

Motherhood, Intergenerational Relationships, and Child Rearing in Diaspora: A Study of The Joy Luck Club

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Abstract:

Literature provides a significant cultural archive through which the emotional, social, and historical dimensions of migration are articulated. Unlike historical records or demographic studies, literary narratives illuminate the intimate realities of migration by foregrounding the voices of women who negotiate displacement, marriage, motherhood, identity, and family life across geographical and cultural borders. The novel *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan (1989) demonstrates that marriage and child rearing are not merely private domestic experiences but are deeply shaped by migration, colonial histories, patriarchy, and the transnational movement of people. It provides one of the most influential literary explorations of mother–daughter relationships in migrant communities. Through narratives of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters, Tan examines intergenerational conflict, language, memory, and bicultural identity. The novel demonstrates that parenting within diaspora involves continuous negotiation between preserving ancestral traditions and enabling children’s integration into host societies.

Keywords: Diaspora, Transnational Marriages, Motherhood, Child- Rearing, Literary Narratives, Migration.

Introduction:

Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is one of the most influential works of Asian American literature, exploring the complex relationships between first-generation Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. Through interconnected narratives, Tan examines how migration transforms family relationships, motherhood, identity, and cultural belonging. Although the novel is situated within the Chinese American diaspora, its portrayal of transnational motherhood and intergenerational conflict offers significant comparative insights into the experiences of women in the Indian diaspora. The novel demonstrates that migration is not simply the movement of individuals across national borders but also the movement of memories, traditions, values, and parenting practices across generations.

Unlike conventional linear narratives, *The Joy Luck Club* is structured through sixteen interrelated stories narrated by four immigrant mothers-Suyuan Woo, Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu, and Ying-ying St. Clair-and their

four American-born daughters-Jing-mei Woo, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu Jordan, and Lena St. Clair. This multi-voiced narrative structure reflects the fragmented nature of diasporic identity while allowing readers to understand the perspectives of both mothers and daughters. Through these alternating voices, Tan illustrates how migration creates emotional and cultural distances within families even as it strengthens the desire to preserve familial bonds (Tan, 1989).

Research have always primarily focused on themes of exile, hybridity, memory, displacement, postcolonial identity, and cultural negotiation (Mishra, 2007). It has been widely analysed through feminist and postcolonial frameworks. However, motherhood has often been discussed only as an aspect of female identity rather than as an active process of socialization, education, and cultural reproduction. Child rearing rarely constitutes the central analytical focus despite occupying an important place within these narratives. Literary narratives illuminate emotional experiences and subjective realities that may not emerge through interviews alone, while empirical research provides contemporary perspectives that enrich literary interpretation. Combining these methodologies enables a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences within transnational marriages.

The paper seeks to address these limitations through an interdisciplinary framework that combines diaspora studies, transnationalism, feminist theory, motherhood studies, and literary criticism. Unlike previous research that focuses primarily on migration or motherhood separately, this study examines the interconnected relationship between transnational marriage and child rearing. It argues that parenting constitutes one of the principal sites through which diasporic identities are negotiated, cultural traditions are preserved, and family relationships are sustained across national boundaries.

Mothers and Migration

Motherhood is the central organising principle of the novel. The immigrant mothers regard motherhood not merely as a biological role but as a lifelong moral responsibility involving sacrifice, emotional labour, and cultural transmission. Having experienced war, poverty, political upheaval, and forced migration in China, they view their children's lives in America as opportunities for security and social mobility. Their aspirations for their daughters are therefore shaped by memories of hardship and loss. Tan portrays motherhood as an act of resilience through which women seek to transform personal suffering into opportunities for future generations.

One of the most important themes in the novel is the transmission of cultural identity through child rearing. The mothers consciously attempt to preserve Chinese traditions, language, customs, and values within American society. They encourage respect for elders, family solidarity, educational achievement, and

collective responsibility. However, their daughters, having been born and educated in the United States, often interpret these practices as restrictive or outdated. This generational tension illustrates the challenges of parenting within transnational families, where parents seek cultural continuity while children negotiate identities shaped by the host society (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Language occupies a central role in these intergenerational relationships. The mothers frequently communicate in Chinese, while their daughters increasingly prefer English. This linguistic divide symbolises broader differences in worldview and cultural experience. For the mothers, language embodies memory, emotion, and cultural identity; for the daughters, English represents independence and integration into American society. The gradual loss of the heritage language generates anxieties concerning cultural continuity, a concern that is similarly observed among Indian migrant families striving to preserve languages such as Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, Punjabi, or Gujarati alongside English. Language therefore becomes a crucial site through which identity and belonging are negotiated.

Tan also foregrounds storytelling as an essential parenting strategy. Rather than relying solely on formal instruction, the mothers communicate life lessons through stories of their own childhoods, marriages, and migration experiences. These narratives function as repositories of family history and cultural memory, enabling daughters to understand the sacrifices that shaped their present lives. Hirsch (1997) describes such intergenerational transmission of memory as “postmemory” whereby children inherit the emotional experiences of previous generations through stories rather than direct experience. In *The Joy Luck Club*, storytelling becomes an important mechanism through which mothers nurture resilience, empathy, and cultural identity in their children.

Marriages and Child- Rearing:

Marriage is another significant theme linking mothers and daughters. The immigrant mothers’ marriages were often shaped by traditional Chinese customs, family obligations, and patriarchal expectations. Many experienced arranged marriages, gender inequality, or limited personal autonomy before migrating to the United States. In contrast, their daughters exercise greater freedom in choosing partners but continue to struggle with issues of identity, communication, and emotional fulfilment. Rose Hsu Jordan’s failing marriage, Lena St. Clair’s unequal relationship, and Waverly Jong’s negotiations of interracial relationships demonstrate that migration transforms the institution of marriage without eliminating gendered power relations. Tan therefore suggests that women’s experiences of marriage continue to be shaped by both cultural traditions and contemporary social expectations.

Child rearing in the novel is closely connected to educational aspiration. Like many immigrant communities, the mothers regard education as the primary means through which their daughters can achieve social mobility and economic independence. High expectations regarding academic achievement reflect not only parental ambition but also gratitude for opportunities unavailable in their homeland. This emphasis on education parallels the experiences of many Indian diasporic families, where educational success is viewed as an essential strategy for overcoming racial discrimination and securing professional advancement (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). Mothers become deeply involved in guiding their children's education, often making personal sacrifices to support their academic success.

The novel also explores the emotional labour associated with motherhood. Hochschild (1983) argues that emotional labour involves managing one's own emotions while responding to the emotional needs of others. Tan's immigrant mothers constantly suppress their own grief, loneliness, and disappointment to provide emotional security for their daughters. Their migration experiences are marked by separation from family members, cultural dislocation, and memories of political violence, yet they rarely communicate these burdens openly. Instead, they prioritise their children's well-being, illustrating the invisible emotional work performed by mothers within migrant families.

Bicultural Identity:

A particularly important aspect of *The Joy Luck Club* is its exploration of bicultural identity. The daughters inhabit a liminal space between Chinese cultural heritage and American social life. Bhabha (1994) conceptualises such identities as existing within a "third space," where new forms of cultural hybridity emerge through interaction between different traditions. The daughters frequently struggle to reconcile parental expectations with their own aspirations for autonomy and self-definition. Their experiences reflect broader patterns within transnational families, where second-generation migrants negotiate multiple cultural affiliations simultaneously.

From the perspective of feminist theory, the novel demonstrates that women are active agents rather than passive bearers of tradition. The mothers reinterpret cultural practices according to changing social circumstances while encouraging their daughters to pursue opportunities unavailable to earlier generations. Migration therefore becomes a catalyst for both continuity and transformation. Although the mothers remain deeply attached to Chinese cultural values, they also recognise the importance of adaptation within American society. This dynamic resembles the experiences of Indian migrant mothers who seek to preserve religious festivals, languages, and family traditions while encouraging their children to participate fully in the social and educational institutions of their host countries.

The Joy Luck Club reveals several themes. For instance, it portrays women as custodians of cultural memory despite displacement. It examines migration through marriage and the reconstruction of family life within unfamiliar environments. It also emphasises the importance of education, maternal sacrifice, and intergenerational resilience. The novel in all illustrates that motherhood functions as one of the principal mechanisms through which diasporic communities reproduce cultural identity while adapting to new social realities.

The novel is particularly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that child rearing within diaspora is inherently transnational. Mothers maintain emotional, cultural, and symbolic connections with their homeland while preparing their children to succeed within multicultural societies. Their parenting practices are characterised by negotiation rather than cultural rigidity, balancing continuity with adaptation and tradition with change. Such experiences closely parallel those of Indian migrant women who navigate similar tensions between preserving ancestral heritage and facilitating their children's integration into global societies.

The Joy Luck Club remains one of the most extensively studied diasporic novels. Critics have analysed the work through feminist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and cultural frameworks, focusing particularly on mother-daughter relationships. Cheung (1993) argues that the novel demonstrates the complexities of intergenerational communication between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. Mothers attempt to preserve Chinese traditions while daughters negotiate American cultural identities, resulting in tensions concerning language, education, and family expectations. Lowe (1996) similarly observes that the novel challenges simplistic notions of assimilation by presenting identity as fluid and negotiated across generations. Maternal storytelling functions as a means of transmitting cultural memory and family history.

While existing criticism emphasizes identity and communication, relatively few scholars examine parenting itself as a structured process of bicultural socialization. This study therefore considers motherhood as an ongoing educational and cultural practice rather than solely an emotional relationship.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, *The Joy Luck Club* offers a profound literary exploration of transnational motherhood, migration, and child rearing. Through its intergenerational narrative, the novel demonstrates that migration reshapes family relationships while reinforcing the central role of women in sustaining cultural continuity. Child rearing emerges as both an emotional and cultural practice through which mothers transmit memory, identity, and resilience across generations. Consequently, Tan's novel provides valuable comparative insights into the broader experiences of women in the Indian diaspora and contributes significantly to understanding the relationship between transnational marriages, motherhood, and identity formation.

Through the intertwined narratives of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters, Tan examines the emotional complexities of parenting across cultures. The novel reveals how differences in language, values, and cultural expectations often generate misunderstandings between generations. Nevertheless, storytelling functions as a powerful means through which mothers transmit family histories, moral values, and cultural memory. Tan suggests that child rearing within diaspora requires continuous negotiation between assimilation and cultural preservation, making motherhood both an emotional and cultural responsibility (Tan, 1989).

The novel demonstrates that transnational marriages reshape family life while reinforcing the central role of women in maintaining cultural continuity and nurturing future generations. Across diverse historical and geographical contexts, mothers emerge as educators, caregivers, storytellers, cultural mediators, and agents of resilience. Child rearing becomes the primary site through which identities are negotiated, traditions are transmitted, and new forms of belonging are created. The literary representations analysed in this paper therefore support the central argument of this study: that women occupy a pivotal position in the formation and sustainability of transnational families, making motherhood and child rearing indispensable to understanding the lived realities of the Indian diaspora.

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