

# Mother-Daughter Relationships in Contemporary American Immigrant Fiction

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Sveučilišni prijediplomski dvopredmetni studij Engleski jezik i književnost i  
Njemački jezik i književnost

Irina Dmitrović

Odnosi majki i kćeri u suvremenoj američkoj imigrantskoj prozi

Završni rad

Mentor: prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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## **Abstract**

Amy Tan is a Chinese American author who made her literary debut by publishing *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989. The novel consists of sixteen vignettes connected through its characters. Set in San Francisco, the narrative explores relationships between four Chinese American immigrant mothers and four daughters born and raised in the United States. Around three decades later, a Korean American author and singer-songwriter Michelle Zauner published a memoir *Crying in H Mart* in the memory of her beloved mother. Growing up biracial in Philadelphia and Oregon, she is struggling to accept her complex identity. Dealing with the pain and unexpected loss of her mother, Zauner starts cooking traditional Korean dishes to reconnect with her past and relatives. *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and *Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner are used as a lens through which the struggle of Asian Americans to preserve their heritage while adapting to a new culture is explored and how it affects mother-daughter relationships. By examining these ideologies through food, language, traditional values, and other cultural aspects, the paper aims to depict the struggle to maintain a strong bond between the two generations due to their differences. The broader aim of the paper is to contribute to a better understanding of overcoming generational trauma, pursuing personal aspirations, fulfilling the American Dream, and accepting racial and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** *The Joy Luck Club*, *Crying in H Mart*, mother-daughter relationships, immigrant fiction, identity

# Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u> .....	8
<u>1. The Concept of Motherhood and Mother-Daughter Relationships</u> .....	9
<u>2. Chongmi and Michelle Zauner in Crying in H Mart</u> .....	11
<u>3. Suyuan and Jing-mei “June” Woo</u> .....	13
<u>4. An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan</u> .....	16
<u>5. Lindo and Waverly Jong</u> .....	18
<u>6. Ying-ying and Lena St. Clair</u> .....	21
<u>Conclusion</u> .....	24
<u>Works Cited</u> .....	25



## Introduction

Amy Tan is a Chinese-American author who made her literary debut in 1989 with *The Joy Luck Club*. The novel consists of sixteen interconnected vignettes exploring the relationships between four Chinese-American immigrant mothers and their daughters who were born and raised in San Francisco. Delving into themes of generational trauma, cultural heritage, and identity, the work explores how the mothers' past experiences in China shape their expectations and interactions with their daughters. The leading characters in *The Joy Luck Club*, such as Suyuan Woo and her daughter Jing-mei “June” Woo, exemplify the cultural and generational conflicts that define the mother-daughter relationship. Suyuan's high expectations rooted in her traumatic past often clash with June's desire for independence. This dynamic is paralleled in other mother-daughter pairs in the novel, such as An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan, Lindo Jong and Waverly Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair and Lena St. Clair. They all represent the struggle to balance traditional values and the pursuit of personal identity.

Michelle Zauner, a Korean-American author and singer-songwriter, published her memoir *Crying in H Mart* as a tribute to her late mother. Growing up as a biracial child in Philadelphia and Oregon, she deals with her complex identity and grief. By cooking traditional Korean dishes, Zauner tries to connect with her heritage and the memory of her mother. The memoir centers around food as a powerful motif to explore the themes of love, sorrow, and cultural identity while focusing on the connection between Zauner and her mother Chongmi. H Mart, an Asian food supermarket, serves as a place of solace and a connection to her Korean heritage. In her memoir, Zauner provides a moving description of how she tries to recreate her mother's dishes to overcome her grief and preserve the tradition. This relationship is challenged by language barriers and Zauner's mixed-race identity, which intensifies her experiences of oppression and racism. This paper examines how *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and *Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner highlight the challenges Asian American women face in preserving their heritage while adapting to a new culture, especially in the context of the mother-daughter relationship. By examining cultural aspects such as food, language, traditions, values, and upbringing, the paper aims to show how these elements influence intergenerational relationships. The overall goal of the paper is to contribute to a better understanding of overcoming generational trauma, pursuing personal goals, achieving the American Dream, and embracing racial and cultural identity. The analysis of key themes, symbols, and characters from both works draws parallels and contrasts between the two literary works. By examining these features, the paper

provides insight into the complexities of maintaining a strong bond between generations despite their cultural differences. Overall, *The Joy Luck Club* and *Crying in H Mart* offer detailed, multi-layered portrayals of the Asian American experience by focusing primarily on the mother-daughter relationships. Tan and Zauner highlight the challenges and resilience required to navigate the complicated dynamics of identity and belonging.

## 1. The Concept of Motherhood and Mother-Daughter Relationships

The depiction of motherhood in literary works depends on the author. Mothers as figures do not appear in the same way in texts written by female authors as they do in those written by male ones. Caesar notices this significant difference in male narratives where the mothers occur in more “degraded” forms, whereas in female texts a mother is “a figure for idealization” (121). Furthermore, he sees postmodern literature as harmful to mothers because they are shown as exclusively related to patriarchy. Caesar also argues that motherhood, whose representation in the literary world is challenging to the writers, is often just a cliché (122). The mother as a literary figure is commonly used to create a narrative, but the character development of the main hero is driven by “paternal power” (Caesar 123). Mothers are mostly described as “only mothers,” embodying “the institution of motherhood,” which is “culturally inscribed under patriarchy” (Caesar 125). Therefore, they are characters with only one societal role in the narrative, without their individual experiences being acknowledged. Caesar also highlights the importance of changing the position of women and mothers in contemporary fiction since there are no figures who “illustrate better than those of mothers what it means to be ‘inappropriated’” (133). By pointing out the issue of mothers being “excluded from representational power” in texts written by men, he encourages female authors to join the reformation (Caesar 133). Similarly, Stewart touches upon this issue by defining a contrast between male and female authors:

Whereas the male artist can identify with traditional mythic heroes without jeopardizing his self-image or his sexual identity, the female artist is burdened by the heritage of patriarchal myths in a society that arbitrarily excludes her from various experiences, sets her on a pedestal or in a pigsty, and otherwise causes ambivalence

about her self-image, whether she follows its traditions or rejects the heroinizing of its myths. (127)

Stewart also defines the novel of the artist as heroine as a work focused primarily on mother-daughter relationships that are crucial for the heroine's development (128). The examples of empowering works about motherhood and mother-daughter relationships in contemporary American immigrant fiction by female authors are *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and *Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner. Both offer an insight into the struggles of motherhood and cultural identity by focusing on mother-daughter relationships. Whereas Zauner writes an autobiographical memoir from the daughter's point of view, Tan broadens the perspective by describing stories from the perspective of an older generation. Heung defines this type of narration as "a double voice," which yields a "multiple female consciousness" (599). Heller further stresses the maternal focus by emphasizing the absence of men from the narrative and family histories (117). They are not given "a voice" in either of these works, as they appear as figures only mentioned in the stories told by mothers and daughters. Chodorow explains this phenomenon as a completely natural cross-cultural "segregation by gender" in which "women tend to have closer personal ties with each other than men have" (200). Not only do they connect through shared dreams and hopes, but also through their shared struggles and experiences as women, mothers, and daughters in modern society. Heung explains this dynamic in the following way:

In the tradition of breaking silence that has become one of the shaping myths in the writings of women of color, maternal silence in the novel is transformed from a medium of self-inscription and subjectivity into an instrument of intersubjectivity and dialogue. For the mothers, storytelling heals past experiences of loss and separation; it is also a medium for rewriting stories of oppression and victimization into parables of self-affirmation and individual empowerment. (607)

By speaking up about their loss, grief, oppression, and cultural and generational conflicts, the female characters transform "common experiences of pain and victimization into testimonials of mother/daughter bonding" (Heung 602). Chodorow also states that women slowly build stronger connections and "layers of identification" with their mothers throughout their development. This idea is further supported by TuSmith, who emphasizes that these relationships become deeper as the daughters mature (37). Thus, the future generation of female artists has an important task "to create a

new mythos, one that will break the cycle and will depict the birth of an artist/heroine who is both courageous and womanly” (Stewart 143).

## 2. Chongmi and Michelle Zauner in *Crying in H Mart*

Michelle Zauner publishes her memoir *Crying in H Mart* in celebration of her Korean mother's life and cultural heritage. By focusing on the mother-daughter relationship between Michelle and Chongmi, this chapter aims to uncover how different aspects of culture evoke a sense of identity and belonging. Throughout her work, Zauner reflects on the memories of her mother who was diagnosed with terminal cancer. In the first chapter, she introduces “H Mart” as the central term of her whole work. It is described as a supermarket chain specializing in Asian food, which she often visits to cry (Zauner 3). The place symbolizes access to her Korean heritage and lost memories that remind her of her mother. Michelle observes other Asians at the store and explains they are all there to find food or ingredients that remind them of their home or their cultural identity (Zauner 10). Losing both her aunt and her mother to cancer, Zauner lost precious childhood memories and a part of herself. She is collecting evidence that the Korean half of her identity did not die when they did (Zauner 11). The first cultural aspect of their mother-daughter dynamic is emphasized by her explanation of how food is an expression of love that brings people together. By observing her preferences and preparing her favorite traditional dishes, Chongmi brings joy, care, and comfort to her child. Despite their differences, Michelle notices how their “shared appreciation of Korean food served not only as a form of mother-daughter bonding but also offered a pure and abiding source of her approval” (Zauner 21-22). Since Michelle sees her mother as her role model, she wants to eat Chongmi's childhood snacks and “like all the things she did, to embody her completely” (Zauner 5). This urge becomes stronger when her mother falls ill, and Michelle is willing to learn how to make traditional Korean dishes, just to help her gain strength:

I fantasized about the delicious food we'd make together, finally repaying my debts, giving back some of the love and care I'd taken for granted for so many years. Dishes that would comfort her and remind her of Korea. Meals prepared just the way she liked them, to lift her spirits and nourish her body and give her the strength she'd need to recover. (Zauner 75)

Michelle feels lost as she does not know how to cook many traditional dishes on her own and only relies on her senses and memories of how the food used to taste. The cooking symbolizes the role reversal as Michelle is responsible for taking proper care of her dying mother. The food was “an unspoken language” between them, their “return to each other,” their “bonding,” their “common ground” (Zauner 98). Since it is emotionally straining to deal with grief, preparing food serves as a form of therapy for the young daughter. She prepares kimchi, spicy pickled cabbage, every month. It makes her happy to maintain the family's “little tradition” (Zauner 219). Another cultural aspect Michelle is struggling with is language and the barrier it creates between her and her family members. During family gatherings, aunts and grandmother would speak Korean while Chongmi tried her best to translate for Michelle who was unable to comprehend. She learned to “read and write Korean in Korean language school, Hangul Hakkyo” (Zauner 80) but mostly relied on Konglish, “a fusion of Korean and English that obeys Korean rules of pronunciation” (Zauner 81). Zauner describes a phenomenon common in children growing up in multilingual families:

Unlike the second languages I attempted to learn in high school, there are Korean words I inherently understand without ever having learned their definition. There is no momentary translation that mediates the transition from one language to another. Parts of Korean just exist somewhere as a part of my psyche—words imbued with their pure meaning, not their English substitutes. (197)

Having a white American father who speaks only English and an Asian American mother whose native language is Korean, Michelle's lack of fluency and linguistic knowledge makes her feel the importance of communication for building strong human relationships. Her first word was “Umma,” meaning “mother” in Korean. The significance of this word is seen in Michelle's last farewell when she screams in her “mother tongue” and Chongmi takes her last breath (Zauner 152). Being brought up in a mixed household and a predominantly white area, Michelle has been struggling with the acceptance of her complex identity. As a school student in Eugene, she was “one of just a few mixed-race kids” (Zauner 33) whom other people saw as Asian. While feeling “awkward and undesirable” in her hometown, she was “exotic” and “celebrated” (Zauner 33) in Seoul, South Korea, where everyone assumed she was Caucasian. Through her younger self in this memoir, the author reflects on her “complicated desire for whiteness” that many people of color or mixed-race Americans experience along with oppression and racism (Zauner 33). She “often felt out of place” (Zauner 81) like “some kind of alien or exotic

fruit” (Zauner 95). People questioning her identity made her lose pride (Zauner 95) and “become embarrassed about being Korean” (Zauner 96). Chongmi calling Michelle “American” made the mother-daughter relationship more complicated because Michelle was looking for her mother’s approval and support (Zauner 96). Similarly, it was hard for her to regain her self-confidence after hearing racist jokes made by her classmates. In response, she was convinced that only non-Asians with a “yellow fever” who fetishize Asian women (Zauner 96) would like her. After Chongmi's death, Michelle starts questioning the right to claim Korea and her family. A mother is a figure a daughter looks up to and sees as the access to culture, self-confidence, and identity. Dealing with grief made Michelle realize that she can still be someone “full” or “whole” (Zauner 107) and that she does not have to prove her belonging to anyone else. All precious memories of her mother, Korea, language, culture, and identity are hers to claim and no one can take them away from her.

### 3. Suyuan and Jing-mei “June” Woo

The main focus of the novel *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan is on the complexity of mother-daughter relationships and the strong bond between them despite their generational and cultural differences. The novel starts and ends with a vignette from Jing-mei Woo's perspective. Her wish to learn more about her deceased mother Suyuan brings her closer to her mother's friends and characters introduced in the following chapters of this paper. June is determined to find out more about her mother's past and her path from China to the United States in search of a better life. The “Joy Luck” Club is what brings the first generation, the mothers called Suyuan, An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying, together. The four mothers become friends by helping each other survive the war, starvation, and terrors of their country at the time. The idea of having a gathering of four women who can play the traditional Chinese game, mah jong, is described as follows:

So we decided to hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year. Each week we could forget past wrongs done to us. We weren’t allowed to think a bad thought. We feasted, we laughed, we played games, lost and won, we told the best stories. And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that’s how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck. (Tan 12)

The game “mah jong” represents a mother’s wish for her daughter “to devise a strategy for solving problems and being successful in life” – just like players plan their moves to win (Emerick 39). To “break a wall” in the game is to overcome differences and restore “meaningful communication” between mothers and daughters (Emerick 41). Although the mothers want only the best for their children, their past traumas deeply affect the mother-daughter relationships and the new generation who grew up as Americans. June describes her mother as “always displeased” with people around her because she thinks they have to constantly improve themselves (Tan 19). The high expectations set by Suyuan caused her daughter's obsession with perfection. Wanting to make her mother proud and happy, Jing-mei is determined to become a prodigy. Suyuan used to trade housecleaning services and all the money she earned for her daughter's weekly lessons and a piano (Tan 146). Seeing her mother's sacrifice, June felt pressured and afraid of being a failure. Although she tried to respect her mother's opinions more, the two of them “never really understood one another” (Tan 27). Fear of disappointment, obsession over being perfect, and problems with communication led them to another big fight. Due to their language barrier, mother and daughter find it hard to express their thoughts and feelings. Suyuan explains she had never asked June to be a genius and only wanted her to do her best (Tan 146). The mother has an approach of the immigrant generation that is more traditional and deeply rooted in Chinese beliefs and values. She expresses her disappointment by criticizing the new generation's lack of passion and gratitude towards the elderly, specifically parents (Tan 146). On the contrary, June's wish to be independent and express herself freely is misunderstood as rebellion and bad temper (Tan 146). By switching from one language to another during the argument, Amy Tan emphasizes the emotional connection through the Chinese language. This idea is supported by an explanation that people usually argue in their native language and use it as a “register of intimacy” as they are more emotionally connected to it (Heung 605). Language is a significant part of a person’s identity and “a way of preserving significance in the new reality of America” (Anzaldúa qtd. in Heung 604). Although a mixture of English and Chinese can be confusing or embarrassing to the new generation, it is a sign of struggle in communication, which in the end leads to misunderstandings and highlights cultural differences. June cries in frustration because she will never be the kind of daughter her mother wants her to be (Tan 153). Suyuan scolds her daughter by shouting in Chinese. The crucial part of their story in the novel that helps the readers analyze how complex and delicate their mother-daughter relationship is can be seen in the following quote:

“You want me to be someone that I’m not!” I sobbed. “I’ll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!”

“Only two kinds of daughters,” she shouted in Chinese. “Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!”

“Then I wish I wasn’t your daughter. I wish you weren’t my mother,” I shouted. As I said these things I got scared. It felt like worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last.

“Too late change this,” said my mother shrilly. And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that’s when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about.

“Then I wish I’d never been born!” I shouted. “I wish I were dead! Like them.”  
(Tan 153)

June cannot comprehend her mother's emotions and the reason she gives so much importance to her daughter's success. Following the stories told by other characters, Jing-mei and the readers are provided with the context about Suyuan's troubled past. After losing her home, parents, first husband, and their twin baby daughters, she had no choice but to move to the United States in 1949 together with other immigrants from Asia. She saw America as a chance for a peaceful, fulfilled life with better opportunities for a new beginning. The concept of the American Dream is portrayed as only an illusion because Suyuan “had hoped for something so large that failure was inevitable” (Tan 154). While she believes a person can be anything they want to (Tan 141), June believes she can only be herself. Suyuan sees her daughter's disobedience as a betrayal and lastly gives up hope (Tan 154). She is not able to find her long-lost twin daughters and later passes away. Jing-mei flies to China to meet her sisters for the first time and to tell them about their mother who has sacrificed her happiness for her daughters as a mother loves her children “more than her own life” (Tan 29). Having a conversation with the ladies from the Joy Luck Club, June realizes that the ladies can see a reflection of their daughters in her. The new generation is disconnected from their heritage and unable to understand the older generation’s experiences and aspirations. They now speak different languages and have unique hopes and dreams. The greatest fear mothers are facing is leaving their grandchildren devoid of the “connecting hope” that should be passed down (Tan 31). By accepting her mother’s position in the traditional game of mah jong, June symbolically shows her will to understand her and learn more



about her past to strengthen their bond (Emerick 37). When she finally embraces her sisters from China, she decides to tell them about the important life lessons her mother taught her and the sacrifices made in the past. By visiting her motherland, Jing-mei circles the narrative by “harmonizing East with West, the past with the present” (Heller 113). Although the sisters have the same mother signifying “a common origin,” they have cultural and social differences that set them apart (Heller 114). Nonetheless, Jing-mei is ready to embrace her cultural identity to create a stronger relationship with her loved ones in the future.

#### 4. An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan

Understanding the family dynamics of An-mei Hsu, a mother who grew up in traditional China, shows how a parent’s childhood trauma affects the children and their relationships with other family members. An-mei was raised by Popo, Chinese for grandma, and was taught never to mention her mother’s name because it was disrespectful to her father (Tan 34). Popo referred to her as a ghost and refused to acknowledge her existence. Another adult An-mei used to look up to was her Auntie, who “had a very bad temper with children” (Tan 35). An-mei and her brothers grew up without a caring and emotionally available mother-figure and their biological mother presented a mystery in their lives. After one of the brothers accused Auntie of frightening their mother away from home, they learned she “had married a man named Wu Tsing who already had a wife, two concubines, and other bad children” (Tan 35). Being abandoned by her mother at such a young age, An-mei explains how unlucky she felt to have her as a mother. Auntie and Popo portrayed her as “a traitor” who dishonored the whole family in a way “that even the devil must look down to see her” (Tan 35). The children were raised to respect their father’s name, although his absence did not allow them to develop a deeper emotional connection. After her father had passed away, An-mei could only remember him as “a big painting” of “a large, unsmiling man” she had to honor by being a respectful daughter (Tan 34). The connection between the “portrait” of the father, which represents “the obliging gaze of absent patriarchs,” and the Chinese mothers, who transmit Chinese culture, is thus to be found in “a cultural imposition of speechlessness on” their daughters (Heller 118). An-mei is deeply traumatized by her mother’s abandonment, not being able to understand how she could leave without her (Tan 242). Burdened by so many questions a child should never ask, she feels trapped by her thoughts and

overwhelming emotions (Tan 36). Her emotional wound starts healing over time and turns into a scar, but the pain “so terrible that a little child should never remember it” has never left (Tan 39). She has learned to love her mother by seeing her nature in her own (Tan 40). To fully accept and appreciate her, An-mei has to learn the truth about her mother and see her mother’s situation from the perspective of a woman in traditional Chinese society, where she has limited possibilities to overcome challenging circumstances and provide financial stability and safety for her children.

When An-mei’s mother unexpectedly became a widow, she had to find a new way to take care of her children. The position of women as daughters, wives, or mothers in Chinese society at the time was determined by “their families’ economic circumstances” and “their ability to bear male heirs” (Heung 601). An-mei’s mother was a housewife and a caretaker with the main role of being a proper wife and mother. Having no one to rely on after her husband’s death, she left her children to Auntie and Popo and left her family due to concubinage (Heung 601). Unlike the Chinese tradition of honoring a husband until death, she left her family to marry a rich man called Wu Tsing. Although he had five wives, she was not jealous because girls in China “did not marry for love,” they married “for position” (Tan 256). By joining Wu Tsing’s household of a higher social status and power (Tan 269), her mother sacrificed her safety, comfort, and happiness to ensure her daughter would never be poor or unhappy. As a result of her mother’s sacrifices, An-mei starts a new life with “dresses and good things to eat” (Tan 249). Upon learning this, she shows empathy and understanding for her mother’s situation:

My mother, she suffered. She lost her face and tried to hide it. She found only greater misery and finally could not hide that. There is nothing more to understand. That was China. That was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away. That was their fate. But now they can do something else. Now they no longer have to swallow their own tears or suffer the taunts of magpies. (Tan 272)

An-mei was taught not to express any strong emotions like sadness, especially not in front of her family members. She would always deal with her problems alone and cry in her room as a child. When An-mei’s mother cried in front of her, it was a special bonding moment that helped both mother and her daughter heal together. Isolating oneself instead of having a conversation about sadness or anger is not a healthy coping mechanism, but a lesson she learned from her mother. Trying to protect herself from getting hurt and being taken advantage of, An-mei might have rejected people who wanted to

offer her help. Just like other mothers from the “Joy Luck” Club, she cherishes the lessons she learned from her past and hopes to share them with the new generation. She moves to the United States in search of freedom and better life opportunities. Even though she tried to move on from the pain and sadness she grew up with, her unresolved issues kept haunting her.

Rose is An-mei’s American-born daughter who is struggling with her marriage. Ted is her emotionally dominant husband who usually makes all important decisions. Rose does not want to take responsibility or blame for anything and always tells her male counterpart to choose instead. She sacrifices her power and gives it to Ted to maintain her relationship. Such an attitude, however, leads to a conflict. The husband feels burdened by the lack of communication and wants a divorce. Rose’s passivity and submission in marriage are linked to the struggles of her mother and grandmother. Both An-mei and Rose now have a chance to break “the cycle of silence” and strict rules the older generations were forced to obey. Rose does not have any hope to save her marriage, but her mother values it as a significant relationship that cannot be abandoned as easily. Instead of giving her a direct answer and advising her what to do, An-mei tells Rose she does not have to give up on her marriage, but rather finally speak up about her struggles (Tan 215). The only thing she must do is take control of her life and make this important decision on her own, even if it means she has to sacrifice her comfort (Tan 139).

## 5. Lindo and Waverly Jong

Lindo Jong starts her part of the narrative by telling a story about her first marriage. Lindo was only two years old when an old village matchmaker and her future mother-in-law, the mother of the boy Huang Taitai whom she would later be “forced to marry,” came to her childhood home (Tan 43). The marriage was arranged according to old Chinese traditions and the personalities of the two children based on the Chinese zodiac. Lindo was seen as a precious baby girl because of her beauty (Tan 43). Arranged marriages in traditional China were not based on love or freedom of choice. Huang Taitai was only one year old at the time and Lindo was supposed to fulfill his wishes as a wife due to her hard-working personality predetermined by her zodiac (44). She was valued only as “Huang Taitai’s wife” because the families in the country “were always the last to give up stupid old-fashioned customs” (Tan 44). Her role as a woman is to be a proper wife, an obedient daughter-in-law, raise

sons, and care for the elderly (Tan 45). When Lindo cries and expresses her wish to stay at home, her mother replies coldly and simply explains she cannot help her as marriage is treated as a contract between two families that cannot be broken (Tan 45). Lindo's mother emotionally distances herself from her daughter to make it easier for her to leave. Regarded as an "object to be invested in or bartered" in society, she is forced to leave her natal family and join a new one (Heung 601). Being a twelve-year-old girl when she moves away, Lindo is not able to understand her mother's sacrifice (Tan 47). Her mother's last words reflect the expectations Lindo has to fulfill as a daughter and a wife: she is lucky to be married into a rich family and should always be obedient to honor her parents (Tan 47). Determined to keep her promise, she enters marriage with an unknown boy. Rather than being welcomed into the family and treated as an honorable wife, she is treated as just another servant (Tan 49). Overburdened by societal expectations, the young girl does not know how to handle the sadness and thinks of taking her life (Tan 53). She feels helpless because her freedom is taken away from her and her life predetermined by others. She sacrifices her happiness to keep a promise (Tan 52). Lindo regains her power by looking at her reflection in the river as her genuine thoughts can never be taken away from her (Tan 53). Her maturity is reflected in her determination to respect her parent's wishes and cultural values while keeping her individuality and following her principles. To Lindo's generation, sacrifices and promises are highly valued, and one who does not fulfill the expectations faces the consequences. As Shirley explains, she is a figure of both "maternity" and "racial consciousness" who helps the new generations overcome the issues of selfhood and racial identity (qtd. in Heung 600). Her Chinese-American daughter Waverly does not see the importance of promises and embodies an independent spirit with a Western way of thinking. Seeing her daughter not conforming to the traditional beliefs and values and not being in touch with her culture, Lindo is afraid this will result in the loss of racial consciousness and weaken the familial bonds she is trying to obtain through cultural heritage. Waverly is open-minded, moves in with her partner before marriage, speaks back to her mother, and questions her principles (Tan 287). Lindo wants to teach Waverly about resilience and gratitude by telling a story about her journey of leaving her motherland behind to give her children "the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character" (Tan 288). By learning about the troubled past of the older immigrant generation, the children understand the value of the opportunities they now have, and the importance of sacrifice and hard work. As "there is no one way of being Chinese or American," these adjectives can be used to describe "multiple, dynamic possibilities" of a person's Chinese-American identity (Heller 116). She soon realizes that Waverly is

highly influenced by her birth country and the old Chinese values are now replaced by new ones. She sees how their experiences of “cultural mixing are different” and their “doubled identity” can cause problems in relationships (Heung 603). Lindo expresses her sadness because Waverly is ashamed of her and her cultural heritage (Tan 290). She is misunderstood by her daughter who does not know about the struggles and sacrifices she did for her family. Just like her mother before her, Lindo was forcefully separated from her parents, married into a family that did not accept her, and survived a war (Tan 292). In the new country, it is hard for Lindo to keep her “Chinese face” (Tan 292). By introducing chess in the new part of her story, Lindo explains her struggle of raising an immigrant family in the United States while maintaining her cultural heritage. Having different social values and beliefs she brought from China, she is “losing the game” on her way to success because she struggles to integrate into the American society and adapt to Western culture. To teach her children how to navigate their challenges and acquire important life skills like decision-making, Lindo encourages them to play with their new chess set, which was given to them by “the neighborhood Tao society” as a Christmas gift (Tan 98). Not being able to comprehend the complicated rules, Waverly first lost many times. Lindo advises her to carefully observe and learn how to win the game. Her chess analogy shows how important it is to have access to “the rules of the game” and be aware of the expectations imposed upon immigrants. Lindo’s fear of freely expressing her Chinese identity serves as a social critique of American society, in which many immigrants suppress their authenticity to avoid being judged or discriminated against due to common misconceptions. Lindo is concerned about whether her daughter can fit into the new society due to her Chinese appearance. She therefore named her “Waverly” after the street they lived on to ensure she would have better opportunities in life (Tan 302). Lindo sets the expectations high and wants her daughter to be successful. Waverly is often underrated by her opponents due to her gender and age, but uses prejudice to her advantage and surprises other competitors with her knowledge and skills. By the age of nine, she was known as “a national chess champion” and “a child prodigy,” representing hope and pride for her Chinese community (Tan 99). Like other immigrant mothers in the “Joy Luck” Club, Lindo wants her daughter to show her full potential and pushes her to her limits. Waverly loves winning and wants to be praised by her mother. Lindo’s constant bragging is a form of love that is misinterpreted by Waverly. She thinks she is being discredited for her hard work and this miscommunication leads to a conflict. Her defeat in a game of chess is described as the loss of “the gift” and her identity as “a prodigy” (Tan 190). Feeling pressured to conform to the dominant culture to fit in and succeed in the States, she disconnects from her family

and Chinese culture and loses her cultural authenticity. Waverly fears she will not be acknowledged for her success by her mother and loses her position in the Chinese community she grew up in by turning into “someone quite ordinary” (Tan 190). She is a daughter who exhibits “matrophobia,” or the fear of “becoming one’s mother” (Rich qtd. in Heung 600). Her fear is evident when the resemblance between the two is pointed out by a hairdresser (Tan 290). Waverly is a “reflection” of her mother Lindo and therefore all generations of mothers and daughters before her. Not only are the happiness, good fortune, and important life lessons passed on to the younger generation, but also the sadness, fears, and trauma (Heung 600). The mother-daughter conflict is further deepened by Lindo’s wish to control her daughter’s marriage. Having learned many lessons from her troubled marital life during her childhood, she wants to ensure only the best for her daughter. Yet, Waverly thinks her mother has poisoned her marriage by interfering (Tan 192). Lindo’s determination to protect her child is contrasted with Waverly’s free spirit and independence. While the daughter sees her mother as an opponent, the mother is waiting “patiently for her daughter to invite her in” and open up to her (Tan 204).

## 6. Ying-ying and Lena St. Clair

Ying-ying’s vignette starts with a memory she has been hiding from her daughter for a long time. It is hard for her to open up about her past because of the pain she experienced. Since her daughter Lena is having a hard time, Ying-ying tries to rebuild a connection with her by explaining how traumatizing events affected her. She fears not being heard by her child because she has been quiet about her struggles and desires for so long (Tan 64). The mother has been keeping her “true nature” hidden like “a small shadow,” not being able to freely express her thoughts and feelings (Tan 64). Because of her drastic change in character, Ying-ying is misunderstood by her daughter and unable to build a strong emotional connection. The reason for this is a traumatic experience from the past described in a story about the Moon festival. Ying-ying comes from a wealthy family. A common Chinese custom among the upper class was to hire servants to take care of their children. While the parents are busy focusing on their business and social status, Ying-ying is being raised by a nanny called Amah, who is dressing up a four-year-old Ying-ying for a ceremony. She scolds the girl for questioning the tradition and being curious by ordering her to “behave” and follow her “mother’s

example” (Tan 66). Like mothers who tell stories to their children to teach them an important lesson, the nanny introduces a legend of the Moon Lady as a woman who grants wishes. Wearing heavy formal clothes in the summer heat, the little girl wishes to be free of her robes (Tan 68). As Ying-ying freely expresses her desire not to conform to the rules, she is rejected by her nanny who wants to teach her discipline. According to Chinese customs, it is selfish to desire something out loud. Amah scolds her for thinking of her needs and tells her to be silent. Ying-ying’s passivity as a mother and wife is deeply rooted in her childhood. She was raised in a society where girls are taught to be obedient and to blindly follow the societal norms in order not to “bring shame into the house” (Tan 276). Therefore, she has been suppressing her free spirit and restless nature to fulfill everyone’s expectations. Ying-ying’s name is an important symbol of female resilience and mother-daughter relationships in the novel. Her name means “Clear Reflection” (Tan 276). Not only does it highlight the beliefs and trauma she inherited from her mother, but it also puts a focus on her “wild and stubborn” character striving to openly rebel against the rules (Tan 275). The absence of a mother highly affects Ying-ying’s ability to build strong and stable relationships with people around her. Looking for safety and comfort, she turns to her nanny in time of need and sees her as a potential maternal figure. This is evident when Ying-ying accidentally falls into the water and calls for Amah instead of her mother (Tan 78). After strangers save her from drowning, she feels isolated and abandoned by her family who still have not noticed she is missing (Tan 79). Ying-ying avoids recalling her sad memories until she sees her daughter struggling with a loveless marriage. She reminisces her wish to be found and hopes to give this wisdom to her child. Just like her mother before her, Ying-ying is a passive maternal figure and cannot communicate openly. The problem with communication is deepened by the St. Clair family situation. Lena is biracial and brought up by a Chinese mother and an American father Clifford who is of English-Irish descent (Tan 107). She grows up as an interpreter between her parents who cannot speak each other’s languages well enough to create a deeper understanding and a stronger emotional bond (Tan 109). As an immigrant mother, Ying-ying cannot fully express herself and is often misunderstood by her closest family members. Clifford destroys her spirit by his lack of patience to learn more about his wife’s culture and does not value her opinion (Heung 602). He “puts words in her mouth” and ignores the language barrier by simply speaking for her and being dominant in their marriage. Ying-ying criticizes her position in marriage by expressing “resentment towards an American husband” and using Chinese only with her daughter (Heung 605). Not even Lena, who can speak Mandarin, can understand her mother’s tradition and values, calling her mother’s Chinese way

of thinking “Chinese nonsense” because she is influenced by American culture (Tan 112). Looking for acknowledgment, Ying-ying first speaks in gestures and broken sentences. After losing her second baby, she withdraws into herself and becomes a “ghost” in her family. Ying-ying’s view on motherhood is depicted in the following passage:

She and I have shared the same body. There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. 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. (Tan 274)

The mother acknowledges the importance of communication in building strong and healthy family bonds. Heung explains how the Joy Luck mothers can “negotiate their daughters’ desires for cultural assimilation and autonomous selfhood” because they are accepting of their cultural differences (604). Although she has been passive and silent most of her daughter’s life, she decides to reconnect with her by transferring her wisdom through the stories of her past. Ying-ying meets an American called Saint who takes her to another continent to start a new life. She changes her style, does “servant’s tasks,” tries to learn English, and does everything she can to fit into the new society (Tan 285). She slowly loses her unique “spirit” and accepts her husband’s and daughter’s “American ways” (Tan 285). Due to a cultural and language barrier, she feels like she is watching her family “from another shore” (Tan 285). This passivity and insecurity are internalized and passed on to Lena, who is also struggling with her marriage. She is questioning her worth as a wife of Harold who she sees as a perfect man. Lena lives in constant fear that “all this undeserved good fortune would someday slip away” (Tan 169) and asks Rose Hsu Jordan for advice. She explains that most Chinese-American women feel the same and think it is due to their upbringing in Chinese humility (Tan 170). She provides a new approach to the problem by saying she learned not to blame her culture or ethnicity for it (Tan 170). Rose encourages Lena to face the problems of their new generation. Lena’s position as a Chinese-American woman in the marriage and professional world is further described through a story of Harold’s success. She supports his dream of starting a business and even sacrifices her old job to help him. Although Lena supports him both financially and emotionally, Harold does not appreciate his wife’s hard work or give her credit for the success of his new company. Both partners are seemingly trying to achieve equality in marriage by splitting their household expenses evenly, but the lack of communication and



understanding shows unequal distribution of power. Ying-ying notices her daughter's sadness and decides to confront her fears from the past to help her daughter.

## Conclusion

*Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan offer a moving exploration of the complicated relationships between mothers and daughters, revealing the deep impact of cultural heritage and intergenerational trauma. Zauner's memoir focuses on her relationship with her Korean mother, Chongmi, using food as a central motif of connection and love. H Mart, an Asian grocery store, becomes a source of comfort and a place that symbolizes her heritage. A role reversal demonstrates their strong bond as Zauner becomes her mother's caretaker by learning to recreate traditional Korean dishes. The issues she faces as a biracial woman, feelings of displacement, and racism are also addressed in the autobiography. Lastly, *Crying in H Mart* is a journey of self-discovery and acceptance. Michelle's cultural identity is shaped by her memories and experiences. In contrast, *The Joy Luck Club* explores the intergenerational and multicultural differences that shape Chinese-American mother-daughter relationships. The novel revolves around the story of Suyuan Woo and her daughter, Jing-mei "June" Woo. The mother's high expectations often clash with the young girl's desire for independence. Suyuan's formation of the "Joy Luck" Club with her friends An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying symbolizes the resilience and hope these women share despite their struggles. A recurring motif, the game of mah-jong, symbolizes the mother's desire for her daughter to develop strategies for success in life by overcoming differences and restoring communication. An-mei's perception of family and motherhood is shaped by her upbringing in rural China, which was marked by the absence of a caring mother figure. This unresolved trauma affects her relationship with Rose, whose passivity in marriage parallels her mother's struggles. An-mei's advice to Rose to take control of her life and make her own decisions serves as an important lesson: the value of speaking out about one's struggles and taking control of one's destiny. Lindo Jong's story explores arranged marriages and traditional Chinese customs. Raised in America, Lindo's daughter Waverly values independence and self-expression, which creates tension between the two. Despite these challenges, Lindo's love and hope for mutual understanding show the enduring bond between mothers and daughters. Ying-ying St. Clair's harsh upbringing, which emphasizes strict obedience to Chinese

traditions and silence, shapes her passive nature and inability to communicate openly. This unresolved trauma affects both her marriage and relationship with her daughter. Ying-ying's decision to open up about her past is a crucial step in breaking the cycle of silence and submission. By acknowledging her experiences, the mother hopes to empower her daughter to stand up for herself and not repeat the same mistakes. Like Zauner's memoir, Tan's novel illustrates the complexity of mother-daughter relationships shaped by cultural heritage and generational trauma. These narratives emphasize the themes of resilience, identity, and the bonds that unite mothers and daughters across cultural and generational divides. They eventually find a sense of belonging and understanding with their cultural identities and family relationships through their journey of self-discovery and acceptance.

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