

# Narrating Motherhood as Psychic Architecture: Maternal Narrative Space in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* and Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*

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**Abstract**—Situated in the intimate worlds of private recollections, matrilineal scars and the soft negotiations between memory and migration, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* and Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* create a maternal narrative space in which diasporic mothers and daughters confront silence, trauma, and fractured belonging. It argues that this space is constructed not only by plot but by narrative form itself, through letters, manuscripts, embedded family stories, multilingual exchanges, and shifts in focalisation that reveal the emotional labor women perform across generations. Drawing on Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory of the reproduction of mothering and Nira Yuval-Davis's intersectional framework of belonging, the study shows how domestic acts and everyday storytelling become a psychological arena where women work through loss, displacement, and intergenerational conflict. As daughters translate, reinterpret, and rewrite inherited narratives, maternal relationships emerge as dynamic negotiations shaped by memory, migration, and evolving identity rather than as fixed cultural expectations. Positioned at the intersection of feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and migration studies, this paper proposes the contours of a feminist psychoanalytic genre of diasporic maternal storytelling, one that foregrounds interiority, multilingual voice, and intergenerational emotional labor as central narrative principles. Together, these works articulate a distinct model of diasporic maternal storytelling that challenges gender inequalities, validates marginalised linguistic identities, and positions the study within the ongoing dialogue on how narratives can advance gender justice, cultural sustainability, and the visibility of vulnerable women in global literary discourse.

**Index Terms**—maternal narrative space, feminist psychoanalytic genre, diasporic motherhood, multilingual storytelling, Sustainable Development Goals (gender equality)

## I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary diasporic fiction in English often revisits the tense, intimate bond between mothers and daughters as a means of exploring displacement, belonging, and the consequences of silence (Kačkutė & Heffernan, 2024). Beyond the discussions of identity and migration, these narratives reveal how diasporic subjectivity is shaped through quiet negotiations of memory, loss, and generational expectation (Singh, 2024). Yet within these familiar frameworks, the specific experiences of mothers often remain insufficiently theorised. Maternal voices carry tradition, memory, and sacrifice, yet their inner lives are often misunderstood or marginalised by children shaped by different languages and cultures, a tension that migration and multilingualism only intensify.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) and Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) are both structured around multi-generational mother–daughter relationships that unfold across borders of nation, class, language, and history (Anuar & Asl, 2022; Putri & McDermott, 2023). While existing scholarship on Divakaruni and Tan has illuminated questions of diasporic identity, cultural translation, and intergenerational conflict, it has paid comparatively less attention to how narrative form and language themselves become the primary means through which maternal marginality is articulated, negotiated, and, at times, reconfigured. What remains underexplored is the way these texts construct a distinctive narrative-linguistic space that functions like a psychoanalytic arena, where ordinary domestic scenes, remembered stories, and written testimonies together enable a slow working-through of trauma and misunderstanding.

By “maternal narrative space,” this study refers to a specific kind of narrative configuration in which the experiences of mothers and daughters are not merely thematic concerns but the principal organising force of form, language, and

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structure. In this space, the narrative is shaped by techniques that echo key aspects of psychoanalytic work, by staging repeated returns to the past, revisitations of memory, and the gradual surfacing and re-signification of previously unarticulated experience.

Layered storytelling, retrospective confession, fragmented timelines, shifting focalisation, and the re-reading and re-writing of familial documents such as letters and manuscripts collectively enable obscured histories and buried emotions to emerge incrementally rather than through sudden revelation. The space is “maternal” not only because it centres mothers as figures of memory and affect, but also because it is structured by their partial access to dominant languages and cultural codes, and by the daughters’ shifting, often ambivalent, responses to these maternal histories.

It is a narrative space in a strong sense as it is constituted through multilingual tensions and textual gaps: untranslatable terms, accented speech, code-switching, mistranslations, and charged silences that both disclose and withhold emotional truths. Within this maternal narrative space, the documentation of ordinary domestic life acquires analytic density, becoming the primary site where guilt, loss, belonging, and refusal are articulated and contested. The novels thus encode an emotional grammar of trauma, in which repetition, miscommunication, and partial articulation operate as recurring patterns that organise relationships across generations and shape how mothers and daughters read, misread, and later re-read one another.

What distinguishes this maternal narrative space from more general diasporic or family narratives is that the texts do not simply situate mothers and daughters within an existing generic framework; rather, maternal experience, multilingualism, and psychoanalytic-like processes of working-through actively generate a hybrid narrative form of their own. In this sense, the maternal narrative space functions not only as a thematic focus but as a genre-shaping practice, whereby formal decisions, how the story is told, by whom, in which language, and with what omissions or delays, become the primary means through which maternal marginality is rendered visible and open to renegotiation.

Against this backdrop, the study is guided by three interrelated research questions: firstly, how do *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* construct narrative itself as a psychoanalytic space for diasporic mothers and daughters, a space in which repressed histories, unspoken resentments, and unresolved grief can be gradually brought into consciousness? In what ways do language and voice, particularly the interplay between English and mother tongues, accent, silence, mistranslation, and code-switching, shape the experience of maternal marginality and deepen or recalibrate intergenerational misunderstanding? How do these narrative and linguistic strategies together produce a hybrid form that exceeds the conventions of the “diaspora novel” and can be understood instead as a distinct maternal narrative space within diasporic English-language fiction?

In conceptualising this space as a diasporic psychoanalytic narrative formation, the study contends that these texts do more than thematise migration, family, and identity: they mobilise the documentation of domestic life, the emotional grammar of trauma, and the tensions of multilingualism to render maternal marginality thinkable, narratable, and open to renegotiation across generations.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of criticism has examined mother–daughter relations in contemporary diasporic fiction, with particular attention to how authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amy Tan represent maternal sacrifice, cultural transmission, and intergenerational conflict (Nixson & Anita, 2024; Gupta & Brar, 2017; Bhandari, 2018). Feminist readings have further emphasised themes of oppression, containment, and performative duty, showing how mothers are often depicted as sites of both strength and erasure, bearing histories of violence, exile, and social constraint while being narrated (or mis-narrated) from the vantage point of younger, more anglophone generations (Chakraborty, 2022). These studies use close readings of characterisation, thematic patterning, and socio-historical context to uncover the gendered economies of care, silence, and sacrifice in diasporic families (Meena & Swain, 2024). This limitation opens space for a formalist and narratologically informed reappraisal that places maternal experience at the centre of textual organisation rather than treating it solely as subject matter.

The fields of diaspora studies and intersectional feminist scholarship have produced an abundant literature on migration, belonging, and cultural translation. Important strands emphasise how migration reshapes gendered identities, how belonging is negotiated through language, and how second-generation subjects mediate between filial obligations and the pull of the host society (Nixson & Anita, 2024). Although intersectional approaches illuminate how race, class, nation, and gender shape diasporic women’s marginality (Bilge & Denis, 2010), they often privilege sociocultural analysis over close attention to literary form. In explaining why maternal marginality occurs, they less often show how it is formally staged through multilingualism, narrative structure, or hybrid genres, revealing the need for a model that combines socio-political critique with textual and linguistic analysis.

A third critical cluster attends to narrative technique and multilingualism in diasporic writing: studies here examine shifting focalisation, non-linear temporality, fragmented structures, code-switching, and the rhetorical functions of untranslated or accented speech. This work has demonstrated that narrative strategies in diaspora fiction are not neutral stylistic choices but often mirror the dislocations of migration, the instability of memory, and the challenge of translating cultural experience across languages. Scholars have shown how fragmentation can index psychic rupture, how multiple perspectives can complicate simple moral judgments, and how the presence of non-English linguistic elements can register affective and epistemic gaps.

Thus, while existing scholarship provides robust accounts of maternal themes, diasporic belonging, and narrative experimentation in English-language diasporic fiction, it rarely integrates these strands into a single explanatory frame that treats narrative form, language, and psychoanalytic-like processes as mutually constitutive. This paper addresses that gap by conceptualising the maternal narrative space, a hybrid narrative formation in which maternal experience, multilingual voice, and narrative techniques that echo working-through jointly construct an emotional grammar of trauma. In doing so, the study moves beyond thematic description to offer a formal and theoretical account of how Divakaruni's and Tan's novels generate conditions for the articulation, negotiation, and partial remediation of maternal marginality.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study brings together psychoanalytic feminism, intersectional approaches to diasporic belonging, and an original narratological concept, maternal narrative space, to analyse how *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* represent and rework maternal marginality.

The first strand of the framework draws on psychoanalytic feminism, particularly Nancy Chodorow's theorisation of the reproduction of mothering and the gendered organisation of emotional life. Chodorow's work highlights how daughters develop subjectivities in close identification with the mother, internalising patterns of care, guilt, attachment, and ambivalence that later shape their own relationships and affective expectations (Chodorow, 1978). Psychoanalytic feminism thus provides the conceptual vocabulary to understand maternal marginality as an affective and psychic formation, not merely a social position (Chodorow, 1978; Hollway, 2016).

The second strand is informed by intersectional feminist accounts of belonging, especially Nira Yuval-Davis's analysis of how gender, race, ethnicity, class, and migration intersect in the production of both inclusion and exclusion (Yuval-Davis, 2007). Applied to Divakaruni and Tan, this framework allows the analysis to situate the intimate conflicts between mothers and daughters within broader matrices of migration, racism, class mobility, and cultural nationalism.

The third strand constitutes the study's key conceptual innovation: the notion of a maternal narrative space. Building on, but moving beyond, existing work on diaspora, memory, and narrative, this term is used to capture the specific literary space in which maternal experience, multilingual voice, and psychoanalytic-like processes converge. This concept is crucial because it is at once linguistic and structural, produced not only through what is said about mothers but through the organisation of voices, timelines, and languages, while also being psychoanalytic and feminist, enacting a process of working-through that revisits memories and contests gendered and racialised marginality, and finally genre-shaping, as maternal experience and multilingual tension generate hybrid narrative forms that exceed conventional diasporic fiction. The theoretical framework positions the study to address both the psychic and structural dimensions of maternal marginality and to show how these are encoded in narrative form and language.

### IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, comparative close-reading methodology to examine narrative form, language use, and character psychology in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amy Tan, focusing specifically on *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Through detailed analysis of focalisation, temporal fragmentation, embedded stories, letters, diaries, and confessional scenes, the study investigates how multilingual practices shape affective and power relations, while a psychoanalytic and intersectional feminist lens illuminates guilt, resentment, attachment, and belated understanding in mother-daughter relationships.

The comparative framework is adopted to place a South Asian American and a Chinese American narrative in dialogue, enabling the tracing of both convergences and divergences in how maternal narrative space is constructed through generational relations, linguistic mediation, and the articulation, or deferral of trauma and marginality. These texts are deliberately selected because, as multigenerational Asian diasporic novels written in English yet shaped by other linguistic and cultural inheritances, they are comparable not only thematically but narratologically, each using layered storytelling structures to formally enact the transmission and reinterpretation of maternal memory. Such a focused pairing allows the paper to model maternal narrative space with methodological precision, demonstrating how diasporic maternal subjectivity is not merely represented but produced and negotiated through narrative form itself rather than through a broader, less cohesive survey of diaspora fiction.

### V. CONSTRUCTING THE MATERNAL NARRATIVE SPACE IN *BEFORE WE VISIT THE GODDESS*

#### A. Tracing Maternal Genealogies: Plot, Generations, and Displacement

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni structures *Before We Visit the Goddess* around three generations of women: Sabitri, Bela, and Tara, whose lives are mapped onto a trajectory of movement from rural Bengal to the metropolitan city and finally to the United States (Sagayaselvi et al., 2024). This spatial axis, village, Kolkata, America, organises the novel's exploration of maternal marginality and inscribes motherhood into a cartography of class, caste, and migration (Divakaruni, 2016). In terms of intersectional feminism, this trajectory exemplifies what Davis describes as the

intersection of gender, class, and migration in the production of both belonging and exclusion: the maternal subject is placed at the fault-lines of economic precariousness, cultural transmission, and national border-crossing (Yuval-Davis, 2007; Arat, 2014).

Sabitri's subject position is marked from the outset by class and rural origin: she is the daughter of a poor sweetmaker, brought as a girl into the Mittir household, where her access to education and refinement is premised upon a deeply asymmetrical dependence (Jeyasingam et al., 2018). Her early recollections of the Mittirs' house foreground both fascination and humiliation, as she registers the meagre education that sustains her and the precariousness of her place within it. Her eventual economic self-reliance is articulated in a hard-won declaration, "This was something I had achieved by myself... No one could take it away" (Divakaruni, 2016), that insists on a maternal subjectivity grounded in labour and self-fashioning rather than in kinship alone. Analysed from Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic feminist perspective, Sabitri's struggle is not merely economic; it shapes the emotional model of mothering that her daughter later internalises as a mixture of self-erasure, responsibility, and the constant risk of being misunderstood.

Bela's life rewrites Sabitri's trajectory in a different register. If Sabitri's mobility is conditioned by upper-class patronage within India, Bela's migration is shaped by marital choice and the desire to escape a constraining domestic and affective environment (Divakaruni, 2016). Her move from India to the United States re-situates the maternal body within a diasporic economy of labour and intimacy, in which the emigrant wife negotiates both racialised marginality and the pressures of maintaining familial ties across continents (Shanthicoleen, 2020). Davis's account of women as "symbolic bearers of cultural boundaries" illuminates Bela's role as the keeper of language and custom in America, even as she lacks full social security in either context (Yuval-Davis, 2007). Bela's experience underscores the complex interplay of cultural preservation and personal agency that defines diasporic motherhood, illustrating how immigrant women navigate their identities across multiple contexts (Morris & Poonkodi, 2019).

Tara, in turn, inhabits an American adolescence and adulthood marked by estrangement from India and from the narratives that governed Sabitri and Bela's lives. Her journeys on American highways, her relationships, and her intermittent contact with her maternal lineage indicate a form of affective and cultural distance that is itself a consequence of earlier displacements (Divakaruni, 2016). From Chodorow's perspective, Tara's oscillation between resentment and longing reproduces, in a different time and place, the ambivalence that structured Bela's relation to Sabitri. Across these three figures, the novel constructs an intergenerational chain of women whose movements inscribe maternal marginality into space: rural poverty, postcolonial urban modernity, and immigrant life are not simply backdrops but the conditions under which mothering is practised, misrecognised, and transmitted as an emotional script.

### *B. Narrative Structure and Focalisation: A Textual Working-Through*

The maternal narrative space of the novel is produced not only by its plot but by its non-linear, episodic structure and shifting focalisation. *Before We Visit the Goddess* moves repeatedly back and forth in time, refusing a chronological unfolding of Sabitri, Bela, and Tara's lives (Anuar & Asl, 2022). From a narratological perspective, this fragmented structure disrupts any illusion of a single, authoritative maternal story. Episodes from Sabitri's youth, Bela's marriage, and Tara's adulthood are dispersed across the text and revisited from different vantage points. Chapters focalised through each of the three women and occasionally through male characters create a polyphonic narrative in which events are continuously reframed (Divakaruni, 2016).

The novel employs a powerful structural strategy of recursive reinterpretation to challenge initial perspectives and gradually shift the emotional charge of past events, particularly within the mother-daughter relationship. A major example is Sabitri's pursuit of education. As a teenager, Sabitri felt profound humiliation when her mother, Durga, publicly exposed her dream of attending college as a "tender dream" and a desperate plea for help. She vowed never to confide in her mother again. Years later, through reflection, Sabitri realises the monumental sacrifice and effort involved: she understands that it "cost her mother to speak those words" and regrets that Durga died "beyond the reach of all apologies" before she could express her understanding. This shifting perspective reveals the hidden depths of maternal sacrifice (Shanthicoleen, 2020).

Similarly, Bela's abandonment of her mother is recontextualised. Initially framed by Sabitri as a "proud, stubborn" betrayal and the ungrateful choice of a husband who would ensure mother and daughter remained apart, the narrative later discloses Bela's perspective. Her flight to America, orchestrated by Sanjay, was a desperate act of love and survival in a dangerous political climate (Aarthika, 2023). Bela's act was laced with regret, symbolized by her massaging of her mother's legs as an "apology... for / her upcoming betrayal". In the final scenes, the reinterpretation is complete when Bela reads Sabitri's deathbed letter and realizes her mother died believing Bela was in trouble.

The novel repeats this pattern with traumatic moments, such as Sabitri striking her own daughter, Bela. In Sabitri's memory, the slap is a monumental event that "changes things" and may have marked the beginning of their generational discord (Komal & Kumar Sharma, 2025). However, Tara's subsequent memory is blurred and disconnected from the cause, leaving her with only the raw feeling of having ruined her parents' happiness, a feeling cynically exploited by a figure like the "magician" (Divakaruni, 2016). This demonstrates how the true cost of inherited emotional trauma is often the incomprehensibility of the core event.

Finally, the narrative traces Tara's initial dismissal of her mother, Bela, following the divorce. Tara resented Bela's emotional collapse and the perceived absence during her own crisis (i.e. the abortion) (Aarthika, 2023). This judgment is later softened by the disclosure of Bela's immense trauma, including the loss of her infant son, Harsha and her

husband's death in a fire. Furthermore, Tara's rage against Bela is later recognised as “displaced rage”. Tara's own compulsive theft is ultimately understood as a manifestation of a deeper emotional deficit, a need to “... take things that I should have had but didn't get”, which mirrors the unresolved emotional losses suffered by her mother and grandmother. The novel's complex recursive process successfully “revises the emotional meanings attached to particular acts and decisions” across all three generations, highlighting how re-examining these maternal narratives functions as a therapeutic genre that facilitates understanding and emotional repair.

### C. *Storytelling, Letters, and Confession: Maternal Self-Analysis*

Within this larger architecture, the novel repeatedly embeds acts of narration that function as forms of informal self-analysis. Sabitri's attempts to write to Tara are exemplary. Facing her granddaughter's absence, Sabitri undertakes the difficult task of composing a letter that will make sense of her past and offer Tara a different future. The drafts of this letter, repeatedly started and abandoned, expose the labour of translating a life into language: Sabitri addresses Tara as “Dearest Granddaughter,” insists that “without education, a woman has little chance of standing on her own feet,” and struggles to condense decades of pain, compromise, and determination into a few pages (Divakaruni, 2016). The hesitation, revision, and self-censorship that mark this scene underscore that what is at stake is not only communication but self-understanding.

Similar dynamics appear in moments where Sabitri or Bela recounts their histories to others. Confessional utterances, such as Sabitri's admission that “I did betray your father... but not in the way you think. Perhaps what I did was more shameful” (Divakaruni, 2016), recast previously opaque or morally condemned actions as responses to structural constraint rather than signs of intrinsic failure. Storytelling and written communication thus become key mechanisms through which guilt, resentment, and misrecognition are processed. The maternal narrative space is not merely described; it is enacted as women tell and retell their own stories to understand and to be understood, negotiating both internalised emotional patterns and external expectations.

### D. *Language, Accent, and Silence: Linguistic Markers of Marginality*

The central maternal narrative space of the novel is defined by how language functions as a marker of power, marginality, and cultural authenticity. Sabitri's personal trajectory involves actively seeking out lessons in “English conversation and comportment” and discovering her “talent” for them, which serves as a vital symbolic resource, mitigating her class background and fueling her aspiration for a better life in Kolkata. Conversely, her eventual use of “rusty English” when writing to her granddaughter, Tara, highlights her linguistic insecurity in the diasporic American context.

In the American setting, this linguistic and cultural clash leads to significant personal struggles, notably in Bela's experience at the grocery store. Despite Bela's fluency in American English, her expertise in authentic Bengali cuisine conflicts with the expectations of the commercial public sphere. Her shame is rooted in being forced to compromise her culinary integrity by demonstrating dishes like chicken tikka and cooking “from a bottle,” which she deems “not even real Indian”.

Beyond spoken language, silence and avoidance operate as potent, albeit destructive, communicative strategies, creating emotional gaps between mothers and daughters. Sabitri's refusal to discuss painful subjects like the death of Bela's brother, Harsha, Bela's decision to conceal her struggles in America from Sabitri, and Tara's act of hiding the abortion are examples of this intergenerational silence (Komal & Kumar Sharma, 2025). Bela's failure to hear Sabitri's dying phone messages due to her own emotional state, an ultimate failure to connect before death that leaves Bela with overwhelming guilt, believing, “I'd killed my mother!” Even when truth is spoken, it can fail: Tara's harsh, shouted confession that “I steal. That's what I do” causes Bela to recoil in “horror—or is it disgust?”, shutting down the painful conversation and deepening the rift. This continuous breakdown highlights how, under the intersecting pressures of migration, class, and gender, “what is not said is as significant as what is articulated”.

### E. *Repetition, Misrecognition, and the Emotional Grammar of Trauma*

Across the three generations, *Before We Visit the Goddess* develops a pattern of repetition that may be read as an emotional grammar governing the transmission of trauma. Similar sacrifices recur in altered forms: Sabitri sacrifices her romantic aspirations and endures class humiliation to secure education and livelihood; Bela sacrifices emotional security and cultural rootedness to migrate; Tara sacrifices relational ties and geographical stability in a bid for autonomy (Komal & Kumar Sharma, 2025). In each case, the daughter misreads the mother's actions through a limited and often accusatory lens, interpreting restraint as selfishness or abandonment as moral failure.

Viewed through Chodorow's theory of the reproduction of mothering, these patterns show how daughters inherit not only practical routines of care but also the unresolved guilt, anger, and ambivalence that marked their mothers' lives. The constraints placed upon the female characters in the novel are vividly illustrated by the traditional adage: “*Good daughters are fortunate lamps, brightening the family's name. Wicked daughters are firebrands, blackening the family's fame*” (Divakaruni, 2016). This saying encapsulates the rigid social “rules” that dictate the difficult choices each woman must make, tying their personal fulfilment directly to the family's honour.

The narrative's insistence on revisiting key episodes, viewing them from different focal points and at different temporal distances, gradually exposes the limits of this inherited emotional grammar. Sabitri's insistence that her

achievements are “something [she] had achieved by [herself],” which “no one could take away” (Divakaruni, 2016), signals the emergence of an alternative grammar that values female agency beyond familial roles and opens the possibility of breaking, however partially, the cycle of repetition.

#### *F. Toward Recognition: Re-Reading Mothers in the Narrative Space*

The cumulative effect of the novel’s structure, focalisation, and motifs of storytelling is a progressive re-framing of mothers within the narrative space. As the text shifts between generational perspectives and moves non-chronologically across time, earlier readings of maternal figures as background or plot advancement are unsettled (Divakaruni, 2016). Scenes initially read as maternal indifference are later reinterpreted, through shifting perspectives, as constrained acts, compelling readers to continually reassess Sabitri’s harshness, Bela’s irresponsibility, and Tara’s rejection, considering newly revealed pressures.

Analysed from Chodorow’s perspective, this movement from accusation to partial recognition enacts a shift in the emotional structure of mother–daughter relations: the daughter begins to see the mother not as an all-powerful figure to blame but as a subject formed by her own history of deprivation and responsibility (Chodorow, 1978). Read through Davis’ recognition also involves acknowledging the structural limits of class, gender, and migration, within which maternal choices have been made (Yuval-Davis, 2007). In this sense, *Before We Visit the Goddess* constructs a maternal narrative space that functions like a slow analytic process embedded in diasporic conditions. The telling, retelling, and translating of maternal stories do not merely recount events; they re-interpret them under the pressure of intersecting inequalities (Divakaruni, 2016). Within this space, maternal marginality is not only displayed but also interrogated and reconfigured. The novel does not resolve all conflicts or fully heal generational wounds, but it does recognise the mother as a historically embedded, emotionally complex subject whose marginality is simultaneously psychic and structural.

### VI. CONSTRUCTING THE MATERNAL NARRATIVE SPACE IN *THE BONESETTER’S DAUGHTER*

#### *A. Layered Narration and Written Testimony: Reading the Mother’s Manuscript*

Amy Tan structures *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* around a pronounced dual narrative architecture that itself becomes a maternal analytic space; the third-person rendering of Ruth’s contemporary life in the U.S. is interleaved with LuLing’s first-person written account of her childhood and youth in China (Tan, 2008). The mother’s manuscript is not simply a flashback device; it is a material object and textual scene, a thick bundle of pages written “in her own crooked characters” and later translated into English for Ruth. As written testimony, the manuscript asserts LuLing’s subjectivity in a voice that has been previously distorted by accent, forgetfulness, and Ruth’s defensive irritation. Psychoanalytically, it functions like the free-associative narrative, a belated attempt to put trauma into words: the tale of Precious Auntie, the inkstick factory, the ravine, the betrayal that leads to suicide, and the girlhood marked by grief and dislocation. What Ruth receives, then, is not just “family history” but a condensed trauma narrative whose belated arrival opens the maternal narrative space.

Ruth’s reading of the manuscript resembles an extended interpretive session in which the daughter takes on the role of listener-analyst as much as child (Goh, 2011). Earlier memories of LuLing, her intrusive phone calls, her dire prophecies, her apparently irrational mood swings, are revisited in the light of LuLing’s textual voice. The mother who once told Ruth, in halting English, “You don’t know suffering” is now revealed as the child who watched Precious Auntie burn, the girl whose body carried the sediment of war, disability, and migration (Tan, 2008). The analytic movement from symptom to history is clear: Ruth’s surface irritation gives way to the recognition that what she had read as melodrama is a repetition of trauma. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the manuscript is the “missing case history” that allows Ruth to trace the line between LuLing’s seemingly disproportionate fears and the primal scene of loss that organised her emotional life.

#### *B. Family Stories, Secrets, and Confessions: The Talking Cure in Narrative Form*

At the heart of the maternal narrative space in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* lies an interconnected network of family stories and secrets (Vizan, 2014). The most crucial of these is the truth about Precious Auntie, not merely a servant nursemaid, as Ruth had long been told, but LuLing’s biological mother, disfigured by fire and rendered mute, whose suicide scars LuLing’s girlhood. LuLing’s confused oral recollections, sometimes insisting Precious Auntie is “your real grandmother,” sometimes contradicting herself, are dismissed by Ruth as the ramblings of an ageing, difficult parent. Only when the manuscript and subsequent conversations make the story coherent does the secret reorganise the family narrative, retroactively illuminating LuLing’s bitterness, overprotectiveness, and superstitions as trauma responses rather than arbitrary cruelty.

The unravelling of these secrets closely parallels the psychoanalytic “talking cure”. What is initially unspeakable: maternal suicide, sexual threat, betrayal by patriarchal kin, is gradually turned into a narratable story that can be shared, translated, and reinterpreted (Putri & McDermott, 2023). LuLing’s act of writing is an initial confession addressed vaguely to a future reader; Ruth’s translation and reading process constitutes the second stage of the cure, where the story is given shape and context. Emotional responses that once circulated as anger, shame, and embarrassment begin to be worked through: Ruth’s anger at her mother’s theatrics is re-scripted as outrage at the injustices LuLing suffered; her

embarrassment at LuLing's "crazy" stories becomes sorrow for a silenced lineage of women.

### C. *Language, Accent, and Translation: The Linguistic Edge of Maternal Marginality*

Language difference structures the mother–daughter relationship in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* at every level. LuLing moves through the U.S. with heavily accented, grammatically "broken" English, frequently slipping into Chinese when she is upset or when emotions feel untranslatable (Putri & McDermott, 2023). Ruth, by contrast, is firmly positioned within American middle-class norms: she is a professional writer and ghostwriter, someone whose livelihood depends on producing smooth, invisible prose for others (Tan, 2008). This asymmetry turns language into a site of maternal marginality. Publicly, LuLing is often dismissed or patronised; her accent marks her as foreign, her malapropisms as comic or irritating. Ruth repeatedly experiences embarrassment at her mother's speech, recalling incidents where she wished LuLing would "just be quiet" or speak "normal" English so that others would not stare.

The accent and "broken English" appear not only as markers of foreignness but as forms of stigmatized speech difference. LuLing's mispronunciations and syntactic errors expose her to ableist assumptions about intelligence and competence; people treat her as if she is childlike or confused, long before dementia sets in. Precious Auntie's damaged throat similarly casts her as less than fully articulate in others' eyes, even though her written and gestural communication is rich and precise. The novel invites us to see these forms of non-standard or impaired speech as legitimate modes of expression that carry complex emotional and historical content. In this sense, the maternal narrative space becomes a linguistic common where shame, loyalty, and resistance are carried through accent, code-switching, silence, and non-verbal signs, rather than only through polished, normative language (Ngo, 2024).

LuLing's manuscript radicalises this linguistic politics. Written initially in Chinese, it must be translated into English for Ruth to fully grasp its contents. Certain terms resist translation, and certain emotional textures feel flattened when moved into English, underscoring the limits of linguistic equivalence (Podnieks & O'Reilly, 2010). The maternal narrative space thus unfolds "between tongues," where the mother's experience can never be fully captured in the daughter's dominant language (Ngo, 2024).

### D. *Shifts in Emotional Grammar: From Misrecognition to Empathy*

Across the novel, Ruth's relationship to LuLing is marked by a striking emotional trajectory that can be read as a shift in what we might call her "emotional grammar." At the outset, Ruth's affective responses are patterned by impatience, irritation, and a desire for distance: she is exasperated by LuLing's constant catastrophising, her demands for attention, her refusal to "act her age" or be grateful (Tan, 2008). The "rules" governing her reactions are simple: when LuLing calls, Ruth braces herself; when LuLing criticises, Ruth withdraws or snaps back. This repetitive pattern mirrors the stalemates described in psychoanalytic accounts of unresolved parental conflict, where everyday irritations stand in for unprocessed histories.

The discovery and interpretation of the manuscript, however, introduces new narrative information that gradually rewrites these rules. As Ruth learns about Precious Auntie's suffering, the violence of the ravine, the betrayals that shaped LuLing's youth, her emotional grammar begins to shift. Moments that previously triggered anger now elicit curiosity or sorrow; behaviours once coded as irrational now appear as understandable trauma responses. The novel repeatedly stages this transformation: scenes of conflict are followed, later in the text, by revisitations of the same memories under the influence of new knowledge (Goh, 2011). Psychoanalytically, this corresponds to a movement from misrecognition, seeing only the annoying, intrusive mother, to empathic recognition of a traumatised subject, a woman whose life has been overdetermined by loss, disability, and migration.

The shift from misrecognition to empathy involves learning to live with and around cognitive and communicative difference. As LuLing's memory worsens, episodes of confusion and repetition intensify; what once would have provoked exasperated correction now invites gentler redirection or patient listening. Ruth's emotional grammar expands to include care-oriented responses to dementia, accepting that certain stories will loop, that some names will be lost, that the mother she now sees is both continuous with and different from the younger woman of the manuscript. The maternal narrative space thus demonstrates how narrative itself alters emotional structures: by making trauma speakable, by situating difference within a meaningful life story, it transforms maternal marginality from a site of resentment into a fragile but renewed connection (Goh, 2011). In this recalibrated grammar, the mother is no longer the "problem" to be managed but a complex subject whose voice, however accented, fractured, or fading, continues to matter.

### E. *Comparative Bridge: Parallels and Contrasts Between the Two Maternal Narrative Spaces*

A comparison of *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* demonstrates how contemporary diasporic fiction constructs what this study terms a maternal narrative space: a hybrid fictional zone in which mothers and daughters renegotiate their relationships through narrative acts that resemble psychoanalytic working-through. In both novels, daughters come to re-read their mothers only when they gain belated access to maternal stories. Tara's revision of Sabitri and Bela depends on piecing together letters, family anecdotes, and retrospectively disclosed episodes; Ruth's shift from irritation to empathy is triggered by her encounter with LuLing's manuscript and the secrets it contains. In each case, the daughter's earlier emotional grammar, organised around accusation, resentment, or incomprehension, is unsettled and slowly rewritten as the mother's past becomes legible.

Formally, both texts use layered narration and multilingual tension to stage this process. Divakaruni's non-linear,

multi-focal structure repeatedly shifts between Sabitri, Bela, and Tara, inviting readers to occupy alternating positions within the mother–daughter dyad and to experience how the same event feels from each side. Tan’s alternating segments between Ruth’s present and LuLing’s written past create a doubled narrative surface in which the symptom (the “difficult” mother) is continually referred to history (the traumatised girl).

At the same time, crucial differences in narrative design and cultural-historical context reveal the versatility of the maternal narrative space as an analytic concept. In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the written manuscript is central: LuLing’s autobiographical testimony, mediated by translation and shadowed by memory loss, anchors the novel’s movement from secrecy to confession. Maternal marginality is crystallised in a single text that must be decoded, and the dynamics of bilingualism, disability, and aging are gathered around this object. In *Before We Visit the Goddess*, by contrast, maternal narrative emerges in a more dispersed form through letters, oral stories, and embedded memories scattered across multiple focalisers. Here, no single document carries the truth; instead, the maternal narrative space is pieced together from overlapping and sometimes contradictory accounts, reflecting the more ramified, transgenerational structure of the Indian and Indian American family network.

Intersectional differences in diasporic formation further shape how maternal marginality is coded. Tan’s Chinese American context foregrounds histories of war, imperial incursion, industrial exploitation, and racialised immigrant precarity in the United States, with disability and disfigurement (Precious Auntie’s injuries, LuLing’s dementia) inscribed at the centre of maternal experience (Walsh, 2017). Divakaruni’s South Asian diasporic setting highlights trajectories of caste and class mobility, postcolonial urbanisation, and the gendered pressures around education, marriage, and migration for Indian women (Gupta & Brar, 2017). In both, however, the mother is positioned as a symbolic bearer of cultural memory and linguistic continuity, even as she is structurally marginalised within patriarchal, racialised, and classed orders. The comparative frame thus confirms that the concept of maternal narrative space travels across distinct diasporic geographies and genealogies, enabling a more precise account of how narrative form, affect, and language intertwine in contemporary Asian diasporic fiction.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that maternal narrative space operates as a formally produced site of emotional negotiation in diasporic fiction, where storytelling becomes a means of processing intergenerational memory, loss, and reconciliation. In *Before We Visit the Goddess* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, narrative fragmentation, embedded testimonies, and acts of retelling transform the novel itself into a space analogous to psychoanalytic working-through. Through letters, recollections, and multilingual shifts, maternal voices that have long remained suppressed gradually emerge into articulation, demonstrating that motherhood in diaspora is not a fixed cultural role but an evolving relational process shaped by migration, silence, and reinterpretation. The study thus reframes diaspora narratives as affective architectures in which subjectivity is constructed through language, memory, and narrative form.

At the same time, this literary reconstruction of maternal voice carries broader ethical implications that resonate with contemporary global priorities such as gender justice, cultural inclusion, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality). By foregrounding women’s lived experiences, emotional labour, and intergenerational caregiving as sites of knowledge rather than marginal detail, these narratives challenge representational hierarchies that exclude or diminish maternal perspectives. The multilingual and cross-cultural dimensions of these texts further model inclusive frameworks of belonging, where translation, listening, and narrative reciprocity become tools for recognising diverse identities and validating historically silenced experiences. In this way, literary analysis contributes to ongoing conversations about equity and representation by demonstrating how cultural texts can imagine more inclusive and empathetic social structures.

Ultimately, this research positions maternal narrative space as a critical lens for understanding how diasporic fiction negotiates trauma, memory, and identity through the very textures of storytelling. By bringing feminist psychoanalysis, narratology, and migration studies into sustained dialogue, the paper not only expands scholarship on motherhood and diaspora but also proposes a methodological pathway for examining how narrative form itself becomes an agent of recovery, resistance, and redefinition. Such an approach underscores the continuing relevance of literary studies in illuminating the intimate human dimensions of displacement and belonging, affirming that the stories through which mothers and daughters speak, remember, and reinterpret their worlds remain central to the evolving landscape of global literature and thought.

## DECLARATION OF THE USE OF AI

To uphold academic writing standards and ensure the clarity and precision of this manuscript, the authors acknowledge the responsible use of AI-based language tools during the drafting process. Specifically, tools such as Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com>), QuillBot (<https://www.quillbot.com>), and ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>) were employed for grammar refinement, sentence restructuring, and phrasing enhancement. Prompts such as “improve sentence structure,” “refine phrasing,” and “clarify specific points” were used to strengthen the manuscript’s linguistic presentation. These tools were used solely as editorial aids and did not contribute to the generation of original content, interpretation, or critical analysis. The intellectual contribution, analytical rigor, and authorship remain entirely that of

the authors. The use of such tools is in accordance with ethical academic practices and conforms to the guidelines set by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). The authors affirm full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work presented in this paper.

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