

A Comparative Analysis of the Novel and the Film of the Joy Luck Club from the Perspective of Postcolonial Feminism

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Abstract. The Chinese American female writer Amy Tan published the autobiographical novel *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989. After four years, the story was adapted into a film of the same name, written by Amy Tan and directed by Chinese American Wayne Wang. Afterward, Chinese and foreign scholars studied from the perspectives of feminism, Chinese identity, Chinese and Western cultural conflict and the mother-daughter relationship. In China, few scholars combine the theories of post-colonialism and feminism to study the original work and film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club*. The research finds that although the film successfully restores the main plot and retains the spirit core of the novel, it also has the following problems: strong orientalist overtones, de-emphasizing female narrative voices, and ignoring Asian marginalization. Through a close reading of the novel and a deep interpretation of the film, this article makes a comparative study of the two from the perspective of Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory and explores the deficiencies after the film adaptation. It is found that these deficiencies occur because the director is influenced by postcolonial cultural background and traditional patriarchy. He falsifies the women's right to discourse in the third world, making them unable to speak for themselves independently.

Keywords: *The Joy Luck Club*, postcolonial feminist theory, Spivak.

1. Introduction

In recent times, there has been a perpetual influx of discourse encompassing various aspects concerning women on a global scale, including their burgeoning sense of independence, treatment within the professional sphere, experiences of motherhood, marital dynamics, and familial status. These topics appear in public view occasionally and raise heated discussions. The Chinese American female writer Amy Tan published the autobiographical novel *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989. It topped the list of American novels within nine months of publication and won several major American literary awards. Written by Amy Tan and adapted by Chinese American director Wayne Wang in 1993, the film became a sensation. With the rise of feminism, orientalism and postcolonial feminism, a group of literature and film works represented by *The Joy Luck Club*, full of feminist colors, have once again become the hot object of the academic world.

Within the realm of scholarly research in both Chinese and English literature, extensive investigations have been conducted by scholars on the novel and film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club*, spanning a multitude of perspectives. These include the feminist perspective, which explores gender dynamics; the postcolonial perspective, which examines power dynamics in the aftermath of colonization; the lens of Chinese identity, which delves into questions of cultural heritage; the exploration of Chinese and Western cultural conflicts; the investigation of the mother-daughter relationship; and the application of trauma theory to shed light on psychological implications. These perspectives all face a single novel or single film. However, few scholars have combined post-colonialism and feminism as theoretical frameworks to examine *The Joy Luck Club*, and there is also a scarcity of scholars who have employed postcolonial feminist theory to conduct comparative analyses of the novel and film adaptations of *The Joy Luck Club*. By juxtaposing the novel and film of *The Joy Luck Club* and employing the lens of postcolonial feminism, it holds great significance in exploring the lived experiences of third-world women.

Based on the postcolonial feminist theory of Spivak, this study analyzes the characteristic feature of character portrayal, the content of character dialogue and the description of the story plot through the close reading of the novel. It makes a detailed analysis of the plot setting, picture composition, color saturation and shooting shots of the film. Finally, the novel and the film are analyzed and compared to find out these three questions in the film: strong orientalist overtones, de-emphasizing female narrative voices and ignoring Asian marginalization. This paper explores the influence of society and gender on the film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* under the colonization background, demonstrates the marginalization of women in the third world in the current social situation, reflects the necessity of postcolonial feminist criticism, and further thinks about the direction of contemporary Chinese women.

2. Spivak's Theory of Subaltern

The postcolonial feminist theory of Spivak differs from most postcolonial theories of the time, analyzing from the perspective of man and focusing on women in the Third World, incorporating feminism alongside postcolonial criticism and focusing on women whom both imperial-centered and phallogocentric discourses have always oppressed.

"The term 'subaltern' was first coined by Antonio Gramsci in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, who defined the 'passive, submissive' group as the 'subordinate class'" [1]. After Spivak's involvement in the Indian Subaltern Study Group, 'subaltern' was incorporated into postcolonial feminist theory, making the term 'subaltern class' come to refer to women in the Third World who were subjected to triple oppression of class, race and gender and called by Spivak subaltern's subaltern in her book *Can the Subaltern Speak*. She explicitly discussed the inability of subordinate women, who were marginalized from the world and their cultures, with voices to be ignored and branded as subordinates on account of their social and gender inferiority. They found themselves hindered in their ability to express themselves directly and authentically, and even the few voices that managed to surface were often subjected to manipulation and censorship by the privileged elite.

Spivak's theory of subaltern also emphasizes the state of upward subservience and downward domination of native males in the Third World in response to the oppression of imperialism. Under the influence of local traditions and patriarchy, women in the Third World have grown into a natural sense of self-sacrifice, making it difficult for most of them to realize the unequal position they are certainly in or to resist if they do. The first voice of society is always in the hands of imperialist men, and the voice of the 'other', represented by women in the Third World, is constantly modified until it conforms to a male-centered gender structure [2]. Men are used to placing themselves in the position of power and savior, especially when imperialism is in full swing, and native men prefer to portray themselves as the saviors of native women, thus compensating for the loss of self-esteem due to their fall under colonial rule.

At the same time, Spivak argues that the subaltern class needs to speak out and be heard. However, any voice in any era is limited by the power of the central discourse, so when women in the Third World are silenced and marginalized with their voice deprived, it is inevitable that they need to be the spokespeople or communicators of the other classes, to expose the conditions in which women in the Third World live and to offer their words an opportunity for a second expression. The ideological and social stance of those responsible for the second expression is particularly important since it is easy for the subordinate women to be controlled by the dominant discourse and to have their speeches tampered with and silenced with their interpretations unimplemented [3]. Thus, women in the Third World are faced with an imperative need to examine their societal standing and assert agency over an autonomous discourse.

3. Strong Orientalist Overtones

In the film *The Joy Luck Club*, the director deliberately portrays a dilapidated, feudal and superstitious oriental society, reinforcing the difference in the audio-visual portrayal of the Chinese and Western environments, making life in America civilized and decent, while the one in China full of warfare, poverty, outdated customs and oppression of women. With this deliberate emphasis, women in the Third World are symbolized and lose their independence, and the women and society of the East become what the West thinks they should be.

Regarding the plot, when the four mothers first arrive in the United States, they are poor and in difficult circumstances. However, in the film, all the difficulties of American life are cut out to reinforce the Orientalist overtones, and only the happy and lively aspects are shown. The lives of the four mothers and daughters in the novel can show that the author focuses more on the ups and downs of the personality building of the children under the background of two very different cultures, mostly caused by differences rather than certain cultures. However, in the film's narrative, the misfortunes that the daughters suffer at the beginning of their lives and marriages are partly due to the backwardness of the feudal culture of the East, stemming from the bullying and oppression that the mothers have suffered, as well as the customs and education that they have received in the East. The mothers have lived devastating life under China's feudal and patriarchal system, which has even affected their daughters. The director blames Eastern culture for most of the suffering of the two generations.

At the same time, the sequences on China are deliberately heavy with Chinese elements to show the dilapidated nature of the rural areas and its old customs in terms of tone, landscape, costumes, make-up and lighting to portray a country viewed as impoverished and backward by Westerners. Most of the scenes for the *Joy Luck Club* in America in the movie are in warm and harmonious colors, with slow-moving shots and a boisterous atmosphere, trying to portray a cozy, warm and lively environment. On the other hand, the images of China are mostly in grey tones, with stark and abrupt color contrasts. Suyuan Woo, one of the four mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, chooses bright red and blue for the bedding wrapped around her babies between the dim sky and the loess in the sequences of the escapades in Guilin in her early years. It is the same for another mother, Lindo Jong, in a sequence of her life in China, where the child's red clothes and trousers, hair strings, and kite stand out against the grey earth and sky, although this is not explicitly described in the novel. The difference in the choice of scenes, particularly between Suyuan Woo's escape from China and his next return to the United States, is particularly clear, with the scenes changing from more distant to more close-up. In contrast, the director emphasizes the environmental elements in the shots of the Chinese scenes, while back in the United States, the focus is on the characters. In terms of the use of light, the joss-stick candles, which appear several times in the Chinese sequences, make the house look dim compared to the bright electric lights in the United States, as does the light hitting the characters' faces, which looks numb and dull. Even where natural light is used, dark clouds or buildings mostly obscure it, and the lack of light makes the characters' inner feelings even darker.

In terms of characterization, the behavior of the Chinese characters in the clips is often rude and exaggerated, with the pace of movement changing widely and quickly. For instance, the mother uses saliva to wipe her daughter's dirty face. In addition, many Chinese people in the film speak with strange accents and appear very vulgar, whereas the characters in the novel are relatively more refined. In the film, the director's understanding of costuming also leans more toward Western-style China than the real China. In both Chinese and American settings, the clothes of the four mother-daughter pairs are mostly solid, heavy, and dark colors, and the accessories worn are bulky red coral or green jade with strong oriental overtones. The film also becomes very abrupt with regard to the make-up of the characters, as in the sequences of Lindo Jong's Chinese life, the matchmaker's face is painted with make-up that makes her look like a ghost, with fierce white cheeks and reddish blush and lips, and the same is true of the bride and bridegroom, which looks very strange.

4. Diluting Female Narrative Voices

Sisu argues that in a patriarchal culture-centered society, language is created by the patriarchal culture, and women have no voice and no information carrier to carry their own culture without their own language, which leaves them in the position of being defined, interpreted and drowned out as an object [4]. After *The Joy Luck Club* is adapted into a film, a considerable degree of individual or group female narrative voices are deliberately weakened or ignored, leading to the suspicion that "language is used to manipulate women instead of men" [5].

In fact, for Ying-Ying St. Clair, it is in the story "The Moon Lady" that takes place in her hometown Wuxi, she 'loses herself' and 'longs to be found' for the first time, and after she meets someone unsuitable, she begins to exploit the dark side in her personality. In contrast to the time when she met a man and began to exploit her black side, killing the child in her womb with her own hands and then drowning in repentance and sorrow, 'losing her soul'. It is noteworthy that in the original novel, Ying-Ying chooses to abort her unborn baby after being betrayed by her husband, whereas in the film, she drowns the baby that is already born. In light of the fact that her husband is a sexually promiscuous man, thus it is reasonable that Ying-Ying comes to awaken with a feminist consciousness. At the same time, the film omits the details about how she courageously struggles to free herself from the patriarchal patronage of her ex-husband. After leaving the family by marriage, she stays ten years in great deprivation in rural areas, moves to the urban area to make a living as a shop assistant, and comes to the United States to work with her new husband. According to the statement of her American husband, it is he who rescues Ying-Ying from a life of poverty and tragedy. By renaming her, changing her birth year, choosing her wedding cloth, and even interpreting her words by his own will, the American husband succeeds in shaping her subordinate status of being a subaltern. Lancer points out that in some novels, the marriage plot, with its predetermined ending of male triumph, limits the role of the female narrative voice, which in turn creates the illusion of openness and freedom for the plot [6]. In fact, a close reading of the novel suggests that Ying-Ying is not a fragile, impotent, and weak woman but a blood-filled and fierce tiger waiting silently in the forest, who also has to unleash her daughter's spirit of a tiger in order to awaken her daughter, who is suffering from an unequal marital relationship and does not know it.

Another mother, An-Mei Hsu, the mother of Rose, gradually loses the confidence that initially endeared her to her husband, Ted, after marrying him, who comes from a wealthy and respectable American family, and voluntarily abandons the initiative in life and livelihood. Ted's confidence is undermined after he loses the malpractice lawsuit, which is transferred to the marriage, forcing Rose to make decisions in family affairs. Unfortunately, Rose's evasive, at-will attitude finally tears the strings of the marriage apart. Facing a marriage that she regards as irredeemable; Rose feels emotionally devastated and has to rely on psychiatric help. However, the film cuts the entire section of "Half and Half" that relates to Rose and her mother, An-Mei Hsu. In it, Rose's family is on holiday at a remote beach when her little brother, Bing, gets drowned because of the family's negligence. An-Mei Hsu does everything she can to save Bing's soul: trying to draw on the power of faith, drawing energy from the Bible, praising God, and even throwing sweetened tea and her dead mother's precious ring of watery blue sapphire into the sea. In contrast to her grandmother's effort to earn her mother's well-being by committing suicide, this story is also hugely illuminating for Rose to salvage her broken marriage, a weak Chinese woman's best effort in the face of an unpredictable fate.

Moreover, the film neglects to elucidate the manner in which Ying-Ying's daughter, Lena St. Clair, as well as her husband, Harold, independently shoulder their respective financial obligations, thereby impeding the audience's ability to fully comprehend Lena's autonomy, astuteness, and prowess, in addition to the injustices she endures within the confines of her marital union. After marrying her American husband, Lena loses self-confidence, becoming so subservient and is always at her husband's mercy, which leads her to neglect the fact that it is she who encourages Harold to set up his own business, who offers effective advice on designing innovative themed restaurants, and who only to be suppressed at every turn in terms of his position and salary. During her childhood, Lena displays a deliberate act of defiance by leaving food untouched on the table to evade an undesirable

future marriage with a bothersome neighborhood boy, showcasing her proactive response to gender-based injustices. However, in her current situation, she finds herself constrained by the confines of her marriage, enduring her circumstances without putting up a fight until her mother awakens her to the profound perils inherent in a loveless union that is on the verge of collapse, ultimately leading to the erosion of her own agency.

All of the absence of feminist plots mentioned above can be explained by Spivak's theory of subaltern that Chinese women from the disadvantaged Third World are under the dual oppression of race and patriarchy and become marginal figures in the society ruled by white elite men, as well as subordinated to a passive position and deprived of their individual freedom and independence.

5. Ignoring Asian Marginalization

In the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, black women are considered "mules of the word". Because they are not only oppressed by patriarchy but also discriminated against by white racism [7]. In the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, it's obvious that Asian mothers in the United States have the same experience as black women. In the mainstream culture of white supremacy, they live a marginalized life. These poor mothers with the scars of Chinese feudalism are incompatible with American society, which seems to advocate independence and freedom. The story of one of the mothers Suyuan Woo, can illustrate the problem clearly. Suyuan owns a six-unit apartment building in California. She often complains to her daughter Jing Mei about her unfair treatment by the two white tenants on the second floor. Even after two white tenants accuse her of poisoning a cat in a fish, she calls all white people "foreigners" [8]. Apparently, the mother has placed herself in a marginalized position. Although she tries hard to integrate into American society, her identity as the yellow race will come out involuntarily when getting along with white people intensely. It seems that she wants to stand against white people and highlight her advantages, but she puts herself in a marginalized position. After all, white culture is the dominant culture in America. Even though Asians possess American property, in the eyes of white people, they are still outsiders and their identity as "the other" will never change.

The novel also depicts a big one-eared tom with gray stripes near Suyuan Woo's apartment. It often jumps on the outside sill of Suyuan Woo's kitchen window. She will stand on her tiptoes and bang the kitchen window to scare the cat away. Moreover, the cat will stand his ground, hissing back in response to her shouts [9]. The cat here refers to Western white people. The disdainful behavior of the cat toward Suyuan Woo symbolizes the racial discrimination that Asian people are subjected to in the Western world and also reflects the difficult survival of the Asian group. Even low-level animals like cats discriminate against them. On the contrary, in the film adaptation, the director completely removes the conflict plot between Suyuan Woo and her white tenants and the cat and instead shows Suyuan talking happily with her friends and family at the Joy Luck Club. "The Joy Luck Club" means a gathering full of happiness and fortune where everyone can put aside their own troubles and enjoy a happy life. There is not a single scene in the film that shows Suyuan's harsh life as an Asian minority in a society dominated by white culture, and the film weakens the identity of Asians as "the other" for Westerners.

The writer Amy Tan of the novel is a Chinese American. Most Asian literary works express the complex and contradictory "fringe culture" mentality of Asian writers, and *The Joy Luck Club* is no exception [10]. The novel reveals that, as a minority, Asians wander on the edge of American society and seek survival in the gap between Chinese and Western cultures, but these are not reflected in the film. The film adaptation weakens the novel's criticism of racism and replaces it with a more mundane story of family ethics. The marginalization of Asian women is an important theme reflected in the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, but it is a pity that it is not involved in the film adaptation [11]. The reason is that Chinese American director Wayne Wang is influenced by mainstream American ideology. It is widely known that the racial issue has a long history in the United States. The issue is extremely sensitive in American society, and the public is silent on it. Wayne Wang must give up his explanation

of racial issues and cater to the values of mainstream American culture so that his works can be recognized by the American public.

6. Conclusion

Because of the influence of imperialism and his own male identity, the director of *The Joy Luck Club* could not fully stand in the position of Chinese women in the third world. On the contrary, the film strengthens the color of Oriental prejudice, weakens the voice and strength of women, and beautifies the living environment of Chinese Americans in the United States. This is also a normal problem that may occur when male directors adapt to female work. Influenced by social environment and gender concepts, they reconstruct the expression and voice of the "subaltern" class subjectively or objectively in order to cater to the central discourse power. On the other hand, postcolonial feminist criticism opposes cultural hegemony and the behaviors of taking fixed groups as the center and silencing marginalized groups. Moreover, it tries to subvert the cultural hegemony caused by colonialism and Phallogentrism and establish the independent voice of women in the third world. This also shows that under the influence of the colonial environment and patriarchy, due to the disunity of cultural discourse power, it is easy to cause deviation and silence of expression in the film adaptation. Combining post-colonialism with feminism and applying the perspective of Spivak's postcolonial feminist "subaltern" theory, this paper analyses the difficulties of women's voice in the third world and the necessity of self-awakening of the "subaltern" class through the film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club*. Although this article may over-interpret the director's behavior from a female perspective, it must be admitted that imperialism and patriarchy have constantly restricted the independent voice of women in the third world. Women in the third world should constantly find ways to speak independently, break the restrictions of long-established concepts, and achieve a real sense of class breakthrough and equality.

7. Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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