of four mothers: Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, Ying-ying St. Clair, and An-mei Hsu, and their daughters, Jing-Mei Woo, Waverly Jong, Lena St. Clair, and Rose Hsu Jordan.

The novel primarily deals with subtle human relationships, equality, freedom and dignity. Amy Tan emphasises the mother-daughter bond and portrays the mother's good intentions for the well-being and success of her child. She deftly presents the challenges in raising the American-born daughters who are very passionate about the American culture rather than Chinese heridity. The theme is intertwined with the idea of the American Dream and its ideals. The Chinese mothers aspire to bring their daughters up in a way that assures American prosperity and, at the same time, inculcates Chinese ethics and values.

Suyuna Woo, even after losing her twin babies and encountering sorrowful situations in China, never loses hope, and she started a new life in the United States by marrying a Chinese-American. She gives birth to a girl, Jing-Mei, whom she wants to be a silhouette of her true nature. She discovers her daughter's natural talent and her impatience with practising piano, too. As a mother, she always cares for her prosperity. She shared the following views on America, which speaks a lot about great fortunes: You could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become instantly rich (Tan 132).

Suyuan Woo is a hard-working woman and puts in her best efforts to brighten her daughter's future. On the other hand, her daughter Jing-Mei stands as a symbol of individuality and initially develops an antipathy for her Chinese heritage while embracing American culture. She continues the legacy of the Joy Luck Club and fulfils her mother's wish, but only after her demise. However, she never respected her mother's efforts in promoting her talent and instead demeaned her. This evidently showed that self-respect and individuality are the foster values of the American Dream.

The cultural conflict is evident in the case of Suyuan Woo and her daughter Jing-Mei, where Suyuan demonstrates a mother's devotion to her child to the fullest. She reflects a personality where a mother can sacrifice herself for her family and daughter. This shows a selfless Chinese culture. On the other hand, Jing-Mei doesn't want to pursue her mother's aspiration of becoming a pianist and to become an elite lady. She wants to lead her life on her own terms. This also reflects her resistance towards her mother's love. This reflects the American culture, which emphasises the spirit of individuality and focuses on her personal will and feelings.

In the case of Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong, this cultural clash can be seen from a different perspective. In Chinese culture, it is us-oriented, which is reflected in Waverly's mother's pride in showing off Waverly's genius, depicted as the daughter's pride is the mother's pride. But, because of the American cultural influence, Waverly thinks her success is her own and reflects the American culture of self-oriented. Waverly develops a feeling that her mother is invading her achievement and taking credit as if it were her mother's. This difference in cultural upbringing creates a misunderstanding between the two, which prominently reflects the cultural and generational conflict.

Whichever the case may be, the clashes between the mothers and daughters always seem to surface because of the cultural differences and different ways of expression. They also suffer because of a different education system and cultural habits. Through the relationship of Ying-ying and her husband, Amy Tan has prominently talked about the management of expenses and household matters, and Ying-ying's complete devotion towards her husband, sacrificing her own needs and wishes. This shows the Chinese culture of having no distinction between a couple. Whereas her husband reflects the American culture of individuality and his incapacity to understand his wife's love, devotion, and sacrifices. Her husband was very calculative from the beginning of their marriage and tends to split everything possible into two halves between them. This cultural behaviour prevented Ying-ying from gaining a complete understanding of her husband.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Born in London in 1967, Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian-American author. She is best known for exploring immigrants' experiences, which also coincides with the theme of the American Dream. According to Jhumpa Lahiri, the American Dream is more of a complex and contradictory experience, specifically for immigrants hustling between the first generation and their American-born children. It is not only about material success, rather than it also deals with complex issues of psychological crisis, identity crisis and mostly the hustle between the culture of the parents and the culture of American-born children. Jhumpa Lahiri has appropriately portrayed such complex elements of the American Dream in her novel *The Namesake*, which was published in 2003 and was further adapted into a movie in 2006. In the novel, she tried to depict the evolution of the American Dream through the characters of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, as the parents, and their children, Gogol and Sonia. Here, parents, being first-generation immigrants, fulfilled their purpose of immigration to the United States by acquiring economic and professional success, but at the cost of cultural loss. On the other hand, their children, being the second-generation immigrants, feel more homely in America as they were born and raised there. But, soon they began to struggle between their parents' culture and the American culture and are burdened with their parents' expectations to succeed in life and career. However, the idea of success has now changed for the second-generation children, which makes them feel lost, and they find it hard to find their own purpose and their own meaning of success.

The Namesake is the story of Gangulis, an Indian immigrant family who have moved to the United States to pursue studies, to start a new life and to explore the world beyond India. But if we closely study the character of Ashima, we will find that this shift was not her personal choice. It was a response of a dutiful wife. Through Ashima, we began to learn about the challenges of immigrants to adapt to a foreign culture, which are also the themes in this novel. Her initial struggle of loneliness and cultural conflict adds to the sacrifices she made for her family. Soon, she gave birth to a boy whom they named 'Gogol.' Gradually, her loneliness was filled by Gogol, but at the same time, she was worried about Gogol's growth, who would age alone without their extended Bengali family culture. Ashima gave birth to her second child, Sonali. Both children were growing up in the American culture and education system, which makes them feel alienated whenever they visit India for family gatherings. They seem to distance their traditional Bengali values and Indian customs. This can be observed in their acceptance of American culture, holidays, food habits, likes and dislikes, in the rejection of the name Gogol given by his parents and in their social behaviours. The parents want their children to get a good education, learn American English, and seek a dignified job, but at the same time, they want their children to practice the Indian morals and cultural values at home. They arranged Bengali language lessons and Classical dance classes to maintain the Indian cultural touch. However, this only adds a challenge to the children to deal with the overlapping cultural roles to adhere to Indian cultural values at home and to adhere American code of conduct at public places.

Jhumpa Lahiri talks of dual loss for the second generation because of the mixed perceptions of American and Indian

cultures. Even his name makes him feel alienated as he thinks of his name as both absurd and obscure. At a certain level, Ashima's and Ashok's sincere attempt to hold on to their Indian culture in a foreign soil worked, but they failed to transfer the same cultural values to Gogol and Sonali. It was only after Ashoke's death, Gogol felt a sense of belongingness while going through the rituals. Meanwhile, he explored the legacy of his father. The whole provided him with a meaning and comfort which guided him through the superficiality of American life, which he always admired. He found his name relatable to the legacy of his father, rather than an embarrassment.

Conclusion

With the changing concerns of the second-generation immigrants, the original idea of the American Dream became a traditional one, which seems unattainable. The original idea was to achieve a life better than that of the first generation through hard work, which could be reflected in having a good family, financial stability and owning a house. However, for the second generation, it is more about cultural and generational conflict, which creates a tension between the parents' traditional values and American culture. This conflict might result in misunderstanding and miscommunication between the child and parents. Both the novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Namesake* evidently reflect upon such concerns, which adds another layer to the understanding of the American Dream. The differences in the ways of living, the choices, and the approach towards upward mobility by second-generation immigrants make the first generation worried, as it might jeopardise the hard work and aspirations of the first generation to fulfil the American Dream.

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