CHAPTER- 2

REVIEW OF THE SELECT NOVELS OF AMY TAN.

2.1 THE JOY LUCK CLUB: Novel 1

The Joy Luck Club is the first of Amy Tan’s novels. The book is organized into four sections, two devoted to the mothers and two devoted to the daughters, with the exception of Jing Mei. The first section is about the mothers’ childhood in China, the period of time during which their personalities were moulded giving the reader a better sense of their ‘true selves’. Later, the daughters view their mothers in a different and unflattering light.

The first section of the book, ‘Feathers from a Thousand Li Away’ describes the heritage of the mothers in China, a legacy that they wished to bestow on their daughters, which the little story in the beginning signifies. For many years, the mothers do not tell their daughters their stories until they are sure that their wayward offspring would listen; and by then, it is almost too late to make them understand their heritage that their mothers left behind, long ago, when they left China. In the second section of the book, ‘The Twenty-six Malignant gates,’ the problem of communication and lack of understanding between the mothers and daughters is emphasized. This section is filled with mother-daughter conflicts, as the story in the beginning foreshadows.

The third section is ‘American Translation’. Here the mothers’ give advice regarding their daughters’ problems and the daughters either take the advice to mean something other than the mothers had intended, or they simply ignore it. At the end the daughters, finally heeding their mothers’ advice and exhortations, realize that their mothers had been right about everything all along.

The fourth section concludes the book with the mothers’ stories of what happened...
after their childhood. The title ‘Queen Mothers of the skies’ signify that the mothers were the Queen mothers of the daughters. The daughters finally realize the pain, heartaches, and happiness of their mothers and feel that they should have revered their mothers from the beginning as the traditional Chinese revered the Queen mother. In this novel as in the other novels of Amy Tan, the mothers watch as their daughters grow, feeling the desire to protect them, to teach them ‘how to lose your innocence but not your hope, to be happy forever’. (Joy Luck 213).

To the mothers, the daughters are themselves reborn, a chance for the mothers to give them a better life than they had in china. In The Joy Luck Club, the relationship between mothers and daughters starts with imbalance and finally ends with a definite balance. The daughters searching for their mothers’ real pasts finally arrive at their own identities. The confusion or anger that they feel towards their mothers while growing up is dissolved. The key to the structure is to find the right balance. The daughters have to find their own understanding through all the conflicts that they have with their mothers. The daughters realize the semblance between themselves and their mothers. Together mothers and daughters create a satisfying wholeness from generation to generation. The first page lists the characters. The names of the mothers and daughters are set opposite to each other as if like a chess game. In a chess game when a pawn reaches the other side of the board she becomes a queen, likewise, daughters have to travel through many conflicts to achieve independence and self-understanding. Daughters have to undergo a journey into the unknown to find their own identities. To these second generation Chinese American women, to know themselves is the motivating energy. Amy Tan chiefly explores the mother-daughter relationships in her novels. Tan brings out transition in each mother-daughter pair. Tan explores step by step the transition of mothers and daughters from their childhood to their life at present. Amy Tan presents the conflicting views and the stories of both sides, the characters with an understanding of the mentalities of both mother and daughter. The prologue is catchy and significant because it outlines Tan’s ideas of Chinese Diaspora.

‘Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide,
stretching their necks towards America’. (Joy Luck 17).

The passage tells the story about a Chinese woman who travels to the United States in search of a better life. This calls for both physical and cultural transition.

“On her journey she cooed to the swan: In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by loudness of her husbands belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow”. (Joy Luck 17).

The Chinese woman is compared to a duck. She takes with her a swan to give it to her daughter as a symbol of her ambitions and desires that made her move to America. However, the immigration officers take the swan from her leaving only a feather. She is now left with only a feather and with no memory of the reasons for her long journey. Years later, the mother’s dream of an American daughter is fulfilled. Yet she does not give the feather to her daughter because she still longingly waits for the moment when she can finally speak perfect English and is able to fully express the meaning behind the feather. The fable of the swan introduces a thematic concept that characteristics all relationships between mothers and daughters the problem of communication. The mother in the fable wishes her daughter to speak only English, instead of Chinese. Yet she is not able to master the same language in order to communicate with her daughter.

‘Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up-speaking only English and swallowing more coco-cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, ‘this feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intensions’. (Joy Luck 17).

The old woman also wishes to have an independent life, for which she experiences misery. But the daughter, who is influenced by American culture, is more concerned about herself than her mother’s identity. She forgets the ideal meaning of life
for which her mother had been fighting all her life. The mothers and daughters face each other across the communication barrier that not only divides generations but also separates the old-world and the new, the immigrant and the American-born. The word ‘lesson’ reinforces the fable elements while the word ‘laugh’ adds a comic touch. “The use of the double is an especially prominent structural device.

‘The word ‘two’, and its synonyms are used several times in Chapter titles, ‘Half and Half,’ ‘Two Kinds,’ ‘Double Face,’ ‘A pair of Tickets,’ and ‘American Translation’. (Xu 151)

The mother talks about to the baby who has lived forever. The Joy Luck mothers have a reservoir of life experiences they want to share with their daughters, but are faced with many issues affecting both generations that prevent the deepening of their relationships. Both the mothers’ and the daughters’ stories explain life changing experiences that take place during their respective childhood in China and in the United States.

The vignettes are deeply moving and troubling Tan explains effectively of the pain of familial incomprehension, the loss of the ‘mother tongue’, and the unarticulated desire for generational understanding. But the geo-cultural gap between China and America creates such a division of social spaces that it immediately revives the pigment of orientalist imagination with an apparent Chinese authenticity.

‘As the language barrier of the mothers-their border language-marks their positioning between two cultures. However, in exploring linguistic limits, the novel also argues for reclaiming language as an instrument of inter-subjectivity and dialogue, and as a medium of transmission from mothers to daughters’. (Xu 151).

The woman characters of the novel are Suyuan Woo and her daughter Jing Mei Woo, An-mei Hsu and her daughter Rose Jordon Hsu, Lindo Jong and her daughter Waverly Jong, Ying-ying St. Clair and her daughter Lena St. Clair.
2.2 THE KITCHEN GOD’S WIFE: Novel 2

The Kitchen God’s Wife is a story about mother-daughter relationship – a mother, Winnie and a daughter, Pearl who have mutually reinforcing secrets. Their inability to communicate to each other is mainly due to their different cultural backgrounds. Winnie was born and bought up in China and immigrated to California. Later in life, while Pearl, her daughter was born and bought up in the United States. In the beginning, the story is told by Pearl, the daughter, who has informed everyone except her mother, Winnie that she is suffering from multiple-sclerosis. Due to the generation and language barrier, Pearl is afraid that her mother, Winnie will get overexcited by her illness. Pearl feels guilty about hiding this information from her mother because she believes that her mother would never hide anything from her.

Most of the story, however, is given in the voice of the mother, whose Chinese name is Jiang Weili (in Chinese, the family name comes first). Out of an unrealistic fear of her former husband Wen Fu’s reappearance, (unrealistic since he is in China and she is in California), Winnie has never told Pearl, her daughter anything but generalities about her first marriage. Now that Wen Fu has died, Winnie tells her story, in the process revealing certain long-veiled circumstance of Pearl’s nativity.

When Weili (Winnie) is six years old, her mother deserts the family, bringing shame on the house. Weili is sent to live in her Paternal Uncle’s house so that she will not be a constant reminder of her mother’s betrayal. In her new home Winnie plays second fiddle to her Uncle’s Children, which is particularly galling in relation to Peanut, the daughter of her Paternal Uncle who is younger by a year to Winnie. Thus, Winnie jumps at the chance to marry Wen Fu, a local boy who begins by romancing Peanut but who switches his matrimonial targets when he learns that Winnie is from a richer background, and that can be comfortable with that rich family.

At the time of the couple’s marriage, China is at war with Japan. The newly married couple had to pack off to live at the Chinese Air Force Academy where Wen Fu
is a pilot. As Winnie lives with him, Winnie comes to understand his perversity. With his friends he is quick-witted, generous, brash, and gutsy. To his wife, he is cruel, spiteful, and over demanding sexually. Moreover, he is a coward who turns tail whenever the other pilots fly into combat. Perhaps, as a compensation for his increasingly ill concealed derelictions of duty, he plays the bully with his wife. He takes possession of some of her personal savings and wastes them, and he begins to flaunt his extramarital affairs, to the point of moving his mistress into the house. These actions do not merely personally affront Winnie, since the couple must share their housing with another married couple; they also cause her to lose face.

The rapid deterioration of their marriage takes place against the backdrop of China’s collapsing defence against a Japanese invasion. Wen Fu’s air force unit repeatedly relocates; moving deeper into China’s interior as the Japanese blitzkrieg continues. Later, new personal disasters harden the marriage partners’ hearts against each other. Wen Fu loses an eye in a jeep mishap, due to which he loses both his looks and his job of being a pilot. Winnie loses the last vestiges of feeling for her spouse when he prevents a doctor from seeing their daughter, Yiku, who is struck by a sudden sickness and dies. For Winnie, apart from her children, the only bright spots during the war years are her deepening friendship with a fellow pilot’s wife, Hulan, and later, her meeting with the enchanting Chinese American translator, Jimmie Louis. Back in Shanghai after the war, two encounters persuade Winnie to leave her marriage. She finds Peanut, who has left her husband and set up a house for runaway wives, and later meets Jimmie Louie again and falls in love with him. She escapes from her husband Wen fu, after a lot of misadventures that include being thrown in jail on trumped-up charges preferred by Wen Fu.

Finally, she joins with Jimmie Louie in California as his wife. On the day before she leaves for America, however, Winnie is surprised and raped by Wen Fu. Pearl is born about nine months later, and the question of her father’s identity is left open. After so many years of doubt, Winnie is convinced that Jimmie Louie, who is dead, is Pearl’s true father, a fact that Winnie tells her daughter as she brings her narrative to a close.
Impressed and awed by her mother’s history and by her courage in revealing it, Pearl reciprocates by informing her mother of her own sickness. Tan’s women with that American husbands attempt often without knowing it to balance East and West, the past and the future of their lives. A level of transcendence is apparent in the storytelling, as in The Kitchen God’s Wife. Mother and daughter must gain from the storytelling in order to have healthy relationships with each other. The story ends with a flow of trust in the mother-daughter relationship.

The woman characters of the story are Jiang Weili (Winnie), her daughter Pearl, Hulan (Winnie Friend), Mary (Hulan’s daughter), Cleo and Dory (Pearl’s daughters’)

2.3 THE BONESETTER’S DAUGHTER: Novel 3

The Bonesetters Daughter unfolds in five linked themes, that is ghosts, ghost writing, nature, bones, and memory. The Bonesetters Daughter investigates as to how the spirit of Gu Liu Xin, the Chinese grandmother plays a critical role in developing the psychological integrity of Ruth, the American born Chinese granddaughter. The story also tells us as to how Gu Liu Xin’s ghost helps to guide LuLing, her daughter and Ruth’s mother, out of the hazardous situation in China. It also tells us as to how Gu Liu Xin’s spirit sustains LuLing in times of alienation and hardship in America. The novel indicates that the womanist spirit of audacity is generational and trans-visible, passing from mothers to daughters or from woman to woman.

The title, The Bonesetter’s Daughter indicates that the story is about the life of Gu Liu Xin, the daughter of a bonesetter; the novel is a saga of the three generations of women, that is Ruth the American born Chinese daughter, LuLing the immigrant Chinese mother, and Gu Liu Xin alias Precious Auntie and Bao Bamu, the Chinese grandmother. The spirit of the dead grandmother guides both the plot development and the central theme of the story, reclaiming the silenced voice of women.

The main body of this story consists of three parts. The story in the first part is
situated in present America and narrated by Ruth, the American-born Chinese granddaughter. It recounts Ruth’s identity and the tension between Ruth and the mother, LuLing. When the story opens, Ruth is a ghost writer in her forties, who works at home and takes care of Art, her American partner, and Art’s two daughters from his former marriage. Nothing seems wrong on the surface in terms of her family life and career. The delicate mother-daughter tension between Ruth and LuLing keeps lingering. Flashing back to her childhood and adolescence, Ruth comes to realize that the mother-daughter relationship is rooted in her identity crisis—living as both American and Chinese. Her Chinese mother’s silence and frustrations of living in a foreign country and the miscommunication between her mother and herself. More important, just as LuLing is losing her memory, Ruth recovers her mother’s autobiography that is representative of the past memories written in Chinese.

The second part is the English translation of LuLing’s autobiography. This part delineates both the stories of LuLing and her mother, Precious Auntie. A misunderstanding develops between LuLing and Precious Auntie. LuLing does not learn the truth and how important her mother means to her until Precious Auntie commits suicide in order to save LuLing from a potentially unhappy marriage. After the death of Precious Auntie, LuLing experiences a number of turbulences in the backdrop of Japanese Chinese war and the Chinese civil war. Whatever happens, LuLing never stops seeking consonance with her mother who teaches her knowledge, wisdom, love, bravery, and the family art of calligraphy. In the process of LuLing’s growth into maturity, Precious Auntie becomes familiar and very close to LuLing. Indeed, LuLing survives every important phase of her life by living on the knowledge and heritage her mother has left to her. In impressing Precious Auntie’s spirit LuLing and Precious Auntie become one.

The third part of the story goes back to the present America, which is the epilogue. In this part, Ruth resumes her role as a story teller. The suspense built up in the first part of the fiction is finally given a conclusion here. Both conflicts, namely the strained mother-daughter relationship between LuLing and Ruth, as well as the vague one
between Ruth and Art, are resolved. Once Ruth learns the truth of her mother’s and grandmother’s life-stories, she begins to identify herself with her Chinese ancestry. While Ruth is being back to her Chinese roots, she becomes more visible for her American partner, Art. Art’s recognition of Ruth’s presence rekindles his love for her and relieves Ruth’s anxiety. However, the vague relationship between Ruth and Art can be seen as subtext to the mother-daughter relationship and reconciliation. Overall, the story is developed on two major parallels, the one between Ruth and her mother, LuLing, and the one between LuLing and her mother, precious Auntie. The two parallel run with the medium of Gu liu Xin’s ghost.

The woman characters of the story are LuLing, Ruth (LuLing’s daughter), Precious Auntie (LuLing’s mother), Gao Ling (LuLing’s sister).

2.4 THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES: Novel 4

“The Hundred Secret Senses” is the third novel of Amy Tan. Amy Tan is a writer with a rare power that intends to touch the heart of every individual of Asian race. In this story, Amy Tan uses her characteristics wisdom, grace, and humor to conjure a story that is filled with the inheritance of love, its secrets and senses, its illusions and truths. This is a novel about two sisters who are bonded with the relationship of the same father but different mothers. Even though it is about sisters, it is more linked to mother-daughter relationship between the two sisters. The story is set in San Francisco and in a remote village of Southern China, Changmian, meaning ‘never ending songs’.

In the novel the concept of cultural translation in formulating a cultural identity for those who struggle between two cultures and languages, as to how ghosts exemplify their in-between situation. In weaving the old cultural references from both Chinese and American backgrounds. Amy Tan also brings the newness and foreignness into the world. This is a tale of American pragmatism shaken, and soothed by the usual concepts of Chinese ghosts.
The novel explains the memories of girlhood among ghosts, combines her mother’s stories, Chinese legends and myths, with her own childhood memories and fantasies. In this sense, ‘ghosts’ means the spirits, the apparition of the dead or the devils. Being the third novel of Amy Tan, the author weaves mysterious ghosts which represent the haunting past and the cultural memory of the immigrant sisters and mothers, waiting to be remembered and then exorcised.

The love we seek between mother and daughter, among sisters, lovers, and friends are emotionally captured in this novel. The boundaries and failings are beautifully explained with love that goes beyond “until death do us part”. The aspects that haunt us like regretful ghosts. The main character’s of the novel, Olivia, narrates the story in such a way that even the reader gets influenced by the ghosts. In 1962, Olivia, nearly six years old, meets her adult half sister, Kwan, from China for the first time. As Olivia’s mother is very neglectful, who in pursuing a new marriage can’t provide enough love and affection for her children, who cannot pay attention to daughter’s needs, finds her stepdaughter Kwan to be a handy caretaker.

The sisters share the bedroom, but Olivia doesn’t accept or give way for her sister in occupying her own-self. Kwan always whispers about the secrets of her childhood memories and about the ghosts and makes Olivia to promise that she should never reveal the secret to anyone. Out of both fright and resentment, Olivia betrays her sister with terrible consequences. From then on she listens to Kwan’s stories and pretends to believe them. Even though the younger ignores the older one, later Olivia realizes that Kwan is her own blood, as Kwan is no more with her. Olivia discovers her ownself by giving birth to a beautiful daughter “Samanata” after Kwan’s death.

It is only after thirty years, Olivia is about to divorce her husband ‘Simon’, after a lengthy marriage. She is certain he has never given up his love for former girlfriend, who died years before. Kwan and her ghosts help Olivia to recover the relationship between her and Simon, and they provide with ceaseless advice and please her in such a way to reconsider, Simon. Since it is been a long time for Olivia that she has dismissed
the ghosts of her childhood and the wacky counsel of her sister, Kwan. Just as Kwan anticipates, Kwan travels to China along with Olivia and Simon, as fate intervenes. In the village Changmian, where Kwan grew up, Olivia confronts the tangible evidence of what she has always presumed to be her sister’s fantasy of the past. And there, she find the proof that love endures, and comes to understand what logic ignores, what you can know only through the hundred secret senses. The novel indicates the senses of importance, led to opinions, led to conclusions, and sometimes different from that of GOD. Olivia’s memory brings a cosmic touch to the novel and makes the reader feel the importance of being a woman.

2.5 SAVING FISH FROM DROWNING: Novel 5

Saving Fish From Drowning is the fifth novel of Amy Tan published in the year 2005. The story follows the trials and tribulations that the twelve American tourists face when they embark on an expedition to explore a journey to china and Burma. The book opens with an article from the ‘San Francisco Chronicle’, stating that eleven tourists, including four men, five women, and two children have mysteriously vanished in Burma, after sailing away on a cruise on Christmas morning. The novel explores the relationship, insecurities and hidden strengths of the tourists, set against the uneasy political situation in Burma. From that instance, the story is narrated through the omniscient first person narrative of ‘BibiChen’, the tour leader who unexpectedly dies before the trip takes place and who continues to watch over her friends as they proceed their journey towards their fate. It is a novel filled with ambitious thoughts narrated by a ghost who, like all of Tan’s heroines, is caught between tow world’s, part of both yet belonging to neither.

Even though her body is dead, her heart is still ensnared in the land of the living. Filled with Amy Tan’s signature, “idiosyncratic, sympathetic characters, haunting images, historical complexity, significant contemporary themes, and suspenseful mystery.” This novel ‘Saving Fish From Drowning’ seduces the reader with a façade of Buddhist illusions, magicians tricks, and light comedy, even as the absurd and picaresque
spiral into a gripping morality tale about the consequences of intentions – both good and bad – about the shared responsibility that individuals must accept for the action of others.

‘A pious man explained to his followers: It is an evil to take lives and noble to save them. Each day I pledge to save a hundred lives. I drop my net in the lake and scoop out a hundred fishes. I place the fishes on the bank, where they flap and twirl. “Don’t be scared, I tell those fishes. I’m saving you from drowning. Soon enough the fishes grow calm and lie still. Yet, sad to say, I am always too late. The fishes expire. And because it is evil to waste anything, I take those dead fishes to market and I sell them for a good price. With the money I receive, I buy more nets so I can save more fishes’.

(SFD 3)

In the above context, the Buddhist fishermen in the eponymous proverb would have themselves believe, by sophistic nationalization could they bear the burden of their cruelty. The fishermen are a metaphor for those who would plunder humanity and seek self-justification. This ghost story is glued to that most agonized of tenses, the past unexpected conditional: she (the ghost) tells us what she would have done, if only she had not messed it all up. This sense of thwarted possibility washes a submerged undercurrent of frustration throughout, stuck as she is too, in the gap between aspiration and achievement. The story is all about an ill-fated art expedition into the Southern Shan state of Burma. Eleven Americans leave their ‘Floating Island Resort for a Christmas morning tour and disappear. Through tourists of fate, curses, and just plain human error, they find themselves deep in the jungle, where they encounter a tribe awaiting the return of the leader and the mythical book of wisdoms that will protect them from the ravages and destruction of the Myanmar military regime.

The story starts with the funeral of Bibi Chen, who narrates the story was once upon a time a Chinese-American woman, is an art expert who loses control over that trickiest of arts: living and dying. The novel opens with a path not taken. Bibi Chen had organized an art expedition down the Burma Road for herself and a group of west coast tourists, but died in a freak accident. Amy Tan tries to spin the story in a mesmerizing
tale about the mind and the heart of an individual, all the characters perform their own importance to bring the novel significantly.