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## Bridging a transnational mother-daughter's relationship through a memoir

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### ABSTRACT

Bridging the past and present in a family is challenging, particularly if they grow up in a different culture. The hassle of life occupies most people's minds, which leads to abandoning one of the most fundamental kinships, the mother-daughter relationship. This phenomenon appears in a literary work written by Amy Tan entitled *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, where the protagonist acts apathetic toward her mother's willingness to preserve their family's lineage through a handwritten memoir. Reading the literary work through the lens of Memory Studies helps to understand the mother's unpleasant to hostile behaviours in the protagonist's upbringing; besides her harsh past that caused it, the daughter's obliviousness toward her mother's wishes in getting to know about her real grandmother and the history of their family heightened her disappointment. As an Asian, family ties serve as a vital source of identity and safeguard against life's challenges, and the bond is severed more due to the different communication styles. Realising the importance of reading the forgotten memoir written by her mother became the turning point of their relationship. By willingly reading the mother's memory, finally, the daughter creates a long-wished family connection.

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## 1. Introduction

The *Bonesetter's Daughter* is a work of literature that describes a bond between a mother and daughter in different settings of upbringings. The book is about family lineage, secrets, the strength of love, and what a mother would do to ensure her daughter's happiness. This story is characterised by the presence of a memoir of their diaspora experience, a collection of a mother's handwriting about her past and her current life—the experiences through nations and cultural challenges. Through letters and stories, truth and love are passed to the next generation regardless of their different culture

and language barriers. The Chinese-American novelist Amy Tan wrote this novel in 2001, offering insight into immigrant life's realities. Readers can see a changing dynamic between individuals in her novel; those raised in their home nation and those whose upbringing was dissimilar to their roots will act accordingly; that is what appears in *Bonesetter's Daughter* novel. Since the two main characters come from different backgrounds—the mother, Lu Ling, is a native Chinese who grew up on the mainland, while Ruth, her daughter, was born in America—the distinctions are clear. The mother's expectations did not match her daughter's efforts, and this disparity became the main issue. According to Purkayastha et al. (2012), there are presumptions about Eastern culture that result in expectations about how elderly Asian-Americans will be cared for. These expectations may or may not be realised in cultures where multigenerational coexistence is becoming less typical. LuLing expected Ruth to understand her more, be interested in knowing about her familial lineage, and act according to what she expected as an Asian mother.

This essay raises two issues that correlate to each other, namely the mother-daughter relationship that is followed by the transnational problem severing their already complicated mother-daughter relationship, and last is the existence of memoir, which eventually saved their mother-daughter's bond. While memoir serves as the key to mending the mother-daughter bond, this story is attributed to several foreshadows. The presence of the foreshadowing features in the novel influences this study. The function of foreshadowing in *Bonestter's Daughter* novel is to give hints to the readers about the central issues of the story. History repeats itself several times to emphasise patterns in this novel. She has started from the similarities between those 3 generations in 3 issues: death, suicide, and writer. The first is Ruth's grandfather's death, which foreshadows Ruth's father's death; Precious Auntie's suicide foreshadows LuLing's suicide attempt and Ruth's suicidal thoughts. The last is that the three female characters in the story use writing as their medium to communicate with each other. Precious Auntie used to write everything to LuLing since she lost her voice due to a failed suicide attempt. LuLing wrote a memoir to record her memory of her mother and employed indirect-communication with her daughter. At the same time, Ruth wrote for a living and also poured her heart when she could not communicate it with others. These events all foreshadow these 3 females' life.

This study briefly describes the novel in order to provide an overview. The story revolves around 3 females' life in which there are 2 mother-daughter relationships in this novel; the first is Ruth with her mother, Lu Ling and Luling with her mother, whom she calls Precious Auntie. Ruth, the book's protagonist, struggles to build a harmonious relationship with her mother. Deep down, no matter how dissonant their relationship is, they had a natural bond – mother-daughter. Nevertheless, when her mother's health declines and the doctor claims that Ruth's mother has dementia and Alzheimer's, this point becomes her turning point: she indeed cares about her mother despite LuLing's rather negative traits and senile behaviour. Mother-daughter relationship, according to Day and Fisher (2010), has a closer dyad compared to another counterpart such as mother-son. Females likely want connection and support from their mothers at an early age. Mainly when communicating feelings, they are more prone, to be honest with their mothers. This occurrence is expected due to shared similarity, it is natural to know each other well with akin traits, and gender similarity is one of them. A person's interaction with other people helps to shape their character, which in turn shapes and forms a child's way of life through factors like interconnected family roles (Alder, 1927). Nevertheless, not every

female can get an ideal mother-daughter relationship; some have close relationships, but some have distant ones. The latter phenomenon happened in Amy Tan's novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, mothers significantly influence their daughters' identities from childhood through adulthood. Nevertheless, the protagonist did not have a close relationship with her mother due to several issues. Since Ruth is the main focalizer, this study will use her perspective in locating the position of familial lineage. Tan's story raises two different generations life issues: the first and second generations of the mother-daughter relationships as its central motif in Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. The three women— (a) the grandmother: Gu Liu Xing, referred to as Precious Auntie throughout the story, (b) the mother LuLing Liu Young, and (c) the daughter Ruth Luyi Young —are central to the narrative. It describes how a misunderstanding regarding cultural background leads to a strained bond between a mother and a daughter. As the mother decides to keep her intentions to preserve their root in their daughter, she eventually makes both parties suffer. Fortunately, at some point, Ruth is willing to break out of isolation between their tense relationship and forge stronger identities through her mother's memoir.

The mother-daughter relationship problem started by the fact with Ruth's awareness that she was facing an increasingly tense conflict with her mother. A doctor determined that Ruth's mother had dementia and Alzheimer's, which caused her to forget things frequently and even become senile. Ruth's mother is regarded as having trouble telling the difference between thought and reality. LuLing and Ruth frequently disagreed since Ruth's mother had a different communication style. LuLing held to her Eastern style, while Western culture influenced her daughter's upbringing. Nevertheless, this occurrence commonly happens in a transnational family when no party is willing to try bridging the gap between them. Transnational literature, according to Jay (2021), is a particular form of literature, "emergent at an identifiable historical moment and dealing, collectively, with a set of issues and themes associated with decolonisation, globalisation, postmodernity, and technology". Jay explained that transnational literature takes literature from the periphery as its point of departure. The correlation between transnational life and identity formation lies in Woodward's (1997) explanation. He stated that identity is everything that can describe people and what distinguishes them or point out their similarities to others—several inborn characteristics, such as physical appearance and external influences. Identity formation can be challenging since external influence might interfere with the process. It usually happens to those who live in a diaspora setting. LuLing is the first character who experiences transnational life. Therefore, it unavoidably impacts her life with her daughter, born in a different nation and culture than hers.

Several types of transnational life's effects relate to an individual's identity formation. Some people keep their previous identities, such as LuLing. No matter where she lived, she was tightly held to her native culture, the eastern one. The next is people who create whole new identities; that is young Ruth. At first, Ruth incorporated this identity formation in her effort to blend with her surroundings. Nevertheless, later on, she goes through an identity construction process due to her mother's deteriorating life. Eventually, she compromises between the two in mediating her current life with her partner and her bond with her mother. Both internal and external factors influence a person's identity, according to Woodward (1997). The society in which someone lives and interacts imply that identity also depends on the root of someone and their surroundings. Since Ruth's upbringing was in

America, her American side suppresses her Chinese side. This phenomenon was the main trigger for LuLing's disappointment toward her daughter. According to Eastern beliefs, an individual must maintain their roots and keep their tradition alive no matter where they live. Ruth's inability to conform to her mother's values causes a great distance between them.

Transnational causes two divergent communication styles; two types of communication styles are seen from cultural lenses: Low-context and high-context cultures. Most Westerners' communication style is low-context culture; communicators of this type rely less on the situation's context to convey their meaning. Meyer (2017) stated that low-context cultures are more likely to be logical, analytical, action-oriented, and person-centred. In contrast, according to Hall (1990), high-context cultures do not require much background information because the listener is already "contextualised". Intuition, reflection, and collective mindset are prevalent in high-context societies. Communicating in high-context cultures involves more than just using words; it also involves paying attention to nonverbal cues, the physical environment, and the social context. In high-context societies, messages are conveyed through posture, voice intonation, gestures, and facial expressions. Building relationships is also a crucial component of conversing and connecting. Eventually, the mother's memoir becomes a pivotal point in strengthening their weak bond.

According to Roediger and Wertsch (2008), memory study is an interdisciplinary topic that incorporates ideas across subjects. Further, Sturken (2008) said that cultural memory is the recollection shared yet loaded with cultural significance outside formal historical discourse. The term "cultural memory" refers to the circulation between personal and cultural memories and the fact that memories are frequently formed and reproduced through cultural forms (Sturken, 2008). Halbwachs (1941) made a distinction between autobiographical memory, which is the memory of the events we experience; historical memory, which only reaches us through historical records, history, which is the remembered past that no longer has any bearing on our lives; and collective memory, which is the present-day past that shapes our identities. Halbwachs also described shared memories as valuable indicators of social distinction; nevertheless, some critics found this idea of a collective consciousness distinct from the individual unsettling and preferred to use different terminology (Olick and Robbins, 2008). However, this study focused on autobiographical memory. It elaborated on the life of LuLing from the past to the present and how her journey shapes her current life and affects her bond with her daughter. There were two memories in this mother-daughter story, the modern one belonged to the daughter, written in a diary using English, and another one was written by the mother in Chinese. The distinctive characteristics between these two memoirs are not only in language context but also in the aims of the writings and how they used the writing activities. Discourse analysis is the technique that will be employed in this study; it has been used in processes of remembering and demonstrates how people jointly create the social environments they live through speech and language (Keightley and Pickering, 2013). Furthermore, a memoir became the connector between them; understanding the mother's past helps to strengthen the relationship between Ruth and Lu Ling. Ruth could also travel back in time through her mother's memoir, specifically when her grandmother, Precious Auntie, lived. The experiences of Precious Auntie and LuLing that are described in her writings also illustrate how the mother and daughter were creating their identities. The study will start with the past generation, followed by the most recent ones.

## 2. Method

The method used is qualitative, with close reading approach by incorporating it with memory studies. Close reading is also sometimes referred to as Practical Criticism by a Cambridge critic I. A. Richards. Close reading is a type of analysis that takes the reader from understanding the text to interpreting it. It is one of several possible types of analysis, many of which can be used in conjunction with one another.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. *The first and second generation's life challenges*

Lu Ling and Precious Auntie were the first gen narrated in the story. Where the dyad took place in the homeland country, Asia, China. Precious Auntie is the character mentioned in Tan's story's title; the Bonesetter's daughter is Gu Liu Xing or LuLing's biological mother. LuLing was raised by her despite having a mother due to a complicated past between their family. It influenced the relationship LuLing had with Ruth in the future, as it aligns with the statements from previous scholars mentioned above. Due to a suicide attempt conducted by Precious Auntie during LuLing's young era, Gu Liu Xing lost her ability to talk. It causes both of them to create two ways of communication through signs and writing, which the latter becomes LuLing's inspiration to write her memoir for her daughter. Despite Precious Auntie's traumatic past, she was a resilient person. There is a line in Tan's novel that emphasises the mother-daughter bond, "I (LuLing) am the reason she (her mother) survives, the only reason she exists" (Tan, 2001, p. 199). LuLing overcame her tough life with the same tenacity as her mother. Her resilience in going through two deaths in her life results from her imitation of Precious Auntie's strong willingness. LuLing internalised her mother's behaviour because she had seen her strength of character since she was young, and she is disappointed that her daughter, Ruth, does not have the same strong determination as her. She asked the bare minimum of Ruth as in knowing their roots and family, yet her daughter could not care less.

LuLing frustration was caused by Ruth's lack of willingness to connect herself to their root; what worsened the situation is that LuLing had already made a great effort by writing them down in a memoir, but her daughter was reluctant to read them. For low-context people, a conclusion may be hinted at but not explicitly argued; therefore, Ruth could not comprehend her mother's intention since she is more inclined to a low-context communication style, the direct one. LuLing becomes rather hostile whenever Ruth does not show an intention to understand their background culture. This occurrence is like a snowball effect; initially, they have a mother-daughter relationship ingrained in their past that affects their current life. The bond is severed by the reality that they still need to face diaspora life in which the roots of both cultures differ. Westerners tend to communicate their intention directly, while Easterners are the opposite; they are more indirect compared to people whose upbringings were in Western countries. Ruth, even though she is an Asian, however, she grew up in America. She was more affected by the society she is living in than her origin; it saddened her mother because it indicated that her daughter was losing her "Asian-ness". The problem got more prominent in the fact that Ruth did not fluent in Chinese, which is their ethnic's language. Ruth is not fluent in it; thus, she needs help understanding the content. If Ruth initially was not interested in learning

their family history, it is heightened by the fact that the only way to know about it is through reading her mother's memoir, which is written in full Chinese. Ruth cannot ask her mother to read the memoir for her since she was the one who refuses to learn Chinese. Knowing that she eventually caved in and was aware of their family history is a relief.

The older Ruth changed for good; she is currently attempting to rekindle her bond with her mother by reading LuLing's writings, which she had previously disregarded. Based on the translation, Ruth reinterpreted everything in order to better understand her mother, grandmother, their family's history, and Ruth's current identity as a result of the past. Memoirs serve as an effective medium to bridge the gap between past and present. If previously Ruth has no recollection of her family members, after decoding the memoir, she grows fonder of her grandmother. She can relate to her mother's fondness for Precious Auntie even though it is evident that her presence did not rely on memory. Through written stories combined with her imagination, she eventually eventually familiar with her grandmother, which has given her a great sense of attachment to Ruth. Through this work of literature written by Tan, people recognise that writing memories immensely impact someone's life. She was bridging a dyad of mother-daughter from two different generations and connecting people with different communication styles due to diaspora experience. The latter case was on the merits of writing a memoir; people with a more direct communication style, or called a low-context culture, got the advantage of understanding their mother with the opposite way of thinking. Even though the two of them are Chinese descendants, the surroundings of their upbringing between them were stark contrast different, creating distinctive types of communication. The American society unavoidably affects Ruth's way of thinking; she behaves more like them. She did not understand her mother's indirect means of communication at first. Ruth needed time to digest her mother's typical longer communication style to understand each other from two different same-yet-different cultures. The narrative itself is located in LuLing's young girl's time. She said she wrote for herself, but if her daughter read it by any chance, she might learn about her mother's upbringing back in her home country and the transnational experience later.

"These are the things I know are true," is the opening sentence of the memoir, and it holds strong meaning for it indicates the firm determination of LuLing's belief in her life. LuLing's efforts to reassemble her identity were visible in her later writing, which details his search for her past. It appears there is still some unresolved business regarding her identification until the end of LuLing's memoir — LuLing was unsure of his mother's last name. Here is the role of the memoir that looked trivial yet significantly impacted mending the tenuous relationship. Even Ruth, in the past, struggled a lot with whom she was, slowly getting to know not only herself but her heritage through reading a collection of memories. The memoir serves as an indirect medium of interaction for someone like LuLing, who has a high-context culture and wants thorough interaction communication with people from the opposite side. The memoir became one of the best mediums because it makes the text available any-time; in other words, it can be read countless times to understand the context better. It is a suitable means of communication to train people from different cultures to understand each other more. Ruth could sit and read the translation several times to grasp the possible underlying meaning since texts enable this possibility for close reading. Through practice and prolonged patience, Ruth can understand the pattern of her mother's way of thinking through the detailed text. Given that she

now sees her mother differently, she wants to tell her, “I am sorry, and I forgive you too” (Tan, 2001, p. 353). They were eventually able to resolve the tensions between them.

### ***3.1.2 The second and third generation’s life challenges***

Ruth and Lu Ling were the dyad faced significant alteration in terms of culture since Ruth was born and raised in U.S., while her mother was native Chinese. Ruth’s personality was affected by their unhealthy upbringing. She became a quiet person who typically kept her thoughts to herself because she had to deal with her mother’s erratic behaviour. Even though, at first, they had a rocky relationship, still their natural mother-daughter is unavoidably there. Ruth constantly feared losing her mother since LuLing frequently threatened her to commit suicide. Much to their dismay, her mother suicide affected her in the future. History repeated itself. She used it to threaten her daughter, like the trauma inflicted on her by the Precious Auntie’s decision to end her life. She frequently threatens to commit suicide whenever Ruth defies her. Their complex relationship impacted Ruth’s adult life. LuLing made it even worse by complicating their life with her inability to accept affection from others due to her past guilt and grief. The main impact is her relationship with her daughter, severed by their shared cultural values. While LuLing held her previous Asian customs tightly, in contrast, her daughter was more inclined toward Western culture. The communication style is one of the most apparent differences between Eastern and Western cultures. The differences between these two styles of communication worsened their already limited communication.

Fortunately, adult Ruth made the right decision to mend their bond; she needed to delve into her mother’s past. Ruth finds that a long-forgotten memoir is probably pivotal to their severe bond. Ruth also tried to learn more about her family’s history in order to make sense of everything. She wanted to understand the content, yet there was also a language barrier; Ruth needed help to read Chinese letters fluently. It made her quest difficult. It turns out that it is not easy to delve into her mother’s past. Ruth could not inquire about her mother’s assistance translating the memoir since it would irritate her mother further. Lack of Chinese language proficiency will only add fuel to LuLing’s anger. Therefore, Ruth hired a professional translator to understand her memoir better. There must be a reason why her mother wrote a memoir in the first place.

In contrast, the young Ruth tried to pour her heart out through her writing in a diary. In contrast, if LuLing wanted her daughter to read her memoir, Ruth did not want her mother to do so. LuLing’s frantic actions caused a significant gap between them. Ruth developed immunity to her mother’s frequent outbursts, which irritated her even more. She became reserved and opted to keep everything to herself and wrote them in her diary instead of communicating it with her mother. She was occasionally portrayed as indifferent to LuLing’s feelings due to her accumulated discomfort for years toward her mother. In her teenage life, Ruth discovered that her mother was sneakily reading her diary. Knowing her mother would read them, she scribbled furious rants into her notebook. As quoted in Tan’s novel, Ruth indicated that her mother was supposed to take action against her empty threats. Her rage made Ruth cry out horrible rhetorical questions to avenge what she did to her. She said, “You (LuLing) talked of killing yourself, so why didn’t you ever do it?” (Tan, 2001, p. 159). The intention of stating this line is to hurt her, in the sense of freedom that allowed her to finally confess

out loud that she wanted to hurt her mother just as much as her mother had hurt her. Whereas Ruth's memoir manifests her accumulated hatred, her mother's memoir is the opposite, preserving their culture. Fortunately, Ruth's memoir did not create calamity, even though it worsened their bond.

#### 4. Conclusion

LuLing written memoir was regarded as an identity agent because of the manner she helped maintain not only Ruth's identity but also rekindle their relationship. It encompasses different cultures and communication types and bridges the distance gap between inharmonious mother-daughter dyads. By sharing her background with Ruth, Ruth's mother, she has made a tremendous contribution by educating her daughter about an aspect of herself she had never recognised—her ethnic identity. Ruth was able to positively perceive and value her Chinese background through close-reading LuLing's memoir, and the gap between mother and daughter relationships could be minimised as mutual understanding increases. LuLing's previously considered peculiar behaviour and fixation towards Precious Auntie were eventually unveiled. In other words, not only did Ruth contribute to mending their dyad, but it all started with LuLing's motherly instinct to share the journey that she thought would benefit her daughter's identity formation. After all, Ruth is still Chinese by ethnicity but American by nationality; she has her root's culture by heart, and LuLing wanted to ensure her daughter would not lose her heritage. In conclusion, LuLing gave her daughter a chance to turn to understand herself more while also saving both from being supposed to be the closest dyad that existed in a societal system.

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