

A Study on Order Reconstruction via Dialogue in *The Joy Luck Club*

WANG Hai-yan

Northwest University, Xi'an, China

While much research on *The Joy Luck Club* has been studied through grand lens, like feminism, or cultural factors, trauma, etc., little research has been conducted to highlight self-consciousness and conflicts that are reflected in their seemingly endless dialogues between the four mothers and their daughters throughout the novel. Using dialogue from Bakhtin's polyphony theory, the present study investigates precisely how it works to awaken self-consciousness in all of them; how their understanding and connection are restored, and eventually how exactly right decisions are made for their daughters in marriage. The findings show that, after numerous dialogues between mothers and daughters, their self-awareness has become clearer, their relations are mended, the right decisions are made, and eventually the order in every aspect is reconstructed. The study calls for greater attention to the embodiment of dialogues in *The Joy Luck Club*, and how they work effectively and profoundly at every level, and at last how they fulfill the reconstruction of orders in certain aspects.

Keywords: The Joy Luck Club, Dialogue, Self-awareness, Relations, Right decisions, Order

Introduction

The Joy Luck Club was the most popular novel written by Amy Tan, a well-known American Chinese female writer in 1989. Since it was published and made into a movie entitled the same name later, this novel has intrigued interests among numerous scholars, critics, both American and Chinese ever since. It has been interpreted from quite a number of different perspectives and has shown charm and beauty with variously splendid facets to the literature world.

According to CNKI scholar website, it can be seen that, from 1990 till September 2021, over 939 pieces of research articles and 269 pieces of dissertation, including one piece for Doctoral degree, have been contributed to this successful novel. By the way, monographs of it are not included in the 1,208 pieces.

Among the 1,208 pieces of papers on *The Joy Luck Club*, seven perspectives have been discussed, i.e. (1) the study on mother-daughter relations; (2) Sino-US relations; (3) feminism study; (4) nationality identity recognition; (5) narrative inquiry; (6) eco-criticism; (7) traumatic memory study (Lv, Tang, & Xia, 2017).

In essence, almost all the existing literature on *The Joy Luck Club* is extensive and focuses particularly on a broad vision of life and experience of people depicted in it. However, no research has been conducted to highlight inner feelings and conflicts that are reflected in their endless dialogues. This particularly outweighs grandeur perspectives in interpretation of the novel, since it emphasizes vulnerable and elaborate inner conflicts between mothers and daughters, offering a unique facet in terms of struggles of human being.

It could be seen that, among all the 1,208 papers, only five of them studied *The Joy Luck Club* with Bakhtin's dialogue theory. These five pieces refer to "Identity Reconstruction in *Joy Luck Club* via Dialogue" (Duan, 2016); "Bakhtin's Theory and Mother-Daughter Dialogues in American Chinese Female Writers' Works" (Zou, 2008); "The Power of Language: Decoding Language and Cultural Factors in *The Joy Luck Club* via Dialogue" (Qiao, 2010); "Disparities and Co-existence: Interpretation of the Language in *The Joy Luck Club*" (Guo, 2016); "Multiple-Symphony: Interpreting *The Joy Luck Club* With Dialogue" (Li, 2008). These critics have interpreted *The Joy Luck Club* with Bakhtin's dialogue from polyphony theory, particularly from mother-daughter relations, language issues, or cultural identity, etc.; yet no attention has been paid to how their life order is restored via numerous dialogues afterwards. Thus, to fill this gap, the present paper intends to investigate how dialogue works to awaken self-consciousness in them; how their understanding and connection are restored, and eventually how exactly right decisions are made for the daughters in marriage.

The paper thus is divided into five parts: The first part refers to introduction; the second part investigates Bakhtin's dialogue and its essence; then, problems and dialogues between mothers and daughters are discussed in the third part; after that, results of dialogues are presented in the fourth part; finally, conclusion is made in the fifth part.

Dialogue

The Joy Luck Club is a Place of Communication Synchronically

As human being, everyone is born with a living spirit, a free will, which is embodied in his/her speech. A person means communication, and one's existence is proved exactly through communication with others (Qiao, 2010). In fact, people are revealed the most in their language, especially how they truly feel, and how they view themselves or others, all of which is presented in their dialogue, or conversations with people.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, during the Japanese invasion, everything was devastating and everybody in despair; Suyuan Woo imagined another world by gathering other ladies to play mah jong, to play games, lost and won, to feast, to tell the best stories, to hope to be lucky, which was their only joy. That was how they came to call their little parties Joy Luck (Tan, 1993, pp. 23-25). With the Joy Luck Club, the ladies, instead of sitting and waiting for their own death with proper somber faces, they chose their own happiness (Tan, 1993, p. 25). Accordingly, the Joy Luck Club served to be a shelter in the cruel wartime.

Dialogic Vision of Bakhtin

According to Bakhtin, everything in life was dialogue, that is, dialogic opposition (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 43). For him, dialogic relationships could be seen everywhere, in all manifestation of conscious and intelligent human life; where consciousness began, there dialogue began for him as well (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 40).

Besides, in Bakhtin's views, dialogue could be divided into two types: one is the great dialogue, which means the author structured a novel as a whole; and then the micro dialogue, i.e. the dialogue penetrates within, into every word of the novel, making it double-voiced, into every gesture, every mimic movement on the hero's face (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 40).

Concerning *The Joy Luck Club*, it is thoroughly written in dialogue. As it is composed of 16 separate yet connected stories, where every story has a storyteller. In other words, each story is told by the four mothers and their daughters respectively. It follows such an order: In the first chapter, four mothers (except Suyuan, who is represented by her daughter June in the whole novel) told stories about their past experience back in China

before they escaped to the States; then in the second chapter, it is their daughters' turn to tell stories of their childhood and present situation; after that, in the third chapter, still daughters' turn to focus on the present problems; last in the fourth chapter, it is four mothers' turn to finish the whole story (Again, June represents her mother to tell stories here).

Consequently, the whole structure in *The Joy Luck Club* constitutes a great dialogue, while every chapter, every single dialogue by each storyteller makes perfect micro dialogues.

Problems Between Four Pairs of Mothers and Daughters

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the four mothers Anmei, Ying-ying, Lindo, and Suyuan, were born and brought up in Chinese cultural context, while their daughters, Rose, Lena, Waverly, and June were born in the States. Because of this cultural difference, the mothers are stubborn and stick to Chinese way of treating each other, that is, to be humble and not to be too straightforward when talking to people; on the contrary, the four daughters are tortured by their American identity and the Chinese values from their mothers. Put it specifically, there was a tension between daughters and mothers. In order to present the problems more vividly, a table is followed, to summarize experiences and problems of mothers and daughters.

Table 1

How Dialogues Work in Experiences and Problems of the Four Pairs of Mothers and Their Daughters

Mothers, fathers and mothers' former experience	Their daughters' experience	Problems between mothers & daughters; ways of solutions
Anmei Hsu & George (1) was poured boiling soup at 4 (p. 46) (2) her mother was forced to marry Wu Tsing as his 4th wife, and eventually committed suicide with opium (pp. 215-241) (3) from Ningpo to Tientsin	Rose Hsu Jordan & Ted (1) old Mr. Chou (p. 186) (2) has got 2 sisters and one little brother died on the beach when he was 4 (pp. 123-131) (3) be faced with a divorce with Ted (p. 189)	too obedient to mother (pp. 185-188) and to her husband Ted (p. 119) fought for herself in the broken marriage after dialogues with mother (pp. 188-196)
Ying Ying & Clifford St. Clair (1) was once drowned in Tai Lake at 4 (pp. 67-83) (2) first husband betrayed her and lived with an opera singer (p. 247) (3) an abortion in the first marriage (p. 248) (4) from Wuxi to Shanghai	Lena St. Clair & Herald (1) a little brother died before he was born (p. 112) (2) Herald divided the bill with her in the marriage (p. 155)	Lena was inferior in her marriage due to the influence of Chinese humility (p. 156) spoke her mind to Herald after dialogues with her mother (pp. 160-165)
Lindo & Tin Jong (1) abandoned by her parents at 12 (pp. 49-53) (2) got married at 16 in her first marriage (pp. 54-58)	Waverly Jong & Rich Shields (1) learned to play chess at 7 (pp. 169-173) (2) has got a daughter named Shoshana in her first marriage to Marvin (p. 174) (3) going to marry Rich Shields (p. 175)	waverly thought her mother hated her future husband (p. 181) conversations between Waverly and Lindo brought final understanding between them (pp. 181-184)
Suyuan Woo & Canning Woo (1) twin baby girls abandoned on the way during Japanese invasion (pp. 268-269) (2) fled Kweilin for Chongqing in 1944	June Woo (1) was taught to play piano by Old Chong (p. 136) (2) not married (3) going to see her two sisters in Shanghai (p. 273)	June felt she was betrayed by her mother. (p. 206) Dialogues between Suyuan and June made mother admit her daughter's value (pp. 206-209)

Note. * All in-text citation in the table is from Amy Tan's book *The Joy Luck Club*.

Anmei and Rose

It can be seen that, Anmei had gone through too much adversity when she was a child: She was poured boiling soup and her neck was badly burnt at four; her mother was cheated and forced to marry a merchant Wu

Tsing as his fourth wife. The mother was simmered in sorrow and never spoke thereafter, eventually committed suicide with opium. Her spirit was destroyed, so was her ability to speak. Due to deprivation of speech, she died. On the other hand, even born in the States, Rose was taught to be obedient to her mother (Tan, 1993, pp. 185-188) and later unconsciously obedient to her husband (Tan, 1993, p. 119). This torn-apart situation becomes the root of tragedy in Rose's marriage with Ted: Ted could no longer see her charm as an independent woman and wife; therefore a divorce is the only way out.

Ying-ying and Lena

Ying-ying was also ignored in her childhood: She was once drowned in Tai Lake at four; in her first marriage, she was mistreated and betrayed by her husband; what's more, a baby was aborted in the broken marriage. And as for her daughter Lena, she was taught to be humble from a very young age. As a result, she lost her confidence and was lost in her marriage since her husband Herald divided the bill with her in almost everything. Now, what she is faced with is an uncomfortable feeling in the marriage (Tan, 1993, p. 159).

Lindo and Waverly

Life was not easy for Lindo, neither. She was a girl abandoned by her parents at 12 when her parents moved to the south for a better life; later, she was arranged to marry a boy at 16. As for her daughter Waverly, she learned to play chess at seven and quit playing chess very quickly the time she felt her mother liked to show off on this. What Waverly felt was her mother did not respect her and even hated her future husband Rich Shields (Tan, 1993, p. 181).

Suyuan and June

Although Suyuan's childhood misery is not mentioned, her life became tragic when she was forced to abandon her twin baby girls during Japanese invasion on the way she fled Kweilin for Chongqing. The two lost baby girls became a heartbreak ever since. From then on, she pinned all her hope and expectation on her daughter June. For instance, June was arranged to learn playing piano by an incompetent teacher Old Chong at nine. Besides, a performance expected by her mother astonishingly turned out to be a total failure and June quit playing piano from then on. Unlike other daughters in the novel, June never got married. She felt a moment that she was betrayed by her mother when she was not seen and even misunderstood by her mother at the dinner (Tan, 1993, p. 206).

Dialogue Works in Reconstructing Life Orders

Now it seems everything is stuck in the middle; the whole situation becomes much more complicated and unresolved. Yet, it can be observed that, since mothers literally see the problems and dilemmas their daughters are now faced with, their self-consciousness starts to be awakened (Qiao, 2010), and then numerous dialogues between mothers and daughters take place and make the whole thing explicit and all settled eventually. Accordingly, at least three aspects have been settled and restored in terms of orders: i.e. their self-consciousness, especially their daughters; the relations and connection between mothers and daughters; at last, the right decisions in life and marriage as well.

Self-Consciousness Being Awakened

Anmei and Rose. As Anmei is concerned, when she saw her mother committed suicide and lied in the bed, she was entirely aware of the tragedy of her mother as a concubine in the ancient society. What's more, she even had courage to show the Second Wife the crushed fake pearl given to her. And on that day, she learned to

shout (Tan, 1993, p. 240). Her anger and her rebellion here is a sign of her self-consciousness. She is the one to roar.

As for her daughter Rose, who is obedient to her mother, used to believe everything her mother said (Tan, 1993, p. 185). Now she is faced with a divorce with Ted. Even she had talked with a psychiatrist about her relation and problems with Ted, she was still confused. Until one day they attended a funeral at the church, she told her mother that they were getting a divorce. Acknowledged that Rose went to see a psychiatrist, her mother contended that a mother was best while a psychiatrist would only make Rose more confused. Before the conversation with her mother, Rose also had a lot of conversations with others, for instance, her friends, including Waverly, Lena. It was after so many dialogues with people, at last with her mother, that she started to know how she felt indeed, and what she wanted in the marriage. She had a feeling that she had raced to the top of a big turning point in her life (Tan, 1993, p. 189).

Ying-ying and Lena. Then, Ying-ying and her daughter Lena. Ying-ying was taught to be obedient and never to ask, only listen at four. She was not taken care of by her mother, but a servant, Amah. What's worse, her father got concubines. On a special day: the Moon Festival, the whole family planned to go to the Tai Lake by pavilion boat. Since she felt bored and went away alone, accidentally she almost drowned to death in the lake. Yet at that very moment she had seen nobody who cared that she was missing (Tan, 1993, p. 79). From then on, Ying-ying was aware that she was lost and she was no longer the same girl (Tan, 1993, pp. 82-83).

As far as Lena is concerned, she felt that her mother saw only bad things, which made Lena insecure and inferior and led to the division of bills with her husband Herald. She is a victim of the Chinese humility that one is supposed to accept everything (Tan, 1993, p. 156). When her mother Ying-ying paid a visit to her house, she noticed the bills divided. It was then they had endless dialogues about "why you do this?" After that, Lena started a fight that was bigger than she knew how to handle. But she did it anyway (Tan, 1993, p. 164).

Relations Between Mothers and Daughters Being Restored

Lindo and Waverly. Lindo was tough and clear at an early age. When she was abandoned by her family and prisoned in her arranged marriage, she knew precisely what she wanted. She promised to herself that she would never forget herself (Tan, 1993, p. 58). That is why she could escape the terrible marriage eventually (Tan, 1993, p. 66). While as a mother, she had pinned her hopes on her daughter, which made Waverly extremely resented her. Waverly bit back her tongue (Tan, 1993, p. 96), protested and tired of her tricks (Tan, 1993, pp. 169-171). Particularly at the dinner, when her future husband Rich came, her mother seemed to hate him. This triggered a heated argumentation and conflicts between them (Tan, 1993, pp. 180-184). After debating, clarifying, and normal conversation, Waverly felt soothed, and finally she did understand her mother. She had seen her mother as an aging lady (Tan, 1993, pp. 180-181).

Suyuan and June. Suyuan used to have twin baby girls who were left on the way during Japanese invasion as she got severe dysentery. With this regret, she had an ambitious goal for June: She wanted to explore a prodigy in June. Yet June felt uncomfortable with her mother and was determined to put a stop to the foolish pride of her mother (Tan, 1993, p. 138). Years later, June complained that Suyuan wanted her to be someone she was not. It was during this dialogue in the kitchen that her mother expressed her early realization of June having a natural talent in piano playing. Furthermore, June felt wronged and betrayed by her mother for selecting a dead boiled crab at the dinner; they two had more dialogues. It was when Suyuan finally admitted

the uniqueness in her daughter with a gold necklace (Tan, 1993, p. 143), that a tremendous burden removed between June and her mother (Tan, 1993, pp. 206-208).

Right Decisions Being Made in Life and Marriage

Rose fought for her rights in the marriage. Rose used to be an obedient lady, and even so in her marriage with Ted. Now that she was hurt so badly in her marriage and faced with a divorce with him. She talked a lot with everyone except Ted. With all these dialogues, she became more and more rational. She knew her feeling and what she wanted. In a word, she was independent and mature then. Even she did not know why she said that, but she felt right saying that (Tan, 1993, p. 195). She courageously fought for her rights in the marriage even when it fell apart (Tan, 1993, p. 196). She made a choice to express and be heard.

Lena expressed her true self in her broken marriage. Lena was not independent in her marriage neither, which is proved by dividing bills with her husband. After a lot of dialogues with her mother, she realized that she needed to make change in her marriage: She expressed her dislike and resentment to her husband in a fierce manner. She fought in a way that she had never done before (Tan, 1993, pp. 162-165).

June fulfilled her mother's long-cherished wish. Since her mother Suyuan was forced to abandon her twin baby girls on a road as she was fleeing Kweilin for Chungking in 1944, endless searching for them became "Forever Never Forgotten" or "Long-Cherished Wish", just as the meaning of her name Suyuan in Chinese (Tan, 1993, pp. 268-280). Accordingly, June made a decision to come back to Mainland China to search for her half-sisters with her seventy-two-year-old-father Canning Woo. Eventually, June met her twin half-sisters, and they all called "mama" in Chinese, at that very moment June understood her mother's inner feelings as one with two lost babies and thus fulfilled her mother's Long-cherished wish (Tan, 1993, p. 288).

Conclusion

The Joy Luck Club is a masterpiece in many aspects. Initially, it's delicately designed with amazing plots; moreover, the relations between four pairs of mothers and their daughters are described in such a moving and exquisite way that it brings tears to the readers; last but not the least, every chapter and section of the entire novel is written in the first person tone, constituting great dialogues and micro dialogues as well, in a way characters and author might participate with equal rights (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 71). In Bakhtin's eyes, the polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 40), and the genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 59).

Dialogues between mothers and daughters serve a purpose of connecting as well as communicating, which consequently leads to genuine understanding between them; on the contrary, without endless dialogues, it is impossible that they comprehend each other eventually, and enjoy a more intimate relation than before. In one word, dialogue is the only way to make things clear, and reveals the true identity and depth of a soul.

In essence, *The Joy Luck Club* could be viewed as a polyphonic novel as it is totally composed of dozens of dialogues. In this way, dialogues in the whole novel have achieved to reveal "man in the man" (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 59); i.e. via dialogues, mothers and daughters finally come to realize who they really are and what they have misunderstood towards each other for so many years. It is also due to numerous dialogues between them, they start to be aware of the problems and figure out solutions. In this way, their self-consciousness is back;

their relations are restored, and become more intimate; most importantly, they are able to fight for their rights, and wise enough to make right decisions in the broken marriage.

All in all, it could be concluded that their self-consciousness is awakened, mother-daughter connections are restored, and right decisions are eventually made; accordingly, orders of life are reconstructed due to dialogues over and over again in *The Joy Luck Club*.

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