

# Transformative Maternities: Navigating Culture, Identity, and Motherhood in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

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**Abstract**—This study investigates the transformation of motherhood constructs in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by the Chinese-American writer, Amy Tan, focusing on how racial, ethnic, and cultural exigencies influence maternal experiences. By utilizing both analytical and comparative methodologies, the study examines narrative techniques, thematic elements, and character development through transnational feminist and postmodern theoretical frameworks. The findings reveal that the novel challenges traditional views of motherhood by highlighting the impact of racial, ethnic, and socio-cultural factors and showcasing diverse maternal roles. The study shows that Amy Tan's novel redefines maternal constructions, emphasizing resilience, cultural heritage, and the negotiation of dual cultural identities. This study recommends further exploration into contemporary multi-ethnic literature to deepen the understanding of the complexities of motherhood across different cultural contexts. Additionally, it suggests incorporating more diverse voices in literary criticism and feminist discourse to enrich the perspectives on maternal experiences. The implications of this study are significant for feminist and multi-ethnic literary studies, providing a nuanced appreciation of the intersectionality of motherhood with cultural, ethnic, racial, and social issues. By emphasizing the transformative power of maternal bonds and the influence of cultural integration, this research contributes to a broader understanding of identity, resilience, and the evolving nature of motherhood in multicultural societies.

**Index Terms**—Chinese-American, feminist, motherhood, multi-ethnic, postmodern

## I. INTRODUCTION

“All human life on the planet is born of woman,” announces Rich (2021) in her seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Describing the motherhood experience, Rich continues, “the one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman's body...most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman” (p. 11). Despite its shared commonality, motherhood remains a controversial issue within different literary, cultural, social, and philosophical discourses. While motherhood has been tackled in multiple works of literature and culture, there is still much to be said and refuted about the ambivalence and doubleness of the many motherhood constructions and literary representations of the maternal experience. Much has also changed in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and a need for an on-going discussion of the maternal experience should be considered as social, cultural, economic, and political conditions change. “A time of changing demographics and family structures, as well as of mass migration and the widespread hybridization of identities” as Rye et al. (2018) affirm in their *Motherhood in Literature and Culture*.

While Rich's *Of Woman Born* reveals the most fundamental aspect in human being's life – the universal experience of being born from a woman and the first encounter with the complex abundance of emotions such as love, disappointment, power, and tenderness, the multiple-sided nature of motherhood has been studied in the different fields of literature, history, philosophy, and anthropology. Motherhood is both universal and enveloped in complexity and ambivalence, a fact which makes women different and triggers continual intellectual discussion of the interpretation of diverse maternal forms. The embedding of the dialogue on the importance of a sustained discussion as stated by Gill Rye and co-authors reveals the new dynamics and hybridization of identities due to family system alteration, mass migration and other demographic shifts. These alterations require a revision and a broader engagement in the discussion of the maternal experience, taking its role into account as a determinant of the individual and collective identities in changing social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes. Hence, such conversations about motherhood require a detailed analysis of

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their long-term foundation as well as the current transformations, which provide knowledge about the everlasting and ever-changing nature of the maternal experience in the human history.

Many literary works have depicted maternity and its myriad cultural meanings; from the canonical male representations of motherhood to recent female fictional and autobiographical writings that focus on the multi-faceted constructions of the maternal experience. According to Staub (2007) in her *The Literary Mother*, “historically, writers – both male and female – have been obsessed with motherhood, often idealizing it as a kind of holy vocation, but just as frequently demonizing it as monstrous. And archetypally, the mother figure is constructed as saint and witch, fairy godmother and wicked stepmother” (p. 1). Within these vagaries of the depictions of the motherhood experience in literature, this study discusses the transformation of motherhood constructions as impacted by racial, ethnic, cultural, and social exigencies of diverse mother subjects. I argue that the conceptualization of motherhood has changed over time depending on the mother figure’s cultural positionality and the particularities of her race, ethnicity, and social politics. This new conceptualization of the maternal experience is investigated in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) which presents a number of diverse maternal experiences though the mothers identify as Chinese or Chinese-American. The study and the selection of Amy Tan’s work does not in any way generalize about all Chinese mothers’ experiences or multi-ethnic women, but it intends to situate these women experiences within their specific positionality to uncover the multiplications of motherhood constructions as affected by the exigencies of race, ethnicity, and culture. The cultural positionality in the novel enables the researcher to explore how race and ethnicity influence mothers’ interactions with their children because experiences of motherhood are so bound up in race, and it is inevitable that the mothers transmit their cultural identity to their children.

The adoption of a transnational feminist theoretical approach facilitates this study of ethnic women’s maternal discourse. It shows how ethnic women authors such as Amy Tan reconceptualize motherhood by highlighting the transnational feminist ideas of positionality and reflexivity. To clarify, in transnational feminist theory the concept of positionality means that one’s place in the world is composed of multiple social identities which relay different sources of power, privilege, and marginalization (Enns et al., 2021, p. 14). It is a situational recognition of how one’s social identities and cultural affiliations may affect one’s understandings and biases. Similarly, reflexivity as part of transnational feminist theory implies that one should undertake a critical analysis of one’s assumptions, values, worldviews, and locations to observe whether these factors might shape one’s views of others (Enns et al., 2021, p. 13). These processes of reproduction and representation of knowledge are critical in the analysis of motherhood within the context of racial, ethnic, and gender attributes.

The research investigates how motherhood experiences have changed over time within Chinese American communities from the late 20th century. It focuses on how factors like race, ethnicity, religion, and immigration have influenced the identities of mothers within these groups. It is crucial to understand the way in which mothers construct their identity within contemporary, complex mothering roles and responsibilities. The research, therefore, intends to answer the following questions:

1. How does multi-ethnic women’s literature, represented by Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, present a transformation of already established motherhood constructions?
2. What is the impact of the racial, ethnic, and cultural exigencies of the mother subject on her maternal experience?
3. How does the positionality of the mother figure in postmodern literature present a new conceptualization of the motherhood experience?

Amy Tan’s novel intertwines the lives of four Chinese American women and their immigrant mothers, exploring their mother-daughter bonds, cultural identities, and the gaps between generations and cultures. It looks at how maternal discourse evolves in a multi-ethnic context, highlighting the contrast between the mothers, shaped by traditional Chinese values, and the daughters, influenced by American culture, leading to challenges in understanding and communication. This intersection of cultures leads to a transformation in how these women perceive motherhood, femininity, and their cultural heritage. In the novel, the maternal narrative emphasizes sacrifice, pain, hope, and resilience. The mothers’ difficult pasts in China influence their aspirations for their daughters in the U.S. Meanwhile, the daughters, facing their own struggles in America, grow to understand their mothers’ viewpoints, deepening their insight into their identities as women and members of a multi-ethnic community.

## II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of this study is centered around the evolving depiction of motherhood in multi-ethnic women's literature. Existing literature has extensively explored various facets of motherhood, but often within specific cultural or geographical contexts. For instance, Karmakar (2018) highlights the portrayal of motherhood in Indian literature, focusing on the works of authors like Ashapura Debi and Jhumpa Lahiri and emphasizing the cultural and societal norms within their narratives. This research is centered on investigating four key areas: the sense of self and autonomy in motherhood, dynamics between mothers and daughters, the experience of motherhood within diaspora communities, and aspects of non-biological mothering. The objective is to grasp the literary implications of these themes and their role in reshaping the concept of motherhood from diverse viewpoints, thereby questioning established Western feminist narratives. The study highlights a multifaceted, nuanced, and varied array of notions about motherhood, deeply rooted in specific cultural settings while engaging with broader international discourses.

Similarly, Sugiyama’s (2000) investigation into the literary representations of motherhood by ethnic minority authors

in the U.S. sheds light on the postmodern creativity within these narratives. The study aims to provide an overview of the evolution of feminist motherhood theories and the importance of maternal discourse by women of color in understanding postmodernism and its realities. It concentrates on how authors like Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston utilized themes of motherhood in their writings to mirror their own experiences and investigates how motherhood influences creativity and the dynamics of a mother's role as a writer and speaker. The study highlights the growth of feminist interest in mothers as subjects in the 1980s, exploring the representation of motherhood from a mother's perspective. Sugiyama concludes that postmodernism, as represented through maternal voices, does not necessarily become apolitical or nihilistic. Such texts, at their most insightful, may represent the world and people's subjectivity as fragmented and decentered, organizing it in a politically meaningful way (p. 71).

In the analysis of *The Joys of Motherhood* novel by Buchi Emecheta, Barfi et al. (2015) examine the manifestations of colonialism, capitalism, racism, and solidarity under the direction of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist theory. The study found that Emecheta's work intricately portrays the various dimensions of women's struggles in a postcolonial context, emphasizing the intersectionality of various forms of oppression, such as colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy and forms of motherhood, and highlighting the importance of solidarity among women in these settings (p. 26).

Brooks' (2008) research on African American and Afro-Caribbean motherhood sheds light on how motherhood can be a form of resistance against patriarchal norms, while also indicating the need for more extensive exploration in a wider multi-ethnic setting. The research focuses on how these influences affect mothers' interactions with their children and how black motherhood serves as a site of resistance against patriarchy. The study analyzes works by Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison to explore how black mothers resisted societal norms and patriarchal inheritance and to highlight the significance of maternal lineage and spiritual heritage in black communities, emphasizing how motherhood is used as a form of resistance in African American and Afro-Caribbean cultures. The research concludes that understanding the dynamics of black motherhood is crucial in appreciating the resilience and heterogeneity within these communities, especially in the face of societal and familial challenges posed by the legacy of slavery (Brooks, 2008, p. iii).

However, there is a notable gap in the comprehensive synthesis of these perspectives, particularly in the context of the transformation of motherhood constructs across different multi-ethnic narratives. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how modern multi-ethnic literature, such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* presents a transformation of traditional motherhood representations. The main focus of this study is to conduct an integrated analysis of how maternal discourse has evolved in modern multi-ethnic female literature, which offers a broader perspective on motherhood across various racial, ethnic, and cultural contexts, and enhances feminist and postmodern literary studies by providing a diverse and thorough view of the development of motherhood in literature. On the other hand, multi-ethnic literature is more concerned with the plurality of stories and identities of ethnic minorities, while they are usually represented in a wider socio-political context, like the United States, without focusing on the specificity of the ethnic discourse. Therefore, this study's theoretical value mainly stems from its contribution to the feminist and the multi-ethnic literary fields by bridging a gap between the traditional feminist narratives predominantly focused on Western perspectives and the rich, varied experiences of motherhood in a specific ethnic space as depicted in the work of Amy Tan.

### III. DISCUSSION

This study concentrates on how Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* reimagines Chinese motherhood, taking into consideration ethnicity and culture in a postmodern context, and it also investigates the challenges that immigrant mothers encounter, such as feeling disconnected from their culture, striving to maintain their ethnic identity, and redefining their role as mothers. These challenges stem from the complex process of acculturation and the emotional upheaval of migrating from one's homeland to a new country. Chinese immigrant mothers, like other voluntarily immigrants, grapple with the loss of their familiar cultural contexts, which deeply affects their sense of identity and their role within the family and the broader community (Verbruggen, 2018). The postmodern condition of the novel appears in its rejection of singular truths about motherhood and its presenting of a pastiche of maternal experiences that resist homogenization. By employing a postmodern framework, the analysis highlights how Tan's work fragments and reconstructs the narrative of motherhood by applying a paradox to challenge traditional representations and invite multiple interpretations (Hutcheon, 2002).

Sugiyama (2000) defines postmodern motherhood as a complex interplay of various themes including ethnicity, culture, history, and the representation of these in late twentieth-century American literature (p. 71). Presenting a variety of maternal realities, though "overdetermined by cultural, historical, and political specificities" empowers a portray of the "fragmentation and decenteredness of today's society" (Sugiyama, 2000, p. 76). The maternal experience in postmodern theory supports this narrative of the decentered world. It recognizes the fluidity and evolving nature of motherhood, especially in multicultural contexts. Raith's (2008) study discusses the mother in postmodern theory by highlighting the complex and fluid nature of motherhood. It shows that motherhood involves navigating multiple, often contradictory identities, emphasizing the transition's individuality and diversity, which aligns with the postmodern view of motherhood as an evolving and multifaceted experience (p. ii). Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* navigates through this multifaceted identity theme early in the novel when Suyuan Woo, one of the mother figures in the novel, plans to give her daughter, Jing-Mei (June) Woo, a swan's feather which stands as a symbol of transformation, fluidity, evolvment, and hope. It is

a metaphor for the mother's wish for her daughter to transcend cultural limitations and forge a new identity, one that blends her heritage as Asian with the opportunities of her new homeland as American. Sugiyama indicates that by employing maternal discourse, one may explore a variety of maternal experiences and subjectivities which are typical of mothers of racial minorities; by doing this, one may also represent a reality that is shared by the majority and may be conceived as "postmodern" (2000, p. 76).

It is, nevertheless, crucial to examine postmodern, Asian American, motherhood through the ethnically and culturally complicated and shifting parenting concept in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. Amy Tan's narrative intricately weaves the personal histories and cultural backgrounds of its characters into the broader tapestry of their experiences as immigrants and as members of the diaspora. The ethnic and cultural identities of the characters are not merely backdrops but are pivotal to their life stories and the mother-daughter dynamics that shape the narrative. Furthermore, *The Joy Luck Club* portrays the complex interactions between the traditional values that the mothers bring from China and the new values their American-born daughters must navigate. These interactions often result in conflicts and reconciliations that are deeply influenced by the mothers' experiences of migration, racialization, and cultural assimilation. As Bhabha (1994) suggests in his discussion of cultural hybridity, the novel presents characters who live on the borders of two cultures, struggling to form identities that reconcile their heritage with their present realities.

On the other hand, the novel addresses the specific pressures and challenges faced by Asian American women which are not just personal or familial but are also shaped by broader social perceptions and stereotypes about race and ethnicity in America. Tan's detailed portrayal of these characters' lives offers insights into the nuanced ways in which race and culture intersect with gender and identity, influencing how these women perceive themselves and are perceived by others. The two conceptions of positionality and reflexivity that are adopted in transnational feminist theory can be utilized here to reflect on how these multi-ethnic mothers are in constant questioning of their cultural positions as formed by different forces of power and marginalization which renders them as carrying multiple social identities. Similarly, these women realized the limitations of their native ethnic identity as Chinese and started a negotiation and critical analysis of their traditions, values, and worldviews to reconstruct their relationships with their daughters.

With a focus on the evolution of motherhood in a multicultural American context, the story challenges traditional views of Chinese motherhood by deconstructing complex mother-daughter relationships and integrating postmodern frameworks. It redefines the mainstream views, whether Chinese or American, about motherhood and incorporates postmodernity to reveal the multiple layers of the parenting experience.

The novel includes sixteen interwoven stories in four sections with each section tells four separate narratives of four Chinese mothers; Suyuan Woo, An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-Ying St. Clair—and their daughters—Jing-Mei (June) Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, and Lena St. Clair. These characters are central to understanding the transformation of motherhood constructs within the novel, as their stories bridge generations and cultures, revealing the mothers' pasts in China, their immigration to America, and the daughters' struggles with cultural identity and personal aspirations. While this study examines these women's maternal experiences, it focuses on the character of Suyuan Woo, June's mother, whose story permeates the narrative through her daughter's voice. Through her shared evocative dream as a Chinese immigrant mother to go back to China to find her daughters, whom she was forced to leave on the roadside during Japan's invasion of Kweilin during the second world war, Suyuan's story serves as a bridge between cultures and generations.

This detailed examination sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of the complex mother-daughter relationships and the broader implications of the immigrant experience and motherhood within multi-ethnic literature. The story of Suyuan Woo embodies the intersection of loss, memory, and cultural preservation within the narrative. As the founder of the titular Joy Luck Club in China and San Francisco, Suyuan serves as a critical bridge between past and present, illustrating the profound challenges of immigration and the struggle to maintain cultural identity in a foreign land. Her complex relationship with her daughter Jing-mei (June) Woo underscores the generational and cultural gaps that define and challenge mother-daughter dynamics in immigrant families, making her story a pivotal element for understanding the broader themes of cultural identity, belonging, and maternal legacy in the novel. Jing-mei's trip to China after her mother's death to meet her half-sisters, twins Chwun Yu and Chwun Hwa, starts a journey of discovery of oneself and one's culture. By delving into themes of identity, loss, and the enduring bond between mothers and daughters, Tan also highlights the power of storytelling as a means of understanding oneself and one's heritage.

#### *A. Transformation of Established Motherhood Constructions*

In Amy Tan's novel, the first four stories recall the mothers' relationships with their own mothers, while the second and the third parts of the novel present the daughters', Waverly, Jing-mei, Lena, and Rose, recollections of their childhood relationships with their mothers and their adulthood struggles. However, the last part of the stories recounts the mothers' struggle to provide their daughters with solutions and support in their lives while realizing the transformation in their motherhood priorities and their maternal identities. The traditional role of motherhood within Chinese culture is masterfully depicted through the character of An-mei Hsu, who reflects on her mother's life to illuminate the values of filial piety, family honor, and the transmission of cultural heritage. Through An-mei's narrative, Tan underscores the expectations placed on mothers to serve as moral and cultural custodians. These mothers are portrayed as pivotal in imparting lessons of strength, resilience, and the importance of heritage, ensuring the continuity of cultural identity and family legacy.

The profound bond between generations of women in the story is explored through crucial dialogue, such as when Auntie An-mei tells Jing-mei, “You must see your sisters and tell them about your mother’s death,” emphasizing the importance of conveying the stories of the past (Tan, 1989, p. 35). Auntie An-mei’s exclamation, “How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!” highlights the intrinsic connection between mothers and daughters, suggesting that understanding a mother’s life is essential to understanding one’s own identity. This dialogue underscores the role of storytelling and memory in preserving familial bonds and cultural heritage as constructed in traditional Chinese motherhood.

Furthermore, Tan delves into the nuances of maternal guidance and the transmission of cultural values amidst the challenges of assimilation. For example, Lindo’s reflection that her daughter “wanted to go to China for her second honeymoon but now she is afraid... Only her skin and her hair are Chinese. Inside—she is all American-made” captures the complex roles of mothers as cultural bearers and educators (Tan, 1989, p. 219). This internal conflict between nurturing a daughter’s Chinese heritage and accepting the realities of identity transformation in a new country illustrates the generational and cultural gaps that challenge mother-daughter relationships throughout the novel, emphasizing the delicate balance between preserving cultural values and adapting to new environments.

An-mei’s journey, however, and the stories she shares serve as a testament to the sacrificial nature of motherhood as traditionally established, showcasing the depth of love, duty, and sacrifice that mothers endure to uphold these values. One poignant instance is when An-mei discusses the importance of listening to one’s mother to understand deeper truths about life and heritage, “In truth this was a bad thing that Yan Chang had done telling me my mother’s story. Secrets are kept from children a lid on top of the soup kettle so they do not boil over with too much truth. After Yan Chang told me this story, I saw everything. I heard things I had” (Tan, 1989, p. 204). An-mei Hsu’s story exemplifies the profound impact of maternal legacies on identity formation. As a member of the Joy Luck Club, a gathering of Chinese immigrant women, An-mei learns about her mother through Yan Chang, her mother’s devoted servant. This revelation acts as both an enlightenment and a burden, shedding light on the secretive and protective nature of motherhood. An-mei describes this secrecy as a “lid on top of the soup kettle” (Tan, 1989, p. 204) a metaphor for the way mothers shield their children from harsh truths to protect them. However, once An-mei uncovers these hidden truths about her mother’s challenges and sacrifices, she experiences a significant shift in perception, leading to a deeper understanding of her own heritage. This narrative moment underscores the role of mothers as bearers of wisdom and resilience, emphasizing how the experiences and stories passed from mothers to daughters are vital in shaping their identities and understanding of their cultural and familial backgrounds.

On the other hand, An-mei’s relationship with her daughter, Rose, vividly encapsulates the generational and cultural conflicts typical in immigrant families, highlighting the tension between traditional Chinese maternal roles and the values embraced by American-raised daughters. These daughters, influenced by a culture that champions freedom and individualism, frequently clash with their mothers’ expectations and teachings, which emphasize the importance of listening and understanding deeper truths about life and heritage. An-mei’s narrative stresses the importance of preserving cultural identity while navigating new societal norms. Through her actions and wisdom, An-mei teaches resilience and the importance of learning from hardships. This is highlighted in a poignant moment when she recounted how her mother taught her a lesson about truth using the necklace of fake pearls that An-mei received as a present from the second wife of her mother’s husband. After revealing the fakeness of the pearls by crushing one under her foot, her mother let her wear them for a week to understand the ease of succumbing to falsehoods, after which An-mei’s mother presents her with a real heavy ring of watery blue sapphire asking, “Now can you recognize what is true?” to which her daughter nods affirmatively (Tan, 1989, p. 199). This interaction underscores the complex interplay of maintaining one’s cultural roots while adapting to and integrating new cultural realities.

The story of the artificial pearls is imbued with life lessons of skepticism and critical thinking that are essential for An-mei, and her daughter afterwards, as they grow within the dual contexts of their Chinese heritage and American environment. This metaphor beautifully encloses the novel’s broader themes of identity, heritage, and the maternal transmission of wisdom across generations, highlighting Amy Tan’s exploration of the intricate dynamics of mother-daughter relationships within the Chinese American cultural framework. Acts of maternal guidance throughout the novel are emblematic of the complexities of mother-daughter relationships as explored through layers of cultural and personal history. An-mei’s lessons transcend the immediate context, delving into the essential process of discerning truth in a world filled with illusions. Her method of imparting wisdom reflects a fundamental aspect of the mother figure in the novel; the role of mothers in guiding their daughters through the intricacies of life, armed with the resilience borne of their own experiences.

In addition to the maternal guidance and transmission of wisdom, An-mei Hsu’s story poignantly illustrates the profound impact of maternal sacrifice on daughters’ lives. Her mother’s decision to leave her so she could have a better future encapsulates the deep expressions of love and sacrifice that permeate the novel. This event not only underscores the complexities of mother-daughter relationships but also highlights the importance of holding onto one’s roots and the resilience needed to navigate life’s challenges. Through these teachings, An-mei learns to value her heritage and identity, which are critical in her quest for authenticity in a multifaceted world. The mother-daughter bond in her story reveals that understanding one’s maternal lineage is key to discovering one’s true nature as narrated by An-mei herself:

Here is how I came to love my mother. How I saw in her my own true nature. What was beneath my skin. Inside

my bones... Even though I was young, I could see the pain of the flesh and the worth of the pain. This is how a daughter honors her mother. It is so deep it is in your bones. The pain of the flesh is nothing. The pain you must forget. Because sometimes that is the only way to remember what is in your bones. You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her. Until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh. (Tan, 1989, p. 42)

This quote illustrates the deep, emotional layers of the mother-daughter relationship, showing how a mother's sacrifices become a part of her daughter's identity. An-mei's reflection on her mother's pain and sacrifice not only fosters a deeper love and understanding for her mother but also aids in her self-discovery and self-acceptance, illustrating the complex interplay between individual identity and familial legacy; a process of reflexivity as discussed in transnational feminist theory. She emphasizes the importance of embracing one's heritage and identity to foster personal growth and resilience. Through her mother's stories, An-mei learns the significance of maintaining a connection to one's roots and the potential it holds for guiding future generations. This reflexivity anticipates the mother-daughter reconciliation later in the novel.

It is clear, thus, how Amy Tan challenges the conventional view of motherhood through the diverse experiences of the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, showing them as multifaceted individuals who navigate the dual responsibilities of cultural preservation and personal fulfillment. The narratives of Lindo Jong, Suyuan Woo, and An-mei Hsu reveal mothers who are caretakers, educators, and resilient survivors, embodying the complexities of identity formation in the context of immigration. The traditional role of motherhood in the Chinese culture is challenged by these women's diverse life experiences and by their American daughters, which negate any homogeneity of maternal discourse in the multi-ethnic context. The transformation of motherhood is a central theme in the novel, reflecting changes not only from one generation to the next but also within the lives of the mothers themselves. This transformation can be seen in how the mothers' identities and priorities shift in response to their immigration to America, their encounters with American culture, and their relationships with their daughters. The mothers change as they navigate the challenges of raising children in a culture different from their own, learning to bridge the gap between their heritage and the new world in which they find themselves. As the mothers adapt, they also confront and often revise their own positionality and assumptions about what it means to be a mother and how to balance the demands of work, family, and self.

This evolution is mirrored in their daughters, who, through understanding their mothers' stories, begin to see them in a new light—not just as parents but as individuals with their own dreams, fears, mistakes, and histories. A reflexive critical analysis of one's locations to observe whether they might shape one's views of others (Enns et al., 2021). It is depicted in Jing-mei's reflection on her troubled relationship with her mother which not only showcases the tension between cultural expectations and individual identity but also the struggle for autonomy within the mother-daughter relationship. This is exemplified in a moment of defiance where the narrator rejects her mother's traditional expectations, stating, "I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before and look what happened. She was the stupid one" (Tan, 1989, p. 122). This pivotal moment signifies the daughter's attempt to assert her independence, highlighting the generational and cultural clash often experienced by children of immigrants as they navigate their dual identities, striving to honor their heritage while seeking their own path. However, Jing-mei (June) later narrates how she reached an understanding of her mother's thoughts as she is turning thirty-six, only after the mother's death:

Five months ago, after a crab dinner celebrating Chinese New Year, my mother gave me my "life's importance," a jade pendant on a gold chain. The pendant was not a piece of jewelry I would have chosen for myself... I stuffed the necklace in my lacquer box and forgot about it. But these days, I think about my life's importance. I wonder what it means, because my mother died three months ago, six days before my thirty-sixth birthday. And she's the only person I could have asked, to tell me about life's importance, to help me understand my grief. (Tan, 1989, p. 171)

This quote touches upon the transformative journey of motherhood, reflecting on the gifts and lessons passed from mother to daughter. It suggests the enduring influence of maternal wisdom even after a mother's death, and the daughter's evolving understanding and appreciation of her mother's teachings and values as she navigates her own grief and questions of identity. Such reflections encapsulate the rich, complex portrayal of motherhood in the novel exploring the themes of cultural identity, the multifaceted roles of mothers, and the transformative impact of maternal relationships across generations.

The novel frames mothers in a way that highlights the complexity of their roles, challenging stereotypes about motherhood and ethnicity. It shows that motherhood is not a static identity but one that evolves over time and through the interplay of cultural, personal, and generational forces. While it remains consistent yet it changes across different generations and cultures. The complex relationship between the mothers and their identities evolves as they face new challenges and environments. This theme reflects the deep connection and varying experiences between mothers and their children, weaving through past and present, and blending traditional values with new perspectives. The novel intricately delineates motherhood as an entity deeply anchored in cultural expectations and personal sacrifices, yet remarkably fluid, adapting as mothers and daughters chart their paths through the dual challenges of immigration and cultural assimilation.

The focus on mother-daughter relationships in *The Joy Luck Club*, rather than mother-son dynamics, is a deliberate choice by Amy Tan to explore the subtle differences of female identity, intergenerational cultural transmission, and the complexities of navigating dual cultures for women. This thematic emphasis allows for an in-depth examination of the unique pressures, expectations, and roles that women face within both their families and societies. By centering on the

experiences of mothers and daughters, Tan highlights how these relationships serve as pivotal sites for the negotiation of identity, tradition, and change across generations, particularly in the context of immigration and cultural assimilation. The novel challenges traditional, idealized images of motherhood by exploring its emotional and psychological complexities, focusing on the sacrifices, resilience, and strength required from mothers. This portrayal goes beyond the archetype of maternal idealism to showcase a multifaceted view of motherhood, acknowledging the depth of maternal challenges to balance personal and cultural identities. Through this nuanced exploration, the narrative redefines the essence of motherhood, highlighting the adaptability and profound influence of mothers within the complexities of cultural expectations. Williams (1999) highlights how An-mei's mother embodies both sacrifice and the complex legacy of maternal expectations, suggesting that these idealized attributes often lead to personal sacrifice and emotional complexity in the lives of mothers (p. 78). The novel shows mothers' sorrow and self-reproach when they fall short of this lofty ideal motherhood that is constructed by their culture. Society's valuing of motherhood, which frequently only considers spiritual and moral values, ignores the tremendous range and complexity of maternal experiences.

Simultaneously, Amy Tan's novel presents a questioning of a fixed image of motherhood deeply entrenched in traditional Chinese culture, which lauds self-sacrifice, resilience, and the stoic endurance of adversity for the family's sake, particularly the children. This examination is vividly portrayed in the narratives of the mothers of the novel who have weathered profound losses and sacrifices, both in China and as immigrants in America. Their stories, steeped in resilience against hardship, echo the traditional values that control the maternal role and emphasize the welfare of children over mothers' needs. However, as the novel unfolds, it also charts the evolving nature of maternal identity, as these women adapt to new cultural environments and engage with their American-born daughters' shifting ambitions. This evolving portrayal is illuminated in the mothers' endeavors to bridge the cultural chasm with their daughters, often misunderstood due to generational and cultural divides, and in the gradual reconciliation of mothers to their daughters' American values and identities. For example, Jing-mei (June) Woo's assumption of her late mother Suyuan Woo's role within the titular group deepens the exploration of their complex relationship, particularly highlighting Suyuan's influence as a mother. Suyuan's resilience and her decision to start the Joy Luck Club in San Francisco were driven by a desire to preserve her Chinese heritage while adapting to her new American life. This decision, coupled with her painful history of having to leave her twin daughters behind in China, shapes June's perception of motherhood and her understanding of her own mother's sacrifices. These experiences reveal the deep emotional and cultural conflicts that immigrant mothers face, balancing the preservation of their original culture with the need to adapt to a new one.

This narrative shift not only underscores the transformation in June's perception of her mother but also prompts her to reflect on her own potential maternal role. The relationship between Suyuan and her daughters, and the legacy of her choices, offer a poignant commentary on how the maternal experience is influenced by historical and cultural pressures. Tan is far away from presenting an ideal mother figure as constituted in the Chinese cultural doctrines. Instead, her mother figures are burdened with past mistakes and life lessons that shape their maternal relationships with their daughters and their eventual self-acceptance. The reconciliation between June and her mother symbolizes a healing of generational and cultural divides, illustrating a merger of tradition and modernity. June's deeper understanding of Suyuan's choices provides insights into how these maternal legacies impact daughter's perceptions of motherhood, potentially shaping how she might approach her relationship with her own children in the future. This evolution of maternal perception is crucial as it highlights how mothers and daughters navigate their identities through a blend of cultural values, mutual respect, and open dialogue.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the transformation of the characters' maternal identities is explored through their re-examination of their inherited Chinese cultural identity and past experiences in China, and their reconceptualization of their motherhood as they reconcile with their Americanized daughters. This is particularly evident in the segments titled "Double Face" and "A Pair of Tickets" in the novel. In "Double Face," Lindo Jong reflects on the challenges of retaining her Chinese identity while adapting to American life. She describes the difficulty of keeping her "Chinese face" in America, noting that even before arriving, she had to conceal her true self and adopt American ways to fit in. Lindo's story captures the tension between maintaining one's heritage and assimilating into a new culture. She recounts how, despite her efforts to appear more American, she was still recognized as an outsider. Lindo's internal struggle with her dual identity emphasizes the complexities of navigating between two cultures and the fear of losing one's roots in the process.

In "A Pair of Tickets," Jing-mei Woo experiences a profound shift in her perception of her Chinese heritage during a trip to China. Initially, she believes she has little connection to her Chinese roots, influenced by her upbringing in America. However, as she crosses the border into China, Jing-mei feels a visceral change and begins to recognize the Chinese part of herself awakening. This story segment highlights the theme of ethnic and cultural identity being more than just external appearances or behaviors; it is deeply ingrained and can emerge in significant moments. Jing-mei's journey to China serves as a catalyst for her to embrace her Chinese heritage, illustrating the idea that one's racial identity can evolve and become more meaningful through personal experiences and connections. Both stories illustrate how the American experience impacts the characters' Chinese ethnic identity. Through Lindo Jong and Jing-mei Woo, Amy Tan explores the nuances of identity formation in the context of immigration, cultural assimilation, and the search for self-understanding within the tapestry of one's heritage.

#### *B. A Postmodernist Perspective on Motherhood*

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* presents a nuanced exploration of motherhood, underscored by the complexities of cultural transition. It delves into the intertwining lives of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters, highlighting their aspirations, adversities, and transformative journeys. Through a short anecdote at the beginning of the novel of a Chinese woman traveling to America, titled "Feathers From a Thousand LI Away," Tan delves into the specific aspirations that this woman harbors for her future daughter—a life unfettered by the traditional Chinese standards that once constrained her own existence:

In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's 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! She will know my meaning because I will give her this swan—a creature that became more than what was hoped for. (Tan, 1989, p. 15)

This woman comes to represent the mothers in the novel itself as they aspire to a different life for their daughters in America. As shown in the above quote, the metaphor of the loudness of her husband's belch serves as a poignant critique of the subordinate role of women in her native culture, encapsulating the oppressive societal norms she wishes her daughter to transcend in the United States. As the woman dreams of her daughter's life in America, she imagines a realm of possibilities where her child is judged not by antiquated conventions but by her own merits, including the mastery of perfect American English; a symbol of assimilation and individual success. This ambition reflects the mother's broader hope for her daughter to avoid the sorrows and hardships of her own life, aiming instead for a new space filled with freedom and self-determination. The narrative further enriches this theme through the symbol of the swan, emblematic of transformation and hope, which the mother plans to give her daughter. Yet, upon their arrival in America, the swan is confiscated by immigration officials, leaving her with only a feather and a diminished memory of her original dreams and intentions. This poignant moment underscores the fragile nature of aspirations in the face of harsh realities, yet the feather remains a token of enduring hope and the complex, often painful process of cultural preservation and identity formation in a new land.

Through the evolving mother-daughter dynamics, Tan captures the nuanced ways in which generational and cultural gaps manifest, challenging the simplistic notion of cultural assimilation and traditional motherhood. In essence, *The Joy Luck Club* serves as a poignant illustration of the transformation of traditional motherhood constructions within multi-ethnic women's literature, particularly when viewed through the prism of the mother in postmodern theory. This transformation is evident in the narrative's departure from conventional portrayals of motherhood that often confine women to subordinate roles within their cultural and familial hierarchies. In contrast, as in the introductory anecdote, Tan's narrative foregrounds the mother's aspirations for her daughter's autonomy and success in the United States, free from the restrictive societal norms of her native culture. This desire for her daughter to speak "only perfect American English" and to be "too full to swallow any sorrow" symbolizes a break from the past and a reimagining of motherhood that values individuality, self-expression, and resilience against cultural and linguistic assimilation pressures. The mother in postmodern theory challenges the homogeneity of traditional motherhood narratives by highlighting the diverse, complex, and often contradictory experiences of mothers, particularly those from multi-ethnic backgrounds. It argues that motherhood cannot be understood through a single lens but rather requires consideration of the varied contexts, identities, and discourses that shape it. In this light, the narrative reflects postmodernism's emphasis on heterogeneity and the rejection of universal truths, showcasing how immigrant mothers navigate the dual challenges of preserving their cultural heritage while adapting to new societal expectations in America.

The symbol of the swan, which the mother intends to give to her daughter as a representation of hope and transformation, further underscores the novel's alignment with postmodern themes. The swan's journey from being more than what was hoped for to being reduced to a mere feather by immigration authorities reflects the complex realities of immigration, identity, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. This metaphorical representation of the swan captures the essence of postmodern motherhood which involves the acknowledgment of loss, change, and the ongoing negotiation of maternal identity in a multicultural context. In his analysis of motherhood in multi-ethnic women's literature, Graves (2017) highlights the nuanced and evolving representations of motherhood and offers a rich understanding of the transformations and challenges experienced by women navigating issues of citizenship, affective bonds, and societal expectations (p. 16). Postmodern theory challenges traditional narratives and societal expectations of motherhood, emphasizing diverse experiences and subjective interpretations rather than a monolithic view.

However, the loss of the swan upon arrival in America, leaving the mother with just a feather, introduces a poignant twist. It reflects the harsh reality of immigrant experiences where dreams and expectations confront the complexities of assimilation and cultural dislocation. This aspect of the narrative aligns with the mother in postmodern theory by illustrating the unpredictable and multifaceted nature of motherhood in a transnational context. The mother's journey and aspirations for her daughter thus become a microcosm of the broader experiences of many immigrant mothers, highlighting the evolving and transformative nature of motherhood across different cultural landscapes. This critical examination demonstrates a deep understanding of how traditional motherhood roles are challenged and redefined in the context of multicultural and immigrant experiences. Tummala-Narra (2004) discusses the struggle immigrant women confront in maintaining their cultural heritage while adjusting to new society standards, notably with their children's choices and independence. She argues, "In grappling with these contradictions, immigrant mothers are in a position of

both reproducing their connection to their cultures of origin and redefining their roles in the family system and their formulations of their social contexts, all of which have significant influence in the lives of their children” (p. 175).

In Tan’s novel, Jing-mei’s recollection of her mother initiating the San Francisco version of the Joy Luck Club in 1949 captures the abrupt and challenging transition Woo’s parents faced when they emigrated from China to the United States, carrying with them only the most essential of belongings. The family’s migration, marked by the mother’s decision to bring solely silk dresses, illustrates a profound transformation in the narrative of motherhood. Here, traditional roles and cultural identities are redefined within a new environment. Jing-mei’s reminiscence emphasizes not just the physical journey of immigration but also the metaphorical journey of maternal figures in multi-ethnic contexts. These mothers adapt to new cultural landscapes while preserving elements of their heritage, thereby reshaping the concept of motherhood across cultural divides.

In another vein, the novel highlights the theme of sacrifice in the immigrant experience, particularly from a postmodern perspective on motherhood. The maternal figure’s sacrifice extends beyond the physical loss of home and belongings, delving into emotional and psychological dimensions. The choice to bring only silk dresses, rather than more practical items, underscores a strong emotional connection to cultural identity, which immigrant mothers strive to preserve and transmit to their offspring. This aspect illustrates the evolution of motherhood in multi-ethnic literature. The narrative provides a nuanced understanding of how sacrificial the maternal journey is, especially within the context of immigration and cultural integration. This observation is consistent with Tyldum’s (2015) research, which often depicts female migrants primarily as mothers, emphasizing narratives of sacrifice and somewhat diminishing the perspective of female migration as a pursuit for personal betterment (p. 51). The balance between cultural preservation and assimilation is a central theme in postmodern discourse on identity, and the choice to bring only silk garments from China is a potent metaphor of the emotional and cultural burdens that immigrant mothers carry. This imagery illustrates the postmodern concept of identity as constructed and fluid, shaped by both past influences and present realities.

Postmodern motherhood theory, as outlined by Taylor (2017), offers a framework for understanding this complex interplay of identity, culture, and motherhood. It emphasizes the dynamic process of negotiation that immigrant mothers undergo as they reconcile their cultural heritage with their new lives in America (Taylor, 2017, p. 110). This theory suggests that motherhood can be seen as a site of cultural conflict and negotiation, where traditional roles and expectations are continuously redefined in response to changing socio-cultural landscapes. Thus, the experiences of Suyuan and other mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* reflect postmodern themes of fragmentation and hybridity, highlighting their capacity to adapt and transform in response to their transnational experiences. Belford and Lahiri-Roy (2018) underscore the intricate process of redefining identity and managing emotional challenges that immigrant mothers often face, marked by a blend of privilege and disempowerment, as they navigate their roles within new cultural contexts (p. 25). Tan’s work provides a profound exploration of the transformation of traditional motherhood roles, resonating deeply with the themes of cultural dislocation and identity redefinition in a new, often challenging, environment.

On another vein, the narrative insightfully reveals that Suyuan Woo, the mother of Jing-mei (June) Woo, shares a deeply evocative and symbolic dream about her homeland, Kweilin. This dream transcends mere personal longing and memory, capturing broader themes of hope, disillusionment, and the dislocated immigrant experience. It symbolizes postmodern parenting theory with its contradictions, combining elements of power, tenacity, and flexibility. This idea highlights motherhood’s diversity and evolution, especially in shifting cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Suyuan’s narrative, and her dream of Kweilin, exemplify the redefined contradictory roles and shifting identities of mothers in multi-ethnic narratives. The dream’s portrayal as both nostalgic and traumatizing aligns with postmodern motherhood theory highlighted by Bueskens (2018) that acknowledges the complexities and challenges of motherhood in contemporary western societies (p. 16). Bueskens’ study discusses modern mothers’ duality and contradiction that resist any classification of the maternal experience within universalized conceptions of motherhood. Within this context, Veazey (2019) also states that immigrant mothers navigate liminal spaces, where their identities and roles are in flux amidst sociocultural and historical contexts of migration and adaptation. “Both migration and motherhood rupture women’s established social networks at the precise time their need for support, advice, information, empathy, and companionship increases” (p. 153). This dual rupture is symbolized in Suyuan’s dream of Kweilin as both sentimental and traumatizing, reflecting on a sweet homeland and warning of a difficult immigrant experience. Veazey’s insight connects the personal and collective experiences of immigrant mothers to the challenges they face in multicultural environments, emphasizing the importance of social connectedness for their experiences of motherhood. The trauma, thus, as reflected in Suyuan’s dream, is not just personal but is embedded within the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of immigration and dislocation.

Motherhood in multi-ethnic women’s literature is portrayed as a transformative force that extends beyond traditional roles, embodying resilience, creativity, and communal empowerment. Through the lens of characters like Suyuan Woo in *The Joy Luck Club*, motherhood evolves from a personal experience into a collective identity that enables women to navigate and transcend oppressive conditions. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the collective strength of motherhood is emblematically represented through the communal gatherings of the women in the club. These meetings are not only a space for sharing personal narratives but also a platform for mutual support and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and experience. The club acts as a microcosm of a broader societal framework, where the personal tribulations and triumphs of motherhood transcend individual experiences to reflect universal themes of hope, survival, and

empowerment amidst adversity. This transformation is depicted as a shift from the “old” view of motherhood as a limiting, individual role to a “new” perspective that highlights its potential for fostering endurance and empowerment in adverse situations. In his analysis of the mother in postmodern theory, Majdi (2023) outlines the evolution of feminist theories of motherhood, showing how the maternal discourse of the women of color can be pivotal in examining both postmodern realities and theories of postmodernism. In this study, the postmodern realities of motherhood acknowledge the complexities and challenges of the maternal experience in multicultural contexts by recognizing its fluidity and evolving nature.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

*The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan presents motherhood as transformative in both personal and societal dimensions, challenging women to navigate the tension between societal myths of the self-sacrificing, ever-giving mother and their own diverse experiences. The transformation involves a shift from the “old” idealized views that restrict women’s identities within narrow confines of selflessness, to a “new” understanding that embraces the complexity, ambivalence, and richness of motherhood as lived experience. This process is not merely about adopting a new role but entails a profound reconfiguration of identity, culture, and ethnic perspectives. Despite societal pressures to conform to dominant ideologies, the journey of motherhood has the potential to subvert traditional narratives, advocating for a broader recognition of motherhood’s multifaceted nature. It underscores the need for societal acceptance of the diverse realities of motherhood, allowing women’s personal stories to challenge and transform entrenched views, and fostering a more inclusive and realistic appreciation of what it means to be a mother.

This study adopts the postmodernist lens to examine the Chinese-American maternal experience in Amy Tan’s work, and it is clear that multi-ethnic women writers add transformative narratives that would fit into postmodern literature. Sugiyama (2000) indicates that “fictional works by women of color and especially their fictional representation of motherhood can even be viewed as the most ambitious and representative examples of postmodern American literature in the last two decades” (p. 71). This quote suggests that multi-ethnic women’s literature, especially its portrayal of motherhood, is a significant and ambitious representation of postmodern American literature. It emphasizes the importance of including the perspectives of women of color in the literary canon, highlighting their unique contribution to the broader understanding of postmodern themes.

Through the postmodern theory of motherhood, this study argues that Tan’s work presents a postmodernist condition in the complex maternal identities and experiences of the Chinese-American mothers that are impacted by cultural, historical, and personal variables. The novel illustrates that parenthood is dynamic and evolving from Chinese-American viewpoints. It depicts postmodern parenting as diverse and contextual, shaped by society, history, and personal experience. The transformation of established motherhood constructions within multi-ethnic women’s literature is depicted through the shifting narratives that explore the depths of maternal diversity and its impact on the mother-daughter relationship within Chinese-American contexts.

One major aspect of motherhood’s complexity that this current study explores is the rejection of idealistic clichés about motherhood through the mothers’ introspective self-examination and confession of their terrible backgrounds which highlight generational and societal differences between them and their daughters. This juxtaposition highlights the transnational feminist dichotomy of positionality and reflexivity in which women whether mothers or daughters undergo a process of examining one’s position amidst multiple forces to be able to understand one’s self and reflect on the worldviews of others. The Chinese-American mothers and daughters in Tan’s novel are heterogeneous through their intercultural differences, and Amy Tan skillfully unveils the complex dynamics of intercultural motherhood practices within the Chinese-American community, particularly focusing on the nuanced subjective experiences of the narrating women. In postmodern literature, the positionality of the mother figure is fluid and multidimensional, formed by memory, loss, and reconciliation and this approach humanizes the mother figure as a multifaceted character with diverse emotions. Hence, the themes of motherhood, identity, and cultural transition in *The Joy Luck Club* offer a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted experiences of Chinese-American mothers. By examining motherhood through the lenses of postmodern literature, transnational feminism, and multi-ethnic dynamics, the novel highlights the intricate interplay between personal, familial, and cultural narratives.

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