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Autofiction and Therapy: Encounters of Generations and Cultures and the Journey to Self-Discovery in Amy Tan's Fiction

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Abstract. Amy Tan is one of the most significant contemporary Chinese American authors, whose personal life, full of family traumas, has been openly discussed by the author herself in various forums. Her first significant novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), was her first fictional attempt in self-definition via exploring and investigating mother–daughter conflicts, ethnic heritage, and the successes and failures in accepting otherness. Tan's novels, especially *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) and later *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), are concrete examples of the author's continuing desire to explore deeply rooted personal tragedies through storytelling by relocating them from the private sphere to the more public world of fiction. The paper focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on the sixteen interconnected stories included in *The Joy Luck Club*. It examines the encounters of literature and psychology and the link between autofiction and therapeutic writing. The daughters in the novel are constantly re-examining and redefining their American Chinese identities and trying to overcome traumas resulting from hidden or unprocessed family history, the gap between their cultural position and their mothers'. Tan's voice and self-representation in the narrative are investigated, notions of self-reflectiveness and the phenomenon of destabilized and fluid identities are highlighted. Special attention is paid to the role of memory, personal healing, the conflicting worldviews of first-generation Asian immigrants and their American-born daughters, experiences of cultural dislocation, childhood memories of abandonment and alienation, and their roles in the formation of personal identity in the context of Tan's autofiction.

Keywords: autofiction, Chinese American, identity, therapeutic writing.

Introduction

Amy Tan is one of the most significant American authors who investigate the Chinese immigrant female experience and explore the processes of identity formation. The fictional universe of Tan uses stories and events from the author's own life and applies literary devices to explore the author's own identity, past family history, and Chinese ancestry. *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan's first novel and commercial success, is an excellent example of how the author tries to define herself in the middle of personal loss and interpersonal conflicts and how she translates herself into the narrative. As a result, the literary work challenges the definitions of autofiction and depicts some convincing ways of dealing with personal trauma.

The main aim of this paper is to detect how Tan's autofictional devices work in her novel *The Joy Luck Club* and to investigate how she has translated herself metaphorically into her narrative. Another aim is to find points in the novel that show how personal trauma is processed and how life experiences and family members can be re-evaluated with the help of time shifts, storytelling, and perspective taking.

Autofiction, Life Writing, and Self-Translation

The traditional definitions of life writing and autobiography have been challenged by several scholars (e.g. Jordan 2012, Srikanth 2019) during the past few decades, and by doing so, generic boundaries have been dissolved, and new definitions and even new terms and subgenres have been suggested. Forms of life writing, autobiography, memoirs, and autobiographical elements in fiction have been examined, and the borderline between fact and fiction and the extent of each in texts has been the subject of ongoing debate. Autofiction is a neologism that was first proposed in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky in his work *Fils* (Jordan 2012, 76). Doubrovsky was reacting to the challenge set by Philippe Lejeune's book *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1975). As Hywel Dix has pointed out, although autofiction first appeared in French literary scholarship, literary criticism of Anglophone autofiction is steadily growing, and both the theory and the practice of English autofiction have emerged recently (2018, 7).

Autofiction differs from autobiography in many ways. Autofiction shifts autobiographical self-representation to a fictional level by modifying autobiographical data and circumstances. Mara Santi emphasizes that this manipulation must be intentional and should not be confused with unconscious self-mystification or the failures of memory; it is connected with the manipulation of facts to obtain a specific literary effect or express a particular theme (2015, 433–434). The major difference between autobiography and

autofiction is that autofiction concentrates much more on self-fictionalization, its voice is less authoritative, and the autobiographical elements in the text are often hidden or modified.

The main difference between Lejeune's and Doubrovsky's understanding of autofiction is that while the former claims that the author and the narrator are identical, the latter and other autofiction scholars argue that the unification of these 'I' figures (author, real-life person, and narrator) can no longer be trusted (Hanczakowski 2020, 128–129). An increasing number of scholars (e.g. Jordan 2012, Santi 2015, Worthington 2017, Srikanth 2019) discuss the several different types of autofiction, where the author's identity can have a variety of forms and the narrator or the protagonist is not necessarily the direct, one-to-one representation of the author. Autofiction gives space for the author's self-exploratory process and attempts at self-definition, which often result in experimenting with different situations and perspectives in the text altering or adjusting real-life events accordingly. Dix emphasizes that a promising contemporary research area within autofiction is trauma writing and illness narratives, in which authors deal with some trauma or traumatic experience (2018, 4). Writing about trauma is a difficult task, especially in the initial phase of treatment, and involves starting, restarting, stumbling, going back, and silence, which means that writing about traumatic personal experiences may be possible only via shifting the particular experience to someone else's life so that recounting the event or restoring personal experience becomes more distant and thus less painful and threatening. In such writings, modifying life events and distancing them from the author is very common and serves the purpose of protecting the author.

It can be assumed that in autofiction there is a growing tendency to hide information about the self for self-protection or to alter information so that the storyteller cannot be immediately identified. Lisa McNee conceptualizes this as "nomadic identity," somebody who opens up in the narrative but simultaneously protects himself or herself (McNee 2005, qtd. in Jordan 2012, 81–82). Behind these hidden events and altered facts, there is often some unprocessed trauma or the need to take a new perspective on events to gain a deeper understanding of processes and interactions. Jordan claims that in autofiction "confidence is placed in the 'act-value' rather than the 'truth-value' of narrative" (Jordan 2012, 76). In these novels, the primary purpose is not the reliability of narration or the narrator, nor the trustworthiness of the presented events; instead, the major focus is shifted to the process of self-repositioning, many times self-distancing, the author's attempt of self-situating, dissociation, self-splitting, and self-understanding, trying to find a voice in a particular socio-cultural setting with a cultural and family heritage. As Srikanth has pointed out, "writers of autofiction often deploy extensive fictionality in order to better illuminate actual life experiences" (2019, 344).

Jordan claims that autofiction is characterized by the sense of fracture and self-estrangement, and hybridity, structural fragmentation, and multi-voicing are used as "responses to inherently unstable subject positioning" (2012, 81). Jordan also points out that autofiction usually presents culturally hybrid identities (2012, 81). Instead of presenting fixed identities, autofiction concentrates on the identity formation process, the changes of identity, and the individual's constant quest for understanding the several different layers of a complex and multifaceted identity. As Jordan calls it, autofiction is a "concentric narrative" (2012, 80), a text that heads towards the depth of phenomena and digs deep under the surface instead of following a linear structure.

Autofiction, a rich and diverse genre, has been the subject of scholarly classification based on various criteria. This diversity is reflected in the numerous types and subgenres it encompasses. Based on the definitions of autofiction, Panichelli-Batalla, for instance, suggests that while there are several types of autofiction, they can be distilled into two fundamental versions: the two extremes at the two ends of the scale are realistic autofiction and a fictionalized version (2015, 30). Realistic autofiction, as Panichelli-Batalla argues, aligns closely with Doubrovsky's 1977 interpretation, where the story told relates directly to the writer's autobiography but is written in a novelistic way. Fictionalized autofiction, which is also called "figurative autofiction," or "figuration of the self," however, is a type of autofiction where the writer uses his or her name but creates an entirely invented character (Panichelli-Batalla 2015, 29–30). These two versions of autofiction seem to be centred on two axes: the extent of the author's presence and the extent of the fictionality of autobiographical data in the narrative. However, it is also essential to talk about another possible combination, a third type of autofiction, where the author writes about his or her own life experiences and own story but puts these facts or references into a fictional context. Here, the author creates invented characters, imbuing them with the deeds, experiences, and traumas the author has lived through. This process of fictionalization serves the purpose of further distancing himself or herself from the (traumatic) experiences he or she lived through and takes the perspective of an outsider who observes the events and experiences from a distance. This phenomenon fits into the framework and practices of therapeutic or trauma writing, where the author's identity is blurred for the previously highlighted reasons. This third type of autofiction is a kind of "reality in fiction," in which, although the author's and the narrator's or protagonist's names are not identical, the concrete facts and life experiences are so vivid and precise that the author's intensive presence in the narrative is undeniable.

The author's manifestation in the narrative of autofiction is apparent, whether direct or indirect. However, the authenticity and the validity of the author's life events presented in the narrative have often been discussed, along with the significance of their trustworthiness. Panichelli-Batalla writes, "[i]n the literary domain, schol-

ars often also question the faithfulness of autobiographical novels, documentary novels, and autofictions, in the sense of how close they are to the real events of the author's life, but one might wonder whether this question really needs to be raised" (2015, 33). This claim also supports the argument that the truth value of the narrative becomes less important and relevant than the process of self-exploration and experimentation. Worthington explains that authors of autofiction are consciously eliding reality and fiction when constructing the narrative, and the readerly confusion resulting from the questionability of facts and events is "part of the point" (2017, 473). Panichelli-Batalla compares autofiction to self-translation, the process in which an author translates his or her work into a new language. The reasons for self-translation can be intrinsic motives, such as the author wanting to reach a wider audience, the fear of being misinterpreted, or extraneous motives, e.g. censorship in the author's country or the author being forced to move to exile. During this process, the author has the liberty to make amendments to the original text, adapt it to the cultural demands of the new target audience, new content can be added, textual enrichment, character development, and changes in the tone or the rhythm of the text can be carried out (2015, 31–33). Panichelli-Batalla emphasizes that autofiction is a metaphorical self-translation (2015, 32). This means that, similarly to what happens during self-translation, the author has the freedom of amending life events and adjusting and modifying them in the narrative of autofiction.

Amy Tan's Writing Therapy

Amy Tan's personal life, full of family traumas, has been openly discussed by the author herself at various forums. Her first significant novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, published in 1989 in the USA, is the first fictional attempt at self-definition by exploring and investigating mother–daughter conflicts, past traumas, and ethnic heritage.

Tan's novels are concrete examples of the author's continuous need to explore deeply rooted personal tragedies by relocating them from the private sphere to the more public world of fiction. Even though her name is never mentioned directly, Tan becomes a character in these novels by depicting her identity-formation processes and her quest for self-discovery and self-acceptance based on examining and overcoming family history, re-examining memories and ethnic heritage from various perspectives and time shifts. She has many times openly talked about her complicated relationship with her mother, full of wild arguments, misunderstandings and finding out about the existence of her stepsiblings, daughters that Tan's mother had left behind in China, or the death of her father and brother.

The idea of therapeutic writing or writing therapy stems from the belief that emotional traumas can be treated in silence and through writing, during which

negative feelings and traumas are gradually eased. Amy Tan explains that for her writing is a catalyst of emotions and a journey to self-understanding. In the *Preface* to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan writes, "Fiction is a portal to a deeper understanding of myself" (2019, vii). She also claims, "I understood that the stories I was writing came from unshakable obsessions, deep emotions, and a desperate need to be understood" (2019, xi).

Tan's novels (e.g. *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Writing Life*, or *Where the Past Begins: Memory and Imagination*) are examples of a writer's quest and journey to self-understanding and her road to forgiving and processing past traumas she had experienced as a young girl. She writes, "I was intuitively guided to a childhood memory of me lying in bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling, scared and utterly alone. I recognized that child, only now that child was no longer alone. I was with her and gave her my complete empathy. With every novel, I have been emotionally shaken and exhilarated by unexpected epiphanies" (Tan 2019, vi).

Tan's unique blend of fact and fiction in her writing allows her to explore universal themes such as death, the uncovering of family secrets, the discovery of unknown relatives, half-siblings in China, and violence, or even the juxtaposition of Chinese and American cultures where she is unable to find her place. These are all deeply traumatic experiences that are hard to process. These topics that haunt Tan's personal life are intensively present in her fiction, where writing and storytelling serve as tools for healing, self-understanding, and self-(re)discovery.

The Joy Luck Club is composed of sixteen chapters each presenting a story. While it is often perceived as a collection of short stories, the narrative is ingeniously interconnected, forming a significant whole in the end, which supports its classification as a novel. They tell the story of four daughters and four mothers (one of whom died before the narrative starts). The dead mother's story is narrated by her daughter, constantly jumping from describing present events and remembering her mother to recounting the stories told by her mother. All the mothers and daughters in the novel belong to Chinese immigrant families in San Francisco who start a club known as "The Joy Luck Club," playing the Chinese game of mah-jong for money. The book is structured similarly to a mah-jong game: there are four parts divided into four sections to create sixteen chapters altogether. It is revealed during the story that the idea of establishing The Joy Luck Club in San Francisco (which is the second club with this name) comes from China. Jing-Mei's mother had the idea of The Joy Luck Club in Kweilin to divert her attention from the war and lift the spirits of women who were afraid of the threat of the war and were waiting for their husbands to come home. Four women gathered together every week; they ate Chinese food, which the hostess had to prepare to bring them good fortune. They put a bowl of money on display so everyone could see it; then they started playing mah-jong. During the game, no

one was allowed to speak. After sixteen rounds (there are also sixteen chapters in the novel), they started to feast again, talking about funny stories and memories, feeling nostalgia for the good times of the past. This was done despite the terrors of the war, blood, starvation, murders, and limbs hanging from telephone wires, people eating rats, and burning houses with parents inside them. Ben Xu points out that the second Joy Luck Club is not only a memory of the first club but also "a renewed means of survival" (1994, 6). Suyuan starts the new club as a refugee; she has fled from the communist regime in China, and for all the other members, who are also immigrants in America, the club represents hope and the promise of good luck and joy in a new world, the world of safety and endless possibilities.

The Joy Luck Club is a typical example of autofiction where the author's presence is unquestionable and intensive even though her name is never mentioned directly in the narrative and is not identical with any of the protagonists'. Certain events in the novel directly refer to Tan's life experiences and are examples of Tan's self-translation into the narrative. The Chinese-American milieu of San Francisco, where Tan grew up, serves as a poignant link between the atmosphere of the book and Tan's life. Her mother was a Chinese immigrant who believed "you could be anything you wanted to be in America" (Tan 2019, 151) and was still under the influence of the terrors of the old world left behind. However, one of the most striking and evident examples of Tan's presence in the novel is the story of Jing-Mei, who is trying to come to terms with her mother's death. Jing-Mei is re-evaluating her relationship with her mother, which was not always based on mutual understanding and acceptance. After the death of the mother, Jing-Mei is informed about the existence of half-sisters in China: her mother had given birth to children back in China and had abandoned them during the war. Jing-Mei visits them, just like Tan did; however, Jing-Mei's mother had two children in China, whereas Tan's mother, Daisy, had four, one of whom, a boy, had died. Tan visits her half-sisters together with her mother,[1] unlike in the novel, where Jing-Mei meets the half-sisters with her father after the mother's death. This deliberate modification of the details of this life experience does not affect the unquestionable presence of Tan and her traumatic experience in the novel, which is a constantly recurring motive.

Another example of Tan's presence in the novel is that, similarly to Jing-Mei, Amy also dropped out of the college chosen for her by her mother (though she received a bachelor's and a master's degree later). The feeling of being a failure and disappointing a mother, not living up to a variety of expectations, is a deeply resonant and prevailing emotion experienced by the daughter narrators in *The Joy Luck Club*, and this trauma "is also seen to lend particular shapes and rhythms to autofiction" (Jordan 2012, 79).

1 Amy Tan's detailed biography at her official website is available at: *https://amytan.net/bio-1* (Last accessed 15 March 2024).

Storytelling and the Mother–Daughter Conflict/Bond

The novel's structure, with its story within a story, serves as a compelling metaphor for the Chinese box world of identities. This intricate design underscores the profound link between self-definition and the heritage of previous generations, which is either a vicious spiral absorbing future generations or inspirational power, a stepping-stone towards self-definition. The daughters cannot move forward without dwelling on the past and examining their mothers' and their own stories. This storytelling allows re-examining, speaking up, being heard by and listening to others. The more times a story is told, the more chance there is to understand and be understood. The daughters seem to understand the importance of storytelling and that silence, "not telling the story" is often the sign of uncontrollable pain and fear. "My mother never talked about her life in China, but my father said he saved her from a terrible life there, some tragedy she could not speak about," writes Lena St. Claire about her mother, Ying-Ying (Tan 2019, 115). The absence of storytelling or being silent about the past may also lead to not being heard any more if one would like to speak again. Ying-Ying St. Clair understands that being silent about the past and past traumas can have a significant influence on the following generations, one cannot ignore conflicts and pains, no matter how painful it is to process them: "And because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me" (Tan 2019, 69). A critical revelation of the novel is that "[t]he daughters' journeys to voice are completed only after they come to the altars of their Chinese mothers" (Booth Foster 2009, 110). Solving transgenerational tensions and traumas can be done together and by facing the past, understanding one's own story and identity can only be carried out by investigating and understanding the stories of previous generations, even if they are based on conflict and violence.

One of the most significant themes of *The Joy Luck Club* is the mother–daughter relationship and all the tensions, misunderstandings, and emotional highs and lows connected with it. The novel presents a complex network of grandmothers, mothers and daughters, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, generations of women with interconnected stories, women who seem to be highly different (one woman in China being the victim of forced marriage and another one, a new-generation Chinese-American woman going to university and pursuing a career). However, the invisible bond between them seems to be so powerful that understanding the heritage of the mothers and grandmothers and investigating their stories and motives turns out to be the only way to self-understanding. As Ingman has pointed out, "[d]uring the course of the twentieth century the mother–daughter relationship has increasingly fascinated women writers who have seen in the bond with the mother the beginnings of their own story. Writing about their mothers they come to understand themselves" (1999, 1).

The differences between mothers and daughters, Chinese culture and Chinese American identity have a central role in the novel. After putting together the fragments, the pieces make up a whole and show that the experiences of previous generations, family heritage, all the conflicts they went through are incorporated in and are integral parts of the daughters' identities, and to come to terms with traumas, they need to face and accept the past. All the seven storytellers (and also the recollections of the eighth woman's, the dead mother's story) in all the sixteen stories show their quest for identity, which seems to be a persistent thematic concern in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (Hamilton 1999, 125). The mothers' perseverance and faith are tested during times of war, violence, and isolation in a historical period and culture where, as Heung has put it:

> women are regarded as disposable property or detachable appendages despite their crucial role in maintaining the family line through childbearing. […] the marginal status of Chinese women shows itself in their forced transfer from natal families to other families through the practice of arranged marriage, concubinage, adoption, and pawning. The position of women – as daughters, wives, and mothers – in Chinese society is therefore markedly provisional, with their status and expendability fluctuating according to their families' economic circumstances, their ability to bear male heirs, and the proclivities of authority figures in their lives. (Heung 1993, 601)

The difference between the cultural and social context in which the mothers socialized and the traumas they had gone through seem to prevent/hinder their communication with the daughters, who are citizens of the more liberal American culture, a much more individual-centred environment, where questioning authorities is not only not forbidden, it is even encouraged. They speak different languages. Whenever the mothers get emotionally moved, they immediately switch to Chinese, and even when speaking English, their English is imperfect, with grammar and stylistic mistakes. By providing an insight into the conflict between an American-born Chinese woman and her Chinese immigrant mother, a significant gap between two cultural universes and experiences is presented and the exploration of the ethnic self is depicted. Mark Singer explains, "Tan creates two entirely different scripts of cultural identity, a realistically-outlined 'American' identity for the daughters and an Orientalized 'Chinese' one for their mothers" (2001, 324).

The novel presents a decentred narrative in a multi-perspectival form with first-person storytelling, a collection of voices that are interconnected and seem to participate in the broader dialogue, a phenomenon which Stephen Souris calls "inter-monologue dialogicity" or "the potential for active intermingling of perspectives across utterances" (1994, 100). However, it is not a simple cacophony of voices but a kind of dialogicity where the intensity of each voice changes with

time, and the reception of each voice is also different. The daughters, as young girls, understand their mothers differently than they do as adults. At a young age, the mother's voice they hear is often aggressive, offensive, and criticizing, and so is their reaction to that. "I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before and look what happened. She was the stupid one" (Tan 2019, 163), says Jing-Mei in the first part of the chapter titled "Two Kinds" when remembering how she was forced by her mother to take piano lessons. When she feels hopeless against her mother's impossible expectations to become a prodigy, she shouts in her painful outburst, "Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius!" (Tan 2019, 156). What she hears is the cold response of her mother saying, "'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!'" (Tan 2019, 164). Jing-Mei's pain and madness make her reply wildly, saying words that aim to hurt the mother: "I wish I were dead! Like them" (Tan 2019, 164), by which she refers to the half-siblings who had been abandoned by her mother and left behind in China. The mother does not respond to these cruel words, she remains silent, the typical way all four Chinese mothers process trauma in the novel. A couple of years later, Jing-Mei returns to her mother as an adult, and they start to talk about the piano and taking piano lessons; however, the voice she hears, her mother's voice is much more gentle this time. This mother is more supportive and caring, someone who believes in her daughter and loves her unconditionally: "'You pick up fast,' said my mother, as if she knew this was certain. 'You have natural talent. You could been genius if you want to'" (Tan 2019, 165).

Examining the mothers' past, exploring and re-evaluating the problems of the mother–daughter relationship from different perspectives and a distance leads to various epiphanies in the novel.

> And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation. (Tan 2019, 35)

The daughters can achieve balance and find security in the world only when they acknowledge the past and the motives of their mothers and when they finally understand their stories, fears and insecurities, as well as their Chinese

heritage and ancestry. As M. Mary Booth Foster has pointed out, "Voice finds its form in the process of interaction, even if that interaction is conflict" (2009, 97). This conflict not only leads to understanding and the daughters' emotional relief but even to love, the love of their mothers: "Here is how I came to love my mother. How I saw in her my own true nature. What was beneath my skin. Inside my bones" (Tan 2019, 45). The healing process involves painful recollections and interactions, but this is the only way to forgiveness and achieving peace. "Because sometimes that is the only way to remember what is in your bones. You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her. Until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh" (Tan 2019, 45). The daughters eventually gain strength from their mothers or from the stories of their mothers and learn how to overcome life difficulties. Their recollections of their mother's identity and stories from the point of view of a little girl and then through the eyes of their adult selves show the importance of perspective and distance taking.

Conclusions

Autofiction has become of central interest in literary criticism; its genre, characteristics, and classification have been the subject of discussion. New subgenres of autofiction have emerged and have initiated the redefinition and re-examination of basic concepts in life writing.

Analysing Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* from the point of view of autofiction, self-translation, and therapeutic writing offers a deeper understanding of both the novel and Tan's attempt at self-definition and self-positioning. The novel's non-cohesive structure, non-linear timeline, and disjointed memories reflect the fragmented nature of identity. It is a concentric narrative, where moving forward first requires moving deep down under the surface. There are various points in the narrative where the success of autofictional devices in trauma processing can be detected in the form of epiphanies and emotional relief. The significant redefinition of the mother–daughter relationship from various perspectives and in various stages of life becomes the key in defining identity and achieving a resolution and reconciliation.

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