

# Negotiating Otherness in Contemporary American Immigrant Fiction

---

Gavran, Ivana

Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2019

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:949707>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-11-23**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek](#)



J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature –  
Translation and Interpreting Studies  
and Hungarian Language and Literature

Ivana Gavran

**Negotiating Otherness in Contemporary American Immigrant  
Fiction**

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2019

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Department of English

Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature –  
Translation and Interpreting Studies  
and Hungarian Language and Literature

Ivana Gavran

**Negotiating Otherness in Contemporary American Immigrant  
Fiction**

Master's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2019

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku  
Filozofski fakultet

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti –  
prevoditeljski smjer i mađarskog jezika i književnosti

Ivana Gavran

**Problematiziranje *drugosti* u suvremenoj američkoj imigrantskoj  
prozi**

Diplomski rad

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Sanja Runtić

Osijek, 2019.

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti –  
prevoditeljski smjer i mađarskog jezika i književnosti

Ivana Gavran

**Problematiziranje *drugosti* u suvremenoj američkoj imigrantskoj  
prozi**

Diplomski rad

Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Sanja Runtić

Osijek, 2019.

## **IZJAVA**

Izjavljujem s punom materijalnom i moralnom odgovornošću da sam ovaj rad samostalno izradila te da u njemu nema kopiranih ili prepisanih dijelova teksta tuđih radova, a da nisu označeni kao citati s napisanim izvorom odakle su preneseni.

Svojim vlastoručnim potpisom potvrđujem da sam suglasna da Filozofski fakultet Osijek trajno pohrani i javno objavi ovaj moj rad u internetskoj bazi završnih i diplomskih radova knjižnice Filozofskog fakulteta Osijek, knjižnice Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku i Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu.

U Osijeku, 16. listopada 2019.



0269060293

Ime i prezime studenta, JMBAG

## Table of Contents

Abstract	
Introduction	1
1. The Main Characteristics and Themes of Immigrant Fiction	2
1.1. American Immigrant Novel	2
1.2. Identity and Otherness	4
1.3. The “Stepmother Tongue” and “Stepmother-tongue Stories” – a Definition	6
2. Amy Tan’s <i>The Joy Luck Club</i>	8
3. Minfong Ho’s “The Winter Hibiscus”	20
4. Bharati Mukherjee’s “Happiness”	24
Conclusion	28
Works Cited	30

## Abstract

This paper discusses the notion of Otherness in contemporary American immigrant fiction by addressing issues such as ethnic diversity, transnational identities, identity quest, alienation, intergenerational relations within immigrant families, the linguistic, cultural, and social obstacles to assimilation, and the psychological and spiritual impact of dislocation. Employing William Boelhower's model for interpreting American immigrant literature, developed in his study "The Immigrant Novel as Genre," and Josip Novakovich and Robert Shapard's concepts of the "stepmother tongue" and "stepmother-tongue stories," the paper provides an introduction to American immigrant genre and one of its main concerns – the dynamics of identity and Otherness. The analysis focuses on three American immigrant texts – Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and two short stories from the collection *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* (2000), "The Winter Hibiscus" by Minfong Ho and "Happiness" by Bharati Mukherjee. It attempts to show that in all three texts, storytelling functions as a powerful narrative strategy that both reveals and resolves the characters' state of in-betweenness and issues such as identity struggle, cultural and generational gap, (mis)communication, and cultural translation. Whereas *The Joy Luck Club* introduces the culturally specific narrative technique of the "talk story," Ho and Mukherjee employ traditional third-person and first-person narrative style, respectively. Nevertheless, in all three texts, storytelling has a crucial role that enables the characters to discover, reclaim, and redefine their identities by voicing their hidden secrets and fears, bridging language barriers, reconstructing their histories and personal life stories, passing on their cultural heritage, and ultimately, celebrating their multiculturalism. By emphasizing the importance of the authors' personal experiences and life stories in interpreting these texts, the paper also argues that American immigrant fiction is strongly related to the genre of autobiography.

*Keywords:* the immigrant novel, identity, Otherness, *The Joy Luck Club*, "The Winter Hibiscus," "Happiness," stepmother tongue.



## Introduction

America is known as a land of opportunity in which you can do and achieve whatever you want and whatever your heart desires no matter who you are or where you come from. The American Dream is the reason why millions of people migrate to America with great hopes of achieving their dreams, making this country culturally and ethnically rich and diverse. Accordingly, the United States has rightly so earned its title of “the melting pot.” Over the years, waves of immigrants have been arriving in the United States from Europe, Latin America, China, and Japan. This process has also reflected on American literature. The writers that came to this country needed to find a venue in the New World in which they could resolve their personal crises, reinvent their identities, reconcile their bicultural selves and histories, and share their experiences, hopes, and fears. As a result, American immigrant literature was born.

Like immigrant literature in general, American immigrant fiction addresses the issues of immigrant identity crisis, challenges posed by assimilation, in particular the cultural and linguistic ones, the generational conflict, as well as the experience of Otherness. This paper aims to explore these issues by focusing on three immigrant texts – Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Minfong Ho’s story “The Winter Hibiscus” (2000), and Bharati Mukherjee’s story “Happiness” (2000).

The first chapter of this paper provides an introduction to American immigrant literature and American immigrant novel as a genre, using the theoretical model for interpreting American immigrant fiction developed by William Boelhower in his study “The Immigrant Novel as Genre.” This chapter also seeks to define the concepts of identity and Otherness as well as the terms the “stepmother tongue” and “stepmother-tongue stories” developed by Josip Novakovich and Robert Shapard in their co-edited collection *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* (2000) and in Novakovich’s essay “This Is No Language” (1994).

The second, third, and fourth chapters provide an analysis of Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Minfong Ho’s short story “The Winter Hibiscus,” and Bharati Mukherjee’s short story “Happiness,” paying special attention to the themes of identity and Otherness in order to explore how these texts expose both the pains and joys of a mixed cultural identity. In addition, by juxtaposing the authors’ personal histories and identity struggles with those of their characters, the analysis also aims to demonstrate that immigrant fiction as a genre is strongly related to the genre of autobiography.

# 1. The Main Characteristics and Themes of Immigrant Fiction

## 1.1. American Immigrant Novel

According to William Q. Boelhower, it is crucial to define the immigrant novel as a genre at two levels – “the level of literary text and at that of literary history” (3). As the immigrant novel has been dispersed under other kinds of novels, such as the city novel, the radical novel, or the pastoral novel, in order to define the genre, we must recover it and separate it from the other novelistic genres. According to Boelhower, throughout American literary history, the immigrant novel has unfairly been ignored, and its impact has been muted:

[T]he task of defining a genre formally and of establishing its characteristic *vraisemblance* (primarily an ideological concern) necessarily requires one to revise and call into question a tradition of literary criticism that has excluded the presence of this genre. . . . The result is the construction of a monocultural world view which cancels or melts immigrant and ethnic protagonism. I am thinking here of the school of myth criticism, especially such exponents as Roderick Nash, Leo Marx, R.W.B. Lewis, Henry Nash Smith, and Northrop Frye who tend to ignore the literary presence of the new historical subjects (the immigrant groups) and their role in American culture. In such a method, a genre like the immigrant novel can have no place alongside other kinds of novels. . . . (Boelhower 3)

Boelhower proposes two levels for the analysis and the definition of the immigrant texts – the macrostructural level, which refers to “the interaction between the semantic or thematic level and the formal level” (4), and the microstructural level, which encompasses “frames,” such as “stereotyped situations, set pieces,” in which characters are implanted (6). At the first, thematic level, “the specific topic of immigration defines the text’s macroposition,” and it, in turn, “underlies the text’s microstructure” (Boelhower 4). Here, the immigrants represent an ethnic worldview that reflects their arrival in America with certain, usually great expectations. The immigrant protagonists are put through numerous trials and are led to reconsider these trials in terms of their final status. These trials represent a contrast between “the Old World and the New World,” as well as “locations” and “sets of mental categories,” which creates tension within the plot structure of the immigrant novel.

Boelhower distinguishes three major elements of the immigrant fabula – “EXPECTATION (project, dream, possible world), CONTACT (experience, trials, contrasts),

and RESOLUTION (assimilation, alienation, hyphenation)” (5). The protagonists view the New World as the ideal reality, in the moment of expectation, and the Old World as the negative reality. At some point, these expectations fade, start to descend, and the process of reconsideration begins. This actually happens at the moment of contact, and it is the moment where the Old World and the New World clash and the de-idealization of the New World begins. As the protagonists discover America, they automatically become separated from the Old World, and this leads them to start idealizing it (Boelhower 5).

Boelhower further argues that “the protagonists mediate or unify not only the various macro-structural sequences that constitute the immigration fabula but also the contributing microstructural sequences to which the stock functions can be referred” (6). When considering the paradigms of contact and separation, one can isolate various frames, such as stereotyped situations, that define the characters’ positions and functions. These frames can be expressed in the following way:

The journey [J].

Folklore [Fk]: figures (fg); wisdom (fw); superstition (fs); practices (fp).  
Religion [R]: belief (rb); ritual-birth (ri); marriage (rm); death (rd).  
Gatherings and feasts [C]: food and drink (cf); songs (cs); music (cm);  
dance (cd).

Speech [S]: dialogue (sd); lexemes (sl); jokes and puns (sj).  
Memory [M]: cultural objects (mo); recollections (mr).  
Multiple character [MC]: ethnic homogeneity (mce); ethnic conflict (mct);  
generational homogeneity (mcg); generational conflict (mcf).

Customs [G].

Contact [T]: work (tr); politics (tp); inter-ethnic contact (ts); judicial  
institutions (ti).

Acquisition and loss [AL]: land (ald); house (alh); business (alb).  
(Letters are capitalized when a particular frame element is strong, that is, it  
encompasses and receives other frame elements.) (Boelhower 7)

These frames could be weak or strong, “depending on their chronological position in the plot, their complexity . . . or their resonance with the overall codification process” (Boelhower 8).

As Boelhower’s model illustrates, it seems that analyzing and defining the immigrant genre is not an easy task; there are various elements that need to be taken in consideration, and it almost seems as if one needed to employ some sort of mathematical formula to get the definition of the genre. Parameters like fabula, characters, stock frames, microstructural

sequences, social, psychological, and historical facts need to be taken in consideration. All things considered, one can surely conclude that the immigrant novel, as Boelhower states, “introduces into American literary history a new pluricultural world view . . . which is strictly related to the collective consciousness of immigrant groups” (10) and responsible for the creation of the genre’s form.

## 1.2. Identity and Otherness

The question of identity is most certainly one of the main themes of immigrant literature. According to Wikipedia, one could define the immigrant novel as a genre that explores the relationship the immigrants have towards another culture’s identity and ideas, including the processes of cultural adaptation, assimilation, as well as the intergenerational differentiation of identity (“American Immigrant Novel”).

A person’s identity is determined by all of one’s characteristics. It is defined not only by an individual’s perception of himself/herself but also by how he/she is seen by society. According to Kelly, literature also has a profound impact on identity formation because it cannot be separated from society and the individual (6). Literature not only serves as a social mirror and a repository of cultural identity but can also shape the way we think. In particular, experiences conveyed through immigrant texts can impact us like a lightning bolt and initiate processes of cultural translation and identification:

The identity has been studied widely in the American literature. The ethnic pluralism has started as a result of immigration. The waves of migration started from Europe, Latin America, China and Japan. At this point, America is the central point of that wave. This variation has reflected on American literature. The writers, who are from different gender and race, have written many things in American literature so as to have a place with their identity and history. Native American, Jewish American, Asian American writers studied about the crisis of identity and the fight of the two cultures. The themes, such as the language, otherness, the ethnic structure and the conflict of generation are the main subjects of their works. Their works portray us the characters who have the crisis of identity. (Tanritanir and Görürüm 123)

According to Tanritanir and Görürüm, “identity is a social statue that people have it [sic] in their social and cultural circle.” It comprises one’s worldview, one’s “social life,” as well as “the beliefs, attitudes and moralities which represent the life style of a human” (123). It is therefore apparent that, as cultural transplants, immigrants face great struggles and

identity crises, and this is mostly a result of the necessity to find a compromise between the Old World and the New World. On the one hand, the need to adapt to the new surroundings and its culture while simultaneously trying to preserve one's "native self" can lead to confusion and loss of identity. Yet, on the other hand, the necessity to keep one's "Old World identity" by preserving the traditions and habits from one's native culture can equally contribute to an identity crisis as such individuals (sub)consciously alienate themselves from the adoptive culture, completely refusing its language, culture, and tradition.

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, Otherness is "the quality or state of being other or different, or something that is other or different" ("Definition of Otherness"). In order to understand this concept, and in order to understand what constitutes Otherness, we must attempt to answer the question: "What is normal?". There is most certainly no right or wrong answer to that question because everybody has their own, unique perspective on seeing and perceiving the world. Of course, these perspectives are shaped, among others, by the society one lives in, so one of the possible "right" answers is that "normality" is a social construct consisting of a specific set of expectations made up by our surroundings:

Ideas of similarity and difference are central to the way in which we achieve a sense of identity and social belonging. Identities have some element of exclusivity. Just as when we formally join a club or an organisation, social membership depends upon fulfilling a set of criteria. It just so happens that such criteria are socially-constructed (that is, created by societies and social groups). (Zevallos)

If we want to comprehend this notion a little better, we must consider categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. As American immigrant literature describes characters that do not belong to the dominant Caucasian race, it inevitably explores the racial backdrop of Otherness. Furthermore, social determiners of appropriate gender and sexual behavior are often the cause of one's Otherness and distress in identity formation. Otherness in immigrant texts is also defined by one's class as their character's position is frequently linked to a lower social status.

Many American immigrant texts show that their characters' Othering frequently creates tension and alienation, and that the struggle to fit in is a painful process, but also a very significant one in discovering and creating new identities. As immigrants themselves, authors of immigrant texts know how it feels to be different, alienated, alone, and forced to struggle in order to overcome cultural, linguistic, and generational barriers. In other words,

their texts express the first-hand experience of Otherness in such a way that anyone can relate to their universal existential backdrop because there is not a single person on this planet that has not been lost or has not asked themselves: “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong.”

## 1.2. The “Stepmother Tongue” and “Stepmother-tongue Stories” – a Definition

“Stepmother tongue” and “stepmother-tongue stories” are two immigrant literature related concepts developed by Josip Novakovich. In his essay “This Is No Language” (1994), Novakovich, a Croatian-born American author, clarifies his immigrant identity through his relationship with English language, and explains that he is bilingual by choice. He explains that he started learning English at the age of sixteen, when, due to a sprained ankle, he had to stay in bed for a month. This is when he read his brother’s books in simplified English and noticed “a transformation within his personality” (qtd. in Moschin 17). Novakovich explains that he wondered whether the new language would change him “into a half-man, a half-goat, or a donkey, or, equally astounding, a foreigner” (qtd. in Moschin 17). It is no wonder that he questioned himself whether he would become a foreigner since, back then in his home country, a young English speaker stood out as the Other, as someone completely different, maybe even deformed. In this essay, Novakovich compares the English language to a cat. He claims that English, just like a cat, chooses its owner: “you don’t control it as much it controls you” (qtd. in Moschin 21).

Novakovich further explains his relationship to the English language in the Introduction to the short story collection *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* (2000), which he co-edited with Robert Shapard. He refers to his early life in Croatia and his beginnings in studying English language. From this short introduction, it is visible that Novakovich is also the Other in many ways; by studying in America, he became alienated from his native culture, but also had troubles adapting to the new culture as a writer who almost exclusively writes in English. In addition, he has been criticized for being a Croat who adopts Serbian words, but was equally reproached for using British words in his writing for an American University. Novakovich also refers to xenophobia as a problem, even among immigrant students. He reveals that even immigrant students have complained about him being a foreigner who teaches American literature.

In the Introduction to *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, Novakovich explains the terms “stepmother tongue” and “stepmother tongue writer,” claiming that the term English as a Second Language seems inadequate comparing to the term mother tongue (the language a

person is born into) because it sounds cold and bureaucratic. Accordingly, Novakovich and Shapard came up with the term that would indicate an expanding family: stepmother tongue. (Novakovich and Shapard 12). Reading Novakovich and Shapard's Introduction, the reader finds out what it is like to write in a stepmother tongue and how the new language can indeed serve as a new, positive, and productive force. Novakovich and Shapard claim that "it is quite common," for example, "among Chinese immigrants that when they begin to write in English, they feel they have more to say" because "English is an expressive language," and the stepmother tongue writers probably feel more comfortable writing in another language (15). On the other hand, some immigrant authors prefer to write in English because they find it more effective to get their point across than their mother tongue. Mikhail Iossel, for example, claims that he has less to say in English, and that this is a good thing since there are too many word choices in his native Russian language, and one could "easily lose sight of the story [one is] trying to tell" (Novakovich and Shapard 15).

However, not every "stepmother tongue writer" is the same, as some writers claim that they are cautious when they write in English because they tend to be very self-conscious and careful in order not to make "awkward choices." On the contrary, Novakovich feels that emigration has helped him put things in perspective and made him realize that his old experiences and memories are story-worthy materials that need to be told and heard. For him, writing in English has served as an escape from harsh Croatian reality of his younger days. Unlike some Croatian words, which can make him cringe, English words do not "carry the political and emotional baggage of a repressive upbringing" (16), which gives him freedom to say whatever he wants. We could say that Novakovich alienates himself from his native culture on purpose; he willingly chooses to professionally express himself in English because English, as he claims, is the only language that does not make him "feel like a linguistic exile" (qtd. in Moschin 21).

## 2. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is one of the most renowned American immigrant novels that has seen numerous editions and has been translated into 25 languages since its publication in 1989. The novel contains sixteen "stories about conflicts between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-raised daughters" ("*The Joy Luck Club* Summary") that provide eight perspectives by four Chinese immigrant mothers, Suyan, An-Mei, Lindo, and Ying-Ying, and their daughters, Jing-Mei (June), Waverly, Lena, and Rose. Out of these sixteen stories, two chapters are dedicated to each woman's perspective, except for Suyan's, whose story is told by her daughter, Jing-Mei. The mothers, who left China with great hopes and dreams about better lives for them and their families, are deeply connected to their Chinese cultural heritage, which forms their views on child raising, education, marriage, as well as their careers. On the other hand, their four daughters, who were born and raised in San Francisco, are influenced by both their Chinese heritage and the American culture.

Throughout the novel, we get a glimpse into all of these women's worldviews and personal histories. The plot shifts from one character's perspective to another, and it provides insight into complicated family relationships, and consequently, generational and cultural gaps. Right at the beginning, we are introduced to the main character, Jing-Mei (June). After her mother's death, June is asked to take her mother's place at the mahjong table in the Joy Luck Club, a weekly social gathering of first-generation Chinese women. The first time she comes to a Joy Luck Club meeting, she finds out from her mother's best friends, whom she refers to as her "aunties," that she has two half-sisters in Shanghai. Her mother, Suyan, left the twin sisters behind forty years ago, and it was her dream to find them and reunite with them. Suyan's friends ask June to travel to China to meet her half-sisters and tell them about their mother. This serves as a sort of turning point of the novel not only because June gets the opportunity to fulfill her mother's wish but also because she realizes that in order to fully know her mother, she needs to explore her past trauma by visiting China and uniting with her sisters (Meng).

One of the dominant motifs in Tan's novel is the motif of storytelling. Each character gets to tell her life story, and the stories of mothers and daughters are tightly intertwined. The reader learns about Suyan through both June's and her own narrative. Suyan came to America in 1947, after she had lost her family, including her twin daughters, whom she had given up in order to save them and herself. Suyan remarried, settled in San Francisco, and with three other Chinese immigrant women formed The Joy Luck Club, continuing the tradition of women's



gathering that she had started in China. Suyan's story is followed by An-Mei's narrative. An-Mei recalls living with her grandparents after her mother had been disowned. Even though disowned, An-Mei's mother sacrificed her own flesh in order to save her mother's life. Right after An-Mei, Lindo gets to tell her story, in which she reveals everything about an arranged marriage she was forced into by her family and how she managed to escape it cleverly and gracefully. After Lindo, Ying-Ying speaks about her fatalism and the loss of her spirit after she gave birth to a stillborn son while she was still living in China.

The next two sets of stories are narrated by the daughters. The daughters reminisce about their childhoods and relationships, as well as about their fears and resistance against their mothers' beliefs. The daughters' narratives start with Waverly's story. Waverly, who used to be a child chess prodigy, remembers giving up chess because she believed that her mother was excessively bragging about and taking all the credit for her achievements. Lena recalls her mother, Ying-Ying St. Clair, going nearly insane after she gave birth to a stillborn baby. In the years that followed, Lena had to act as both a translator and a mediator between her Chinese mother and American father. Lena's story is followed by that of Rose, who remembers her brother's death and her mother's incapability of letting go of the past trauma.

The novel is divided into four sections consisting of four stories each. Each section starts with a parable which serves as an introduction to the theme that connects all of the following stories. According to Lyngdoh, in *The Joy Luck Club* Tan employs the "talk story" narrative technique (144). The "talk story," or in Chinese "Gong gu tsai," is originally a Hawaiian phrase for chatting or "shooting the breeze." Despite its Hawaiian origin, the term can as well be applied to Chinese tradition of storytelling:

. . . Maxine Hong Kingston uses the term to describe a Chinese/Chinese-American storytelling style, which is an oral tradition of history, mythology, genealogy, bedtime stories, and how to stories that have been passed down through generations, an essential part of family and community life. ("About Talk Story")

Linda Ching Sledge defines the term as "a conservative, common folk art by and for common people, performed in various dialects of diverse ethnic areas that are never intended for those of non-Chinese origin" (qtd. in Yu).

In *The Joy Luck Club*, storytelling functions as a powerful narrative strategy which appertains to several different themes and immigration-related issues, such as Otherness, the state of in-betweenness, identity struggle, friendship, cultural and generational gap, language,

communication, as well as cultural translation, that loosely correspond to the frames of memory, gatherings, recollections, customs, and generational conflict from Boelhower's model. All of these frames are pretty much interrelated and cannot function separately.

Friendship is a very important theme in this work, especially in respect of the mother-characters as they are all immigrants with their own difficult backgrounds and stories. Even though at first it seems that these women cannot stand each other, they also seem not to be able to live without each other. Suyan started the Joy Luck Club for this very reason, in order to create a getaway for her friends in which they could share and listen to each other's stories. It is a place where they can be anyone they want, where they are not the Others, and it helps them realize that they are all in the same situation, making it easier for each other to survive in the foreign country.

Another important theme informed by the novel's storytelling technique is that of identity and Otherness. Given that Chinese and American societies are significantly different, it can be easily concluded that growing up between the two cultures – surrounded by both Chinese beliefs and customs and a more open and “free” American society – could lead to confusion, identity issues, and life problems in general. Logically, one's sense of identity shapes one's life trajectory. If a person knows exactly who he or she is, his/her goals are set, and it is more likely that he/she will succeed in achieving these goals. On the contrary, if a person has unresolved identity issues and is not quite sure where he/she belongs, his/her opportunities and life chances are diminished.

Both the mothers' and the daughters' stories reveal the mothers' positioning as Others in the eyes of both their daughters and the non-Chinese people in America. Alternately, due to their alienation from Chinese tradition, the daughters are also perceived as Others by their own mothers. In the first section of the novel, titled “The Feathers from a Thousand Li Away,” America is presented as a chance for the mothers to start over through their daughters. They have come to a new country full of hopes and dreams, wishing for their daughters to have better lives in a place where they will be valued based on their personal abilities and not judged by their husbands at their whim:

On her journey she (Suyan) cooed to a swan: “In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by her husband's belch. Out there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. (Tan 17)

Unfortunately, this is where the troubles and the struggling begin for Suyan, and her dreams start to fall apart. The immigration officers take Suyan's swan, the symbol of her good intentions and hope for her daughter's life, leaving her with only one feather. Soon enough, she gets disappointed both in the new country and her own daughter, who has distanced herself from her mother's tradition and is now "swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow" (17).

According to Boelhower, language is an important macrostructural element of immigrant texts that defines the character's conflicted position and "the inevitable . . . clash between their expectations and their Old-World cultural background" (6). Likewise, the language barrier is a constant source of the mother-daughter conflict throughout *The Joy Luck Club*. The daughters have grown up speaking only English, which alienates them from their own heritage as well as from their mothers. The mothers, on the other hand, are constantly viewed as "less competent or alien in American society" ("Immigration, Language, and Mistranslation in *The Joy Luck Club*"). Non-Chinese characters either ignore them or treat them as if they were inferior. Even within their own families, the mothers of *The Joy Luck Club* are alienated and treated differently as if they somehow did not belong there either.

The miscommunication between the mothers and the daughters is a dominant theme throughout the novel. The mothers have a hard time communicating with their daughters because the daughters are estranged from the Chinese culture. As a result, the mothers no longer seem to know their own daughters. They only see them through their relationships with their men as the daughters' husbands and boyfriends represent the American part of them, the American lifestyle that scares them. In other words, the mothers cannot connect with their daughters because they have become the opposite of what they wanted for them – to maintain the traditional Chinese mindset and values while adapting to American circumstances. Yet, the daughters seem to have accepted only American values and circumstances. When Waverly, who wants to go to China for her second honeymoon, declares that she will blend in too well in her mother's country, Lindo tells her that she will instantly be recognized as a tourist as she has that "sour American look on her face" (253):

How can she think she can blend in? Only her skin and her hair are Chinese. Inside – she is all American-made. . . . I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix? . . . I couldn't teach her about Chinese character. How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. . . . Why Chinese thinking is best. No, this kind of thinking didn't stick to her. She was

too busy chewing gum, blowing bubbles bigger than her cheeks. Only that kind of thinking stuck. (254)

When Lindo tells her that the locals will simply know that she does not belong, Waverly gets offended. Waverly wants now to be Chinese because it is fashionable, but as Lindo says, it is too late now because as soon as her daughter learned how to walk out of the door by herself, she completely forgot the Chinese ways her mother tried so hard to teach her.

The issues of Otherness and miscommunication are also revealed through the relationship between Ying-Ying and her daughter, Lena. Whereas Lena, who is fully Americanized, is socially accepted and treated as a white girl, her mother Ying-Ying is mistaken for her maid (108). Due to the language barrier, Lena acts as a mediator or translator between her Chinese mother, Ying-Ying, and her American father (“Immigration, Language, and Mistranslation in *The Joy Luck Club*”). When Ying-Ying gives birth to a stillborn son, the grief eats her up and she becomes utterly depressed. When her father asks Lena to translate what her mother is saying, Lena chooses to lie to him instead of translating her mother’s almost insane words correctly in order not to hurt him. However, because of Lena’s false translations, her father cannot support Ying-Ying in the right way, the way she needs him to support her, and this eventually results in Ying-Ying shutting herself out of her family and life all together.

Ying-Ying’s identity loss can be traced back to the moment she came to America. Upon her arrival, her husband changes her name to a more American one, and to make things worse, he puts down the wrong birth year in the immigration papers:

. . . my father said he saved her from a terrible life there. . . . My father proudly named her in her immigration papers: Betty St. Clair, crossing out her given name of Gu Ying-Ying. And then he put down the wrong birthyear, 1916 instead of 1914. So, with the sweep of a pen, my mother lost her name and became a Dragon instead of a Tiger. (104)

Ying-Ying’s case shows that due to the linguistic barrier, immigrants are often misinterpreted, which results in them being silenced and shut down. Moreover, immigrants who are unable to communicate in the language of the new country are diminished not only within their own families but also by the American society, which often gives them lower-class status. As she shops with Lena in a grocery store, Ying-Ying opens up jars and smells their insides. When a man starts yelling at her for doing that, Lena tells her mother that Chinese people are not allowed to shop in that store. Throughout the novel, Ying-Ying is treated as less worthy,

which she passively accepts. She accepts her new name and her fake date of birth, which turns her into “a Dragon instead of a Tiger.” She also accepts her daughter’s explanation that Chinese people are not allowed in some stores without even questioning it and without asserting her opinion. Even though she possesses clairvoyant powers – she predicts the downfall of a bank and her own delivery of a stillborn son – Ying-Ying does not act upon this knowledge; she just lets things happen. It is only later in the novel that she decides to act when she sees that her daughter’s marriage is falling apart.

However, in Tan’s novel, storytelling also serves as a vehicle to bridge language barriers, pass on the cultural heritage to the Americanized daughters, as well as a means to show love, provide advice and guidance, and share hopes and dreams. The mothers’ narratives are almost fairytale-like, and they are (in)directly told to their daughters. They are particularly useful when it comes to their daughters’ relationships because the mothers see themselves in their daughters, and they see them making the same mistakes they did. The mothers come to realize that even though their daughters are Americanized and independent, they are completely lost. They have become individuals with no identity in their marriages and relationships with men, in which they are invisible, like ghosts. This is evident in the chapter “Rice Husband,” when Ying-Ying comes to visit Lena and her husband. Lena and her husband are supposed to be equals in their marriage, but they are anything but equal. Harold completely ignores Lena’s role in his success; he does not even know that Lena does not like ice cream, and Ying-Ying sees through him right away. She realizes that Lena has become submissive, that she is not as independent as she would like her to be, and that she and her husband do not share a life. Lena is simply there within the boundaries that Harold has set up. Ying-Ying is upset because she recognizes herself in her daughter’s behavior. She does not want her daughter to disappear just like she did in her own marriage:

All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved. . . . All around this house I see the signs. My daughter looks but does not see. This is a house that will break into pieces. How do I know? I have always known a thing before it happens. (242-43)

The reader learns that Ying Ying really has the possibility to see things before they happen, but all her life she has remained passive: she never did anything to prevent them from happening. Lena gets her fatalism from her mother, so Ying-Ying decides that in order to save her, she will tell her daughter the story of her own dark past and reveal to her “that she is the daughter of a ghost” (252): “I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter’s tough skin

and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because it is the way a mother loves her daughter” (252). When Ying-Ying hears Lena and Harold talking downstairs, she hears “words that mean nothing,” so she decides to knock over a table and a vase in the guest room. She wants her daughter’s life to be better than her own, so knocking over that table is Ying-Ying’s way to get her daughter’s attention and to alert her of the troubles in her marriage. When Lena gets upstairs to check on her mother, Ying-Ying does not apologize, but rather, she hears her daughter say that she always knew that the table would eventually fall. The turning point comes with Ying-Ying’s question: “Then why don’t you stop it?” (165).

Despite her ability to see the oncoming signs of unhappiness in her marriage and her wish to control everything, Lena clearly does not have control over her personal life as she, just like her mother, is very passive and leaves everything to fate. It is through her mother’s difficult life story that Lena finally sees everything that is wrong with her own life. Ying-Ying’s story, therefore, helps Lena realize the true effect and power of mother-daughter love and that her mother’s stories are meant to teach her something and lead her in her own life. Lena realizes that it is important to express one’s true feelings in order to be happy and fulfilled. She takes her mother’s story as a life lesson and applies it to her marriage with Harold.

Every single story in this novel has a meaningful purpose, which is fulfilled despite the generational gap and the language and cultural barriers; all the characters come to terms with each other and with themselves. Through her own storytelling, June finds out a lot about herself and her mother. Waverly manages to find the courage to confront her mother and tell her that she is marrying Rich, and to her surprise, she learns that Lindo actually likes her future husband and that the two of them have her blessing. Likewise, Rose gets the strength to stand up for herself during the divorce with Ted with her mother’s help, upon hearing her mother’s story of self-assertion and defiance. In other words, storytelling enables the characters to reconstruct their histories and personal life stories as well as to recover and discover their identities. It allows these women to voice their hidden secrets and fears, to vocalize the meaning of their existence and selves. Moreover, storytelling also serves as a vehicle that transforms those fears and secrets into strengths which turn them into survivors. In this fashion, this powerful literary device depicts the process of discovering, reclaiming, and redefining one’s identity. By telling stories, these women review, analyze, and even are

able to understand their ancestry and thus come to understand themselves (see Foster, qtd. in Yu):

The act of storytelling is built upon mutuality in which the acts of telling and listening are conducted simultaneously: one cannot work without the other. The teller is the one who narrates and the listener is the other, who listens, but this is an interactive and dynamic process in which the two parties are creating meanings, and neither party is passive. In many respects, the relationship between a teller and a listener is analogous to that between a mother and an infant. (Yu)

As a means of family communication, the “talk story” bridges the generational and cultural gap since the mothers cannot articulate fully and fluently their intentions because of their “fractured English.” The daughters also seem to lack knowledge and command over Chinese, and these stories help them forge their connection with their mothers. The mothers’ tales are certainly addressed both to the readers and the daughters. Without these stories, the daughters would never have established the connection to their mothers and their native culture (Lyngdoh 161-66).

Accordingly, through storytelling, Tan emphasizes the themes of mutual recognition and understanding as well as self-confirmation. By shifting the mother-daughter communication roles, she enables her characters to glimpse into their souls and to find the core of their existence, which eventually transforms and empowers them. The mothers are at first silent by their own choice, which is not only out of shame, or helplessness, or guilt of any kind; it is a strategy for adapting to the New World in which they have arrived full of hope. Telling stories and sharing their experiences gives them a sense of belonging, security, and empowerment; they get the opportunity to remain silent, but also to make themselves heard and share the circumstances that have shaped their identities. In that sense, storytelling acts as a means of family communication. Their pains can be transformed into an artistic form such as myth.

Perhaps the best example for that is Suyan’s narrative. She tells June the same story over and over again, but each time the ending changes. In that way she keeps a certain distance between herself and June, but still gets to share her pains, opinions, or advice (see Yu). Like Waverly, June has lost touch with her Chinese heritage and her identity in general. She also feels incomplete and as if she were not good enough for her mother Suyan. Throughout her life, June tries to be special in order to live up to her mother’s belief that in

America one can be anything one wants to be. When she starts taking piano lessons as a child, June struggles to meet her mother's high expectations:

In fact, in the beginning, I was just as excited as my mother, maybe even more so. I pictured this prodigy part of me as many different images, trying each one on for size. . . . In all my imaginings, I was filled with a sense that I would soon become *perfect*. My mother and father would adore me. I would be beyond reproach. I would never feel the need to sulk for anything. But the prodigy in me became impatient. "If you don't hurry up and get me out of here, I'm disappearing for good," it warned. "And then you'll always be nothing." (133)

Yet, because of her mother's fragile English, June does not understand that all Suyan wants is for her daughter to be the best version of herself. June fears that her mother is trying to impose an identity on her as if she were inadequate just the way she is. She believes that she is not the kind of daughter Suyan wants her to be, and the constant failures to meet her mother's expectations start to wear her down:

And after seeing my mother's disappointed face once again, something inside of me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night, I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back – and that it would always be this ordinary face – I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made this high-pitched noises . . . trying to scratch out the face in the mirror. And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me – because I had never seen that face before. . . . The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not. (134)

As a result of the misunderstanding and miscommunication with her mother, June feels completely out of place and considers herself a failure. Yet, what she does not realize is that by standing up for herself, she has already become the person Suyan wanted her to be. Suyan always thought that June was special and that she was different from the other daughters. However, it was her fragile English and "the Chinese" way of doing and saying things that prevented her from expressing her feelings completely and telling her daughter that she was good enough and special just the way she was. Eventually, Suyan and June's relationship transforms for the better during a dinner, when all of the families join together to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Suyan has cooked eleven crabs, one crab for each person, and one crab extra. Out of eleven crabs, one is missing a leg, and had already been dead before it was



cooked, which is considered bad luck in Chinese culture. At the dinner, Waverly picks “the best crab, the brightest, the plumpest, and puts it on her daughter’s plate” (202), and then she picks the next best one for her boyfriend, and makes another good pick for herself. After everyone has a crab on their plate, two crabs are left on the platter, including the one with the torn-off leg. Even though June is not really fond of crabs, she takes the one with the missing leg. Yet, Suyan does not let her daughter take that crab, and gives her her own crab, claiming that she is not that hungry. Later on, however, she reveals that she is proud of her daughter and of her humility:

“What if someone else had picked that crab?” My mother looked at me and smiled. “Only *you* pick that crab. Nobody else take it. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different.” She said it as if this were proof – proof of something good. She always said things that didn’t make any sense, that sounded both good and bad at the same time. (208)

June might have become Americanized, but with her seemingly harsh upbringing methods, Suyan succeeded to instill a part of herself and the Chinese culture in her daughter; June, just like Suyan, wants what is best for others, and not just for herself. Even though, due to Suyan’s sudden death, the two of them never really get a chance to work out their differences (“*The Joy Luck Club Reader’s Guide*”), their precarious relationship is resolved at the end of the novel, when June travels to China to meet her half-sisters and fulfills her mother’s dream. The whole time, since she learned about her two half-sisters, she has asked herself if she was a replacement for the daughters that Suyan had left behind. Yet, upon visiting China and meeting her sisters and the people that knew her mother, June finds out the true meaning of her Chinese name – Jing, as “just pure essence,” and Mei, as “younger sister.” She finally reaches an understanding why her mother raised her the way she did and learns that she was not meant to be a replacement, but an enrichment as, according to Suyan, she was made of the best elements of her sisters. This young woman finally finds peace with herself because she learns that she is an *inheritor* to Suyan’s twin daughters’ legacy. Moreover, by coming to China, June also learns what it is like to be in a foreign country and how frightening it must have been for her mother and the other women when they came from China to America and were forced to adapt to a world completely different from the one they knew. Eventually, she realizes the true sense of belonging, as the trip brings her closer to her mother and her heritage, and comes to learn that Suyan’s hopeful dreams for her have been fulfilled. Thereupon, the last chapter brings intergenerational reconciliation and transformation as it

brings harmony “between Suyan’s two lives, between the two cultures, and between mother and the daughter” (“*The Joy Luck Club Summary*”).

Finally, the reader finds out that June is the main protagonist of this novel because her trip to China also connects all the stories from all the women in the novel. June’s narrative proves that despite all the miscommunication and misunderstanding, the deep love between the mothers and the daughters exists beyond all the boundaries, and that there is no cultural or language barrier that can overcome this kind of love. Like June, the other daughters eventually come to realize that storytelling is about learning, listening, and respect. Through storytelling and by sharing their experiences and fears, their mothers teach them to embrace themselves and every bit of their being and reunite both with their Chinese heritage and the American culture.

Like most immigrant texts, *The Joy Luck Club* contains numerous autobiographical references. June’s story and the stories of other Chinese-American women characters were inspired by Amy Tan’s own personal experiences, memories, and identity struggles, which makes the author’s life an essential element in the novel’s interpretation. Amy Tan was also a second-generation immigrant, born in Oakland, California to Chinese immigrant parents. Her father came to America to escape the Chinese Civil War, while her mother, whose life inspired Tan’s novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, was forced to leave her three children behind when she escaped from Shanghai before the Communist takeover of China in 1949. Tan’s brother and father both died of brain tumors, after which the family moved to Switzerland, where Tan finished high school. Like June, Waverly, Lena, and Rose, Tan was also in constant conflict with her mother throughout her teenage and young adult years. A turning point occurred just about when Tan’s writing career started to bloom; her mother got very sick. During that time, Tan promised herself that if her mother got better, she would take her to China to see the daughters she had left behind forty years before. Their trip to China was an eye-opener for Tan; it gave her a new perspective on her difficult relationship with her mother and inspired her to write *The Joy Luck Club* (“Amy Tan Biography”).

Amy Tan’s biography reveals a profound connection between immigrant writers’ life experiences and their works and characters. As a child of immigrants, Tan is also an Other – she has experienced identity crises no matter how American she has felt. Her relationship with her mother was not easy as she was struggling to reconcile the two very different parts of her identity – the Chinese part and the American part. Yet, like June, Tan was not aware of that until her trip to China. It was only when she met her half-sisters and experienced China in real

life, on her own skin, that she really got to know her mother and learned about her own identity:

I discovered how American I was. I also discovered how Chinese I was by the kind of family habits and routines that were so familiar. I discovered a sense of finally belonging to a period of history, which I never felt with American history. . . . So, I think going to China was a turning point. I couldn't have written *The Joy Luck Club* without having been there, without having felt that spiritual sense of geography. ("Author of *The Joy Luck Club* – Interview")

*The Joy Luck Club* is, therefore, not just a work of fiction but also, in Tan's words, the closest thing of describing her own life path ("Author of *The Joy Luck Club* – Interview") and personal growth that has taught her to find balance by embracing both sides of her immigrant identity as a privilege and cultural advantage.

### 3. Minfong Ho's "The Winter Hibiscus"

Minfong Ho is a Singaporean writer educated in schools in Bangkok and Taiwan. Ho started her literary career when she came to America, after she had been accepted to Cornell University, where she earned her Bachelor's and Master's Degree. She considers her body and personality split into three different (linguistic) entities and believes that English serves as an agglomerating force of her identity. Minfong Ho did not grow up listening or speaking the English language; she grew up surrounded by Chinese and Thai language for the most part, and English only came much later, in school. Therefore, she considers Chinese to be the language of her heart, as it carries "the deepest emotional resonance"; Thai is the language of her hands, as for her it is the functional language which connects her to the outside world, and English is the language of her head, as it has served as "a form of intellectual exercise" (Novakovich and Shapard 161). In a personal statement from *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, Ho provides an answer to the question "What happens when you have a different language for your heart, your hands and your head?" ("Mingfong Ho" 162). She believes that such a position creates both fragmented identities and a richness of identity. Even though she feels some sort of uneasiness when writing in English, she also feels that this stepmother tongue has been really good to her: ". . . it has allowed me to bring back what is gone, to relive what is lost, to make mosaic out of fragments. And to feel – head, hands and heart – whole again" ("Mingfong Ho" 162).

The main character in Ho's short story "The Winter Hibiscus" (2000) could be said to be the author's alter ego. This short story is about a sixteen-year-old Laotian girl, Saeng, who moved to the USA with her family four years before the beginning of the story. Her parents were grade school teachers back in Laos, but in America, her mother is a dishwasher and her father is a janitor. Both of her parents are paid more in the United States than they were back in Laos, and are very happy and pleased about the opportunities America has offered them. Saeng's father is not very much discussed in the story, but her mother plays an important role. Saeng needs to pass her driving test because it will help her parents with the transportation to work and back, and that will save them some money as well. The story highlights Saeng's homesickness and the difficulties she faces while adjusting to her new life in America.

As is the case with the other texts discussed in this paper, the *leitmotifs* of this short story are the issues of Otherness and the state of in-betweenness. Whereas Tan's novel depicts Otherness in many different ways, and from many different angles – through the themes of mother-daughter relationships, language barriers, marriage and relationships of the characters,

Old World / New World relation, adaptation, and preservation, "The Winter Hibiscus" primarily focuses on the protagonist's alienation and inability to fit in her new surroundings, and the mother-daughter relationship is its marginal motif. It is true that Saeng's mother has an important role in this short story, but this happens only at the end. Throughout the story, Saeng and her mother have different views on their life in America; her mother is very optimistic and grateful about being in America, and she feels that America is very welcoming to them:

"America has opened her door to us as guests," Saeng's mother had said. "We don't want to sit around waiting for its handouts like beggars." She and Mr. Panouvong had swallowed their pride and gotten jobs as a dishwasher and a janitor, and were taking English lessons at night under some state program that, to their amazement, actually paid them for studying! (165)

However, even though Saeng feels more comfortable speaking in English, she still feels as if she did not belong. Her nostalgia, alienation, and fears are not depicted through storytelling, like in Tan's novel, but rather through some other form of reminiscing. Like Proust in one of his greatest works *In Search of Lost Time* (or *Remembrance of Things Past*), Ho relies on stimuli and the characters' emotional reactions to these stimuli. Certain Chinese words hold a strange resonance with Saeng; she is immediately thrown back to her childhood when she hears such words as *luuke* (meaning child in Laotian). Just like the author of this story, for Saeng, Laotian is the language of her heart.

Immediately upon her arrival in the New World, Saeng and her family are positioned as Others. In addition to their inability to communicate in English, their social and economic circumstances contribute to their alienation. In the school, Saeng feels different not only because of her oriental features but also because her clothes, donated to her by her family's benefactor, Mrs. Lambert, are second-hand and old-fashioned. Her realization of not belonging and her disappointment intensify when she fails the driving test. Saeng feels as if she had disappointed her parents by failing "the one test which might have enabled her to help her parents get to work" (169). She even feels as if this test could have earned "her some status among her classmates" (169). In other words, her failure to pass the test serves as a reminder that she is "different." In addition, Saeng realizes that she is of no interest to David, Mrs. Lambert's son whom she has a crush on, who let her use his car for the test at his mother's request. When she returns his car after the driving test, she watches David drive away with his girlfriend, whom she describes as "someone blond and vivacious" who makes her feel wrong and "totally out of place" (170). As she watches David and the girl being "so

carefree, so casual – so American” (170), Saeng compares them to Ken and Barbie dolls. Seeing them as the representation of everything American, she comes to the realization “that They Belonged, and she didn’t” (170), which only adds up to her sense of failure and Otherness.

During her walk home, Saeng comes across a flower shop and decides to go inside the shop’s hothouse where she has seen a “familiar bush” of tropical hibiscus (172). Like in Proust’s work *In Search of Lost Time*, in which the narrator’s emotions take him back to the past, the hibiscus plant transports Saeng to her childhood days in Laos filled with its familiar sweet rich scent:

The familiar fragrance filled her lungs, and Saeng could almost feel the light strands of her grandmother’s long grey hair, freshly washed. . . . And when the sun had dried it, Saeng would help the gnarled old fingers knot the hair into a bun, then slip a *dok Malik* bud into it. (175)

The hibiscus plant has a pivotal role in this story. It is a representation of Saeng herself. When she sees it in the florists’s flowerpot, she feels that, like herself, it is out of place, far away from home where it just grows wild in different places, and decides to purchase it and bring it home. When Saeng comes home, her mother is appalled when she learns how much money Saeng has spent on that plant. Saeng breaks down and cries, telling her mother everything about the driving test. Her mother’s reaction is supportive and she shows much understanding. She reassures and comforts Saeng by comparing her to the hibiscus plant that she has brought home:

“I’ve seen this kind blooming along the lake. Its flowers aren’t as pretty, but it is strong enough to make it through the cold winter months here, this winter hibiscus. That’s what matters.” . . . “Look how rootbound it is, poor thing,” she said. “Let’s plant it, right now.” (177)

This is the moment when Saeng’s mother takes an important role in Saeng’s recuperation and adaptation to her new surroundings. She carefully plants the hibiscus in the ground, and in that way metaphorically both buries her daughter’s self-deprecation and enables her to become rooted in her new surroundings. Saeng can now finally make peace with her situation and start appreciating the new beginning in the New World rather than despising it.

At the end of the story, we learn that in addition to her determination to fit in the New World, Saeng is also aware of the richness of her bicultural identity and strives to preserve the best parts of her Old World identity by choosing to prefer Chinese cuisine and bitter melons

over Big Macs. Thereupon, "The Winter Hibiscus" has a positive ending as, with her mother's help, Saeng finally makes peace with herself; she decides that, like the hibiscus plant, she will grow stronger and bloom in the spring, and then take that driving test again.

#### 4. Bharati Mukherjee's "Happiness"

Bharati Mukherjee was an American writer of Bengali origin born in 1940 in Calcutta. She authored numerous remarkable novels, such as *Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*, as well as various essays and short story collections like *The Middleman and Other Stories* and *Darkness*. This renowned writer usually wrote about personal experiences and difficulties of women from India who migrated to America in the late twentieth century, describing their transformation in the new surroundings in order to survive. Having gone through those experiences herself, Mukherjee was able to convey the strength and courage needed to get through identity crises and the worst time in one's life by using her witty narrative style. The most common themes in her works were most notably strength, courage, and identity as well as gender issues ("The Writings of Bharati Mukherjee").

In her short story "Happiness," Mukherjee depicts a Bengali woman whose very traditional, dying father has arranged her marriage with a very successful man of Bengali origin named Arjun, who lives in New York. Right at the beginning, the reader finds out that neither of the future spouses is very thrilled about the arrangement: ". . . the dramatic moment came for the veiled bride to lift her head and look into the groom's eyes, we both managed I'm – ready – for – whatever – adventure smiles" (39). Later on, the protagonist moves to America with Arjun; day by day, they are getting to know each other; she learns American customs, whereas Arjun is "updated" to Indian customs. Still, the protagonist realizes that somehow this does not feel right: "Give and take; take and give: that was the flow of our intimacy. Arjun liked to have money, and he liked me to spend it" (41). The protagonist knows for sure that that is not what marriage should be about. In their marriage, there is no intimacy or love whatsoever. She wishes that she had a chance to tell her late father that the marriage he had arranged for her did not last. It was a marriage that she did not understand, she did not belong in, which she and Arjun eventually become aware of. It takes her seven years to gain some self-esteem, reinvent her identity, and find some other goals in life. Finally, upon starting law school, the protagonist realizes that this failed arranged marriage "has alchemized into new strengths and excitements" (45).

Mukherjee's "Happiness" is slightly different from the previously discussed texts. This work is told in the first person and, unlike the other works, does not follow the mother-daughter relationship, but rather, though partially, the father-daughter relationship. Similarly to the *Joy Luck Club's* narrative technique, the protagonist in Mukherjee's work shares her story with the reader; the reader finds out about her arranged marriage and her subsequent life



in America. In this story, Mukherjee toys with the themes of Otherness and identity, as well as with gender issues, in particular the issue of the arranged marriage. The protagonist comes from a traditional Indian family, but has a strong relationship with her father. This firm bond with her father connects her with Mukherjee herself since she also had such a relationship with her father and family in general. The first mention of this relationship occurs right at the beginning of the story as the protagonist reminisces her father's last words:

The night before he passed away, he gave me his last advice and blessing. He said, "In the areas I can control, namely financial security and temperamental compatibility, I have hedged all bets. Happiness in marriage? That, even I can't guarantee." (38)

On his deathbed, her father gives her advice and makes sure that the arranged marriage she is about to enter will at least give her financial security. He even makes sure that his daughter's future husband is compatible with her temperament and personality by consulting astrology when choosing her spouse. That makes him a good father who means only the best for his daughter, has an open relationship with her, and is willing to do as much as he can to make sure that she will be fine. Such a good relationship between her and her father is also notable later in the story when she continues reminiscing his words while describing her marriage with Arjun and her life in America:

"Class and conscience," my father said, "go together like a washerman and his donkey. Class is the washerman, but he has to follow the path that his stubborn donkey takes, isn't it?"

My father's analogies were not for me to question . . . he'd composed a notebookful of morally uplifting couplets in Bengali, the point of all of which was, cultivate your conscience so that money and rank may not lead you astray. I have followed his advice . . . for lascivious reasons. (41)

The arranged marriage in this story might as well illustrate the question of gender equality, which connects with the protagonist's and Arjun's quest for identity. Since this kind of marriage is normal in India, even though she is aware that this is not what she truly wants, the protagonist agrees to it. In fact, it seems that both she and Arjun are deprived of any say in the matter, and are therefore positioned as Others, with no role in deciding their own future:

I don't call it my wedding, or Arjun's and my wedding, because the bride and groom played the least assertive roles. . . . We fasted when we were told to, we bathed with turmeric paste in Ganges water . . . and when the dramatic moment came for the veiled bride to lift her head and look into the groom's eyes, we both managed I'm-ready-for-whatever-adventure smiles. (39)

These two people act as bystanders in their own wedding out of respect for their native culture, and, in the protagonist's case, her father's wish. Upon her arrival in the U.S., the protagonist tries to preserve the parts of her native culture that she likes, and denies the parts that she dislikes. She has the same attitude toward the adoptive culture, i.e. the American culture. She goes to social gatherings with Arjun and learns new words and expressions, such as "Creedmore, Prozac, shelter for abused women, defenestration" (40). Both she and Arjun fill each other in on each culture, which shows that this woman may have a fluid identity as she does not feel nostalgic about her native culture, but is rather willing to embrace the new culture and take from it as much as she can:

At the dinner table, I learned to taste the differences between chardonnay and sauvignon blanc. . . . He cut back on pork and beef. I filled him in on Indian politics. . . . He reciprocated by dictating which senators and Congress representatives I was to trust and explaining the glories and ghastlinesses of the American two-party system. (40)

Even though Arjun is completely Americanized, he does not try to Americanize his wife, which is visible in that she just takes what is offered to her in the New World. Some things she sees for the first time in her life, such as the material things she did not have back in India. This woman willingly chooses to Americanize herself because she can; she has the possibility to live a better life, at least materially.

Yet, it could also be said that both she and Arjun are the Others in their own marriage. In order to preserve their culture, they both lose themselves. Even though Arjun's identity is completely in line with the dominant American identity, which is carefree, materialistic, *white*, and consumerist, he loses his freedom and becomes the Other the moment he agrees to the arranged marriage. On the other hand, the arranged marriage liberates his wife, but also alienates her from her own culture. Even though she, to some extent, dislikes her husband and is clearly aware that "the Indian concept of formalized relationships and institutionalized togetherness cannot work" in American context (see Ramesh Babu), she initially chooses to stay in a marriage without actual love and intimacy. She likes the part where she can have whatever she wants and not having to move a finger for it:

Give and take; take and give: that was the flow of our intimacy. Arjun liked to have money, and he liked me to spend it. I did. I drove the BMW – bigger, shinier than in the photos I'd been shown – to the malls, and displayed what money could buy. . . . Money in my marriage to Arjun, was the consensual currency of intimacy. . . . We gave and took freely, greedily. We demonstrated large-hearted poor sense instead of self-interest. There should have been time

for me to let my father know that before intimacy, happiness in marriage pales.  
(41)

Accordingly, the protagonist absorbs the new culture rather greedily, and her transformation happens fast.

The plot twist happens when Arjun comes home from work one night, which the protagonist refers to as "any other weeknight in their American life" (41-42). Arjun comes home happy, stating that the two of them should celebrate that night. He opens a bottle of champagne and the two of them start dancing. While dancing, she starts to trip, stumble and apologize, claiming that she cannot "feel the beat to his hummed tune" (44). Eventually, they both realize that they are not compatible either as dancing and or as marriage partners: "I think my problem is I'm not hearing what you're hearing, I'm not feeling what you're feeling" (45). Arjun suddenly lets go of her and, as she falls back to his chair, he continues dancing on his own. This is the moment when the protagonist realizes that she actually does not belong in that marriage, that she is not happy at all.

The next morning, she finds a note on an orange Post-it, stuck to the neck of the champagne bottle: "*There is another woman, but that's not the reason. Arranged marriages carry no risk. I know you'll react to my leaving, and to a gambler, certainty is boring. Ciao! Have a happy life*" (45). The note which Arjun leaves to his wife is a perfect example of his Americanization; he cherishes the freedom America offers and he wants to grab it. In America's materialistic world nothing is certain, and Arjun decides to enjoy this kind of life without patriarchic weights. Likewise, the dissolution of their marriage paves the way for the protagonist's liberation and her identity quest as well. Even though she claims that the changes in her life are almost invisible as she still has all the material things she used to have while married to Arjun, she only later realizes that what has changed the most is herself: "My father's failure to arrange a lasting marriage has alchemized into new strengths and excitements" (45). Like many of Mukherjee's characters, she successfully manages to reconcile the two cultures that clash inside her, forsaking a predictable life, throwing herself into a new, better one, and ending up richer and happier than she could ever have imagined.

## Conclusion

All of the texts analyzed in this paper belong to the immigrant genre and therefore share many similarities. These works provide a glimpse into what it is like to be a foreigner in a foreign country and live far away from what one used to call home. Identity issues and states of in-betweenness and Otherness are the major themes tackled and explored through these works and their characters, whose stories are relatable since there is not a single person on this planet that has never felt alienated, forgotten, or ignored; every single one of us has experienced the feeling of being the Other. In addition, as they are all authored by immigrant women, these texts bring forth real-life experiences, and in that way, they are confessional narratives, both fictitious and autobiographical.

Of the three texts, Tan's novel is the most complex one, probably due to the fact that it is a novel, while the other two works are short stories. *The Joy Luck Club's* plot and themes are unified through storytelling and reminiscence as it is also the case with Ho's "The Winter Hibiscus" and Mukherjee's "Happiness." Unlike Tan and Mukherjee, Ho does not use storytelling as a literary device, but instead relies on the technique of reminiscing which is quite similar to the one employed by Proust's in his greatest work *In Search of Lost Time* (or *Remembrance of Things Past*).

*The Joy Luck Club* revolves around the mother-daughter relationship, and thus explores the generational differences as well as the cultural differences between the mothers and the daughters, while in "The Winter Hibiscus," the mother's role becomes prominent only at the end, when Saeng's mother helps her daughter find her place in the world. On the other hand, Mukherjee's short story is slightly different than Ho's and Tan's works as it delves into a father-daughter relationship, rather than a mother-daughter relationship.

In addition, both Tan's novel and Ho's short story examine the immigrant identity-related problems by exposing the hardships faced while adapting to the New World, the cultural clash between the generations, as well as the difficulties in preserving one's native cultural heritage. The latter is particularly evident in Tan's novel, whose first-generation immigrant characters face considerable difficulties while adapting to the new culture, while their American-born children struggle to understand and uphold their native cultural tradition. On the contrary, both Tan's and Ho's characters eventually recreate their identities with their mothers' help. In Tan's novel, the mothers tell their stories to their daughters in order to help them, and in that way they also help themselves because storytelling acts as a "therapy" that

lets them vocalize their pains and personal histories. In “The Winter Hibiscus,” Saeng’s mother helps Saeng by showing her love and understanding in a moment of identity crisis. For Mukherjee’s protagonists, on the other hand, the immigration experience serves as a venue towards an identity quest. By leaving the protagonist, Arjun forces her to leave her predictable self behind and embrace a new, pluri-cultural self, which paves the way to her self-discovery and the ability to maintain the best of the two cultures within herself.

The protagonists of all of these texts are on an identity quest through which they learn a lot about themselves and their native and adoptive cultures. All of the characters are wedged between the Old World and the New World. Some of them, such as Mukherjee’s protagonist, decide both to keep some parts of their old selves and absorb some parts of the new culture, whereas the other characters are in constant struggle with themselves and their surroundings, while trying to figure out which identity to choose, the native or the adoptive one. Eventually, they all come to realize who they are and find themselves in both cultures, proving that having multiple cultural identities does not have to be wrong or difficult, and that it actually makes a person richer in terms of experiences, language, perception, and even feelings. Just like Ho, they eventually learn to feel in one language and touch and express themselves in another one.

## Works Cited

- “About Talk Story: Celebrating Cultural Heritage and Reading.” *Talk Story*, talkstorytogether.org/about. Accessed 31 July 2019.
- “American Immigrant Novel.” *Wikipedia*, Accessed 29 July 2019.
- “Amy Tan Biography.” *Academy of Achievement*, 15 July 2019, www.achievement.org/achiever/amy-tan/#biography. Accessed 15 July 2019.
- “Author of *The Joy Luck Club* – Interview.” *Academy of Achievement*, 28 June 1996, <https://www.achievement.org/achiever/amy-tan/#interview>. Accessed 15 Oct. 2019.
- Boelhower, William Q. “The Immigrant Novel as Genre.” *MELUS*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1981, pp. 3-13.
- “Definition of Otherness.” *Merriam-Webster*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/otherness. Accessed 31 July 2019.
- Ho, Minfong. “The Winter Hibiscus.” *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue Tongue*, edited by Josip Novakovich and Robert Shapard, White Pine Press, 2000, pp. 162-78.
- “Immigration, Language, and Mistranslation in *The Joy Luck Club*.” *LitCharts*, www.litcharts.com/lit/the-joy-luck-club/themes/immigration-language-and-mistranslation. Accessed 20 July 2019.
- “*The Joy Luck Club* Summary: Plot Overview.” *SparkNotes*, www.sparknotes.com/lit/joyluck/summary. Accessed 25 July 2019.
- “*The Joy Luck Club* Reader’s Guide.” *Penguin Random House*, www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/300526/the-joy-luck-club-by-amy-tan/9780143129493/readers-guide. Accessed 30 July 2019.
- Kelly, Lynda, *The Interrelationships between Adult Museum Visitors’ Learning Identities and Their Museum Experiences*. 2007. University of Technology, Sydney, PhD dissertation, [musdigi.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/kelly-thesis-chapter-2-and-7.pdf](http://musdigi.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/kelly-thesis-chapter-2-and-7.pdf). Accessed 2 Aug. 2019.
- Lyngdoh, Gayreen. *The Journey to the Self: A Study of the Women Characters in the Select Novels of Pearl S. Buck and Amy Tan*. 2006. North-Eastern Hill University, PhD dissertation, [hdl.handle.net/10603/194767](http://hdl.handle.net/10603/194767). Accessed 2 Aug. 2019.

- Meng, Lijun. "The Joy Luck Club and Chinese Culture." *Lijun Meng's Blog*, 27 Oct. 2015, [menglijunemily.blogspot.com/2015/10/the-joy-luck-club-and-chinese-culture.html](http://menglijunemily.blogspot.com/2015/10/the-joy-luck-club-and-chinese-culture.html). Accessed 3 Aug. 2019.
- "Mingfong Ho." *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue Tongue*, edited by Josip Novakovich and Robert Shapard, White Pine Press, 2000, pp. 161-62.
- Moschin, Sara. *What I Did for Love: An Analysis of the Work of Josip Novaković with Reference to a Selection of Short Stories in English by Non Native Writers*. 2015/2016. Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Master's thesis, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/aedc/98b4f7a36f31625f5cff0f6509879e85f1c1.pdf>. Accessed 15 Oct. 2019.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. "Happiness." *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, edited by Josip Novakovich and Robert Shapard, White Pine Press, 2000, pp. 38-46.
- Novakovich, Josip, and Robert Shapard. *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, White Pine Press, 2000.
- Novakovich, Josip. "This Is No Language." *Ploughshares*, vol. 20, no. 2-3, 1994, pp. 140-47. *Literature Resource Center*, [go.gale.com/ps/anonymou?id=GALE%7CA15759506&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00484474&p=LitRC&sw=w](http://go.gale.com/ps/anonymou?id=GALE%7CA15759506&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00484474&p=LitRC&sw=w). Accessed 20 Aug. 2019.
- Proust, Marcel. *U traganju za izgubljenim vremenom 1-13*. Preveo Tin Ujević, Zora – Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1977.
- Ramesh Babu, Tera. "Alienation, Self-assertion and Immigrant Sensibility in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* and *Jasmine*." *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2013, pp. 23-26, [www.academia.edu/35692685/ALIENATION\\_SELF\\_ASSERTION\\_AND\\_IMMIGRANT\\_SENSIBILITY\\_IN\\_BHARATI\\_MUKHERJEES\\_WIFE\\_AND\\_JASMINE?auto=download](http://www.academia.edu/35692685/ALIENATION_SELF_ASSERTION_AND_IMMIGRANT_SENSIBILITY_IN_BHARATI_MUKHERJEES_WIFE_AND_JASMINE?auto=download). Accessed 23 Aug. 2019.
- Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989. Penguin Books, 2006.
- Tanritanir, Bülent Cercis, and Gamze Görürüm, "Struggle for an Identity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." *The Journal of International Social Research*, vol. 10, no. 48, 2017, [sosyalarastirmalar.com/cilt10/sayi48\\_pdf/1dil\\_edebiyat/tanritanir\\_bulent.pdf](http://sosyalarastirmalar.com/cilt10/sayi48_pdf/1dil_edebiyat/tanritanir_bulent.pdf). Accessed 2 Aug. 2019.

“The Writings of Bharati Mukherjee.” *Bartleby*, 4 Feb. 2018, [www.bartleby.com/essay/The-Writings-of-Bharati-Mukherjee-F3C7T24JDBRA](http://www.bartleby.com/essay/The-Writings-of-Bharati-Mukherjee-F3C7T24JDBRA). Accessed 23 Aug. 2019.

Yu, Yi-Lin “Relocating Maternal Subjectivity: Storytelling and Mother-Daughter Voices in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*.” *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2002, <http://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/article/view/yu/49>. Accessed 15 Oct. 2019.

Zevallos, Zuleyka, “What Is Otherness?.” *Other Sociologist*, [othersociologist.com/otherness-resources](http://othersociologist.com/otherness-resources). Accessed 10 July 2019.