



**INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA  
IN AMY TAN'S *THE BONESETTER'S DAUGHTER***

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**Abstract**

This research aims to explain how trauma transmission from the previous generation to the next generation occurs, and how the next generation cuts the intergenerational trauma off in Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Using a qualitative descriptive method and utilizing the postmemory theory by Marianne Hirsch, this research was finally finished. The three concepts of Hirsch, i.e., memory transmission, reconstruction, and identification, are the main tools in uncovering the questions of how the old generation's memory is transmitted to the post-generation, and how the post-generation cuts off the intergenerational trauma. At the end of the research, the writers found: 1) There is a structure of familial memory transmission from the mother to the daughter and then to the granddaughter, known as affiliative transmission from the objects related to past trauma. 2) To break the chain of intergenerational trauma, the parties related to the trauma should make a serious effort to experience what-so-called post-generation reconciliation. The consciousness possessed by the post-generation draws itself to overcome the trauma passed down from the previous generation.

Keywords: intergenerational trauma, transmission, post-generation, postmemory.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Family has an important role in building character and developing children's mentality. This is because children need supervision from parents to avoid negative things that can constrain character development and mentality. However, family can also

become an unhealthy environment for mental development. Intergenerational trauma is an obvious example of a mental health problem that sources directly from the family, and it may be inherited from generation to generation. It deals with how trauma experienced by a family member that

passes down to children, grandchildren, and their descendants. Hirsch (2012, p.35) states that the inheritance of trauma in postmemory is referred to as memory transmission. The process of memory transmission is closely related to social or environmental conditions, and this is very likely to move from the same generation or another. In this research, the researchers scrutinize a novel entitled *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, about conflict in the mother-daughter relationship, Luling and Ruth, because they have a life that is contradictory due to differences in their cultural background. The researchers examine the process of inheritance of trauma passed on from the mother to her daughter and how the daughter can cut off the chain of intergenerational trauma that she encounters. Memory transmission studies how a mother's memory is transmitted to her daughter, while reconstruction and identification are used to examine how the daughter cuts off the intergenerational trauma.

## **II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Hirsch's Theory on Postmemory**

To analyze the intergenerational transmission of trauma in *The*

*Bonesetter's Daughters*, the writers apply postmemory theory that focuses on the transmission of trauma between generations. According to Hirsch (1992, p.9) postmemory is an event that is obtained from post-generation indirectly or at a distance from the event and is received deeply. Postmemory is a phenomenon resulting from the perception of a memory received by a post-generation person who is the generation after a traumatic event occurred but which they did not experience directly. The role family is as a transmission space where photography is the main medium for transmitting intergenerational trauma. The theory of postmemory provides a framework for analyzing how transmitted memory is received by post-generation.

### **2.2 Memory Transmission**

The process of memory transmission is closely related to social or environmental conditions, and this is very likely to be transferred from the same of different generation. The inheritance of trauma in postmemory is referred to as transmission. Hirsch (2012) mentions two types of transmission: familial and affiliative postmemory. Both types have the same

depth and affectivity in different ways. Based on these two concepts, familial transmission and affiliative transmission usually appear in family and public domain.

### **2.2.1 Familial Transmission**

Hirsch explains that familial transmission of memory is carried out within the family. Previous generations' memories of traumatic events are transmitted to the postmemory generation through stories or photography. Familial transmission is the main process in the inheritance of trauma. The word *familial* refers to something intense, meaning that this trauma is transmitted based on blood relations. Blood relations would indicate that the first and second generations are in the same family, living in one house. This togetherness makes this trauma able to be inherited, both consciously and unconsciously, through narratives that are conveyed to the next generation.

### **2.2.2 Affiliative Transmission**

Affiliative transmission is the inheritance of trauma acquired by the second generation through subjects outside the family. This transmission can take shape during social

interactions, it can take the form of historical documents in oral-written or visual-non-visual forms. According to Hirsch (2012, p.36), affiliative transmission is an extension of a loosened family structure, or in other words, transmission that occurs in a wider scope outside the family structure. This transmission is carried out through a set of mediating structures that accommodate collective memory, such as cultural archives and museums. Hirsch emphasizes that familial transmission makes affiliative transmission a complement, whereas photography has an important role as a postmemory media that clarifies the relationship between familial and affiliative post-memory.

### **2.3 Reconstruction**

This concept explains that when a memory is transmitted, the postgeneration will carry out the reconstruction. In the reconstruction stage, there will be a process of "*correction*" or changes to the form of the original narrative. Post-generation can carry out a return journey, traveling back to the place of trauma. The object of testimony is lost and found again, compiling a plot of return. According to Hirsch (2012, p.212), in carrying out a

return journey, post-generation can carry out research related to historical archives. The memories transmitted by survivors will be different, depending on post-generation reception and the storage they have. They can embody memories, thereby triggering influences that are shared across generations. It can cause the post-generation to experience connections that activate memories and thereby reactivate the trauma of loss.

#### **2.4 Heteropathic Identification**

The research also attempts to look at how Hirsch's concept of heteropathic identification is discussed in *The Generation of Postmemory*. Hirsch explains that heteropathic identification is carried out by pulling *the self* out of oneself and empathizing with *others*. Thus, *the self* feels sympathy without making *the self* part of *the others*. Heteropathic identification, as described by Hirsch, is a concept used to understand the relationship between individuals and traumatic events or experiences that they have not directly experienced but are connected to through familial or group relations. This form of identification is characterized by a sense of proximity and distance at the same time, as individuals can empathize with the

experiences of others while also recognizing the differences between their own experiences on those of the people they identify with. Heteropathic identification is particularly relevant in the context of postmemory, which Hirsch defines it as the ability to say, "*It could have been me; it was me, also, but it was not me*".

### **III. RESEARCH METHOD**

In conducting this research, the writers use objective analysis in which the researchers focus on studying elements in literary works. Therefore, the main focus of the research object is on the intrinsic elements of literary works. The writers use psychological theory by Marianne Hirsch to support this research. The writers applied three concepts of postmemory, that is, memory transmission, reconstruction, and identification.

In analyzing the novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the writer collected the data through a close reading activity. To finish the research, the writers use two data. The primary data is *The Bonesetter's Daughter* novel and the secondary data are journals, articles, and other data from the internet or library that are related to the topic.

The data is in the form of paragraphs, sentences, parts of sentences, quotations, and words. This research was conducted using qualitative methods. Bogdan and Biklen (1982, p.5) stated :

Qualitative research methods are research methodologies that create descriptive data in the form of people's written or spoken words and observable behavior data.

Qualitative research is used in this research to express the thoughts and opinions of the writers who interpret the data of the novel to solve problems raised in this research. Various references, such as journals, academic articles, literature, theory books, and some online sources, are also employed to help the writers obtain a deeper comprehension of the novel and the theory. Lastly, the writer reports the data by using the descriptive method, which describes a situation or

#### **IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

This research is divided into two main subject matters: the first is the way the old generation's memory is transmitted, and the second is the way of post-generation cuts off the intergenerational trauma. Trauma can be passed down through genetic changes,

behavioral transmission, and historical memory. Mindfulness protocols and understanding the psychological markers of trauma can help individuals break the cycle of trauma.

#### **4.1 The Way the Old Generation's Past Memory is Transmitted**

##### **4.1.1 Familial Transmission**

Familial transmission is a form of memory inheritance related to family or blood relations. The inheritance of memory in this process takes the form of conveying a narrative of trauma carried out by the previous generation to the next generation, which gives rise to imagination. This form of transmission affects the way a post-generation understands and reconstructs the story received. Hirsch (2012, p.35) asserts :

“Trauma narratives can be inherited. The inheritors of the trauma are called the second generation (post-generation). The second generation receives memories incompletely. The reason is, unlike the first generation, the second generation was not born when the traumatic event occurred.”

Trauma is inherited through narratives, which can be projected onto children by parents who have experienced trauma. These narratives are incompletely inherited, leading to the post-generation

only remembering the event based on what was conveyed, without understanding the actual events. This is illustrated in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* by LuLing Young as the old generation often narrates her traumatic experiences to her daughter. She always tells the same thing regarding her past experiences. This situation is shown in the following quotation :

*LuLing was now sobbing. "Precious Auntie, oh Precious Auntie! I wish you had never died! It was all my fault. If I could change fate, I would rather kill myself than suffer without you. . . ." Oh, no. Ruth knew what this was. Her mother sometimes talked about this Precious Auntie ghost who lived in the air, a lady who had not behaved and who wound up living at the End of the World. That was where all bad people went: a bottomless pit where no one would ever find them, and there they would be stuck, wandering with their hair hanging to their toes, wet and bloody.*  
(P.68)

The quote illustrates the transmission of trauma narratives from the old generation to her child, particularly during conflicts between generations. From the sentence "*Precious Auntie, oh Precious Auntie! I wish you never died! It was all my fault. If I could change*

*fate, I would rather kill myself than suffer without you. . . ."* shows familial transmission where LuLing conveys her trauma narrative about the death of Precious Auntie and her regrets to Ruth when they are fighting. It can also be seen in the next sentence that Ruth knows that this will happen because LuLing often says it. The younger generation who receive incomplete trauma narratives will perceive it negatively and form bad memories related to someone they often hear about through the narrative. This can be seen in the sentence "*Her mother sometimes talked about this Precious Auntie ghost who lived in the air, a lady who had not behaved and who wound up living at the End of the World.*" shows how Ruth describes the figure of Precious Auntie leading to something negative because based on the narrative that LuLing always conveys, conveyed incompletely which gives rise to misunderstand. This incomplete transmission of trauma narratives can result in misinterpretations and conflicts between generations.

Familial transmission involves repetition of trauma narratives from previous generations, consciously or unconsciously transmitting traumatic senses to the listener, forming their

psychological well-being and memory. According to Hirsch (2012: p 86), in the familial transmission process, it is known that there are several repetitions of one narrative theme. Apart from being a starting point for emphasizing which memories are most remembered by the generation that experienced them, repetition also functions in the reconstruction process for the post-generation. This can be shown in the following quotation:

*Ruth: "But the doctor said sometimes you forget things because you're depressed."  
LuLing: "Depress 'cause can not forgot! Look my sad life!" Ruth pumped the brakes to make sure they would hold, then steered the car down the falling turns of the parking garage. Her mother's voice droned in rhythm with the engine: "Of course, depress. When Precious Auntie dies, all happiness leaves my body. . . ." (P.86)*

The narrative highlights the impact of narrative trauma, as LuLing repeatedly discusses her life post-traumatic event, highlighting how trauma can lead to a broken timeline and a distorted view of oneself in the past and future. The sentence "*Depress 'cause can not forgot! Look my sad life!*" shows LuLing's trauma narrative, which states about her miserable life because of traumatic memories that she cannot

forget. The trauma narrative is said repeatedly by Luling as conveyed in the next sentence, which says, "*Of course, depressed. When Precious Auntie died, all happiness left my body. . . .*" This shows LuLing emphasizes that Precious Auntie's death has ruined her life because that's what made her depressed. LuLing's repetition will affect Ruth's reconstruction process later because she collects narrative trauma that LuLing emphasizes only on the part of Precious Auntie's death.

#### **4.1.2 Affiliative Transmission**

The second form of LuLing's past memory transmission is affiliative transmission. Affiliative in postmemory becomes a description in explaining the form of trauma transmission. Traumatic experiences can be transmitted through objects that are related to the events that occurred. Traumatic events obtained from the post-generation are not solely obtained directly. These events are recorded in many media in the form of photos, personal notes, or objects seen as if the experience belonged to them completely. According to Hirsch:

"Affiliative transmission refers to the transmission of traumatic memories across a larger social field, in which objects or people who do not

have a direct personal relationship to the horrific event yet have a strong emotional attachment to it.” (2012. p.36)

This means that, in addition to family, the social environment can also be a realm where traumatic memories are transmitted. This can be from other people’s narratives or objects related to traumatic events. In postmemory theory by Hirsch, objects here refer to visual media such as photos, notes, letters, or museums that can evoke strong emotional responses to the past. In the novel *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Ruth as the post-generation received this affiliative transmission when she and her mother were gathering with other relatives to celebrate the Moon Festival dinner. This situation is shown in the following quotation:

*LuLing was fishing for something in her wallet. She pulled out a tiny photo, then handed it to Ruth. "There," she said in Chinese. "This one right here, she's my mother." A chill ran over Ruth's scalp. It was a photograph of her mother's nursemaid, Bao Bomu, Precious Auntie.. As Ruth peered more closely at the photo, the woman's expression seemed even more oddly disturbing, as if she could see into the future and knew it was cursed (P.82)*

The data reveals both familial and affiliative transmissions, allowing postgenerational understanding of past events. Ruth receives a familial transmission stating the fact that Precious Auntie is her grandmother, as well as an affiliative transmission where the photo shown by LuLing becomes a depiction of the narrative she has been conveying so far about Precious Auntie so that Ruth can know the true form of the figure her mother always tells her about. Postgenerations who get a picture of an event or a person through photography or documentary notes can also feel the emotions felt by the trauma owner based on what they hear. This is also what Ruth feels in this novel as can be seen from the sentence “*As Ruth peered more closely at the photo, the woman’s expression seemed even more oddly disturbing, as if she could see into the future and knew it was cursed*”. This shows that Ruth could feel a similar fear or anxiety as her mother when she looked closely at the photo of Precious Auntie even though she has never met her. This is because of the narrative conveyed by LuLing who believes that there is a curse that will always follow her after the death of Precious Auntie. Therefore, by looking at the photo of Precious Auntie, Ruth also feels anxiety



about the curse that could also happen to her as her mother often said.

In addition to photographs, other objects that can transmit trauma are notes that contain stories of events that occurred in the past. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, LuLing's life notes in the past become the second form of affiliative transmission received by Ruth. This can be seen from the following quotation:

*What else was in the bottom of the chair? Ruth reached in and pulled out a package wrapped in a brown grocery bag and tied with red Christmas ribbon. Inside was a stack of paper, all written on in Chinese. At the top of certain sheets was a large character done in stylish brushed-drawn calligraphy. She had seen this before. But where? When? And then it came to her. The other pages, the ones buried in her bottom righthand desk drawer. "Truth," she recalled the top of that first page read. "These are the things I know are true." What did the next sentences say? The names of the dead, the secrets they took with them. What secrets? She sensed her mother's life was at stake and the answer was in her hands, had been there all along*  
(P.132)

The quotation shows that a stack of paper is an object containing LuLing's life story written in Chinese. In this case, trauma can be transmitted through

interaction in historical form in writing. Someone who reads a traumatic story can cause feelings of anxiety as if they were in the story, which can form a traumatic memory from what they received. From this affiliative transmission, Ruth gets information and experiences of trauma experienced by her mother. However, Ruth's limitations in speaking Chinese make her only understand part of the contents of the notes. From the understanding she gets, it can cause anxiety in her.

The sentence "*She sensed her mother's life was at stake and the answer was in her hands, had been there all along*" shows Ruth's anxiety because she worries about her mother when she feels that her mother's life depends on the past that written on the paper. She now has the answer to her curiosity about his mother's life in the past.

## **4.2 The Way of Post-Generation Cut off the Intergenerational Trauma**

### **4.2.1 Reconstruction**

Reconstruction is the first step Ruth takes to identifying intergenerational trauma. After the memory is transmitted, the post-generation will perform reconstruction. It is the process of remembering influenced by cognitive functions that

can alter memory recall. Individuals attempt to understand and reconstruct their past through personal experience and affiliative transmission. Through the reconstruction stage, it can be seen how the post-generation receives the transmitted memory.

The connection of past events that continue to be repressed leads individuals to have a greater desire to reveal objects that are not yet complete. This situation leads individuals to reconstruct memories from the return journey. A returning journey aims to trace the history of the first generation, maximizing affiliative transmission. Post-generation heirs attempt to understand incomplete trauma received during this time. Hirsch's concept, exemplified in the Holocaust, suggests heirs present at the incident's scene, but in Ruth's case, the scene is not a real place but an attempt to obtain information about her mother's life as stated in the following quotation:

*Ruth lay down on the bed, the pages next to her. She looked at the photo of Precious Auntie and put that on her chest. Tomorrow, she would call Art in Hawaii and see if he could recommend someone who could translate. That was One. She would retrieve the other pages from home. That was Two. She would call Auntie*

*Gal and see what she knew. That was Three. And she would ask her mother to tell her about her life. (p.133)*

The quotation above shows Ruth's reconstruction efforts aim to understand her mother's trauma, often influenced by reconciling with the past and seeking authenticity through historical archives and family memory. Those with awareness and resistance to trauma aim to overcome it, as Ruth did. This can be seen by the sentence

*"Tomorrow, she would call Art in Hawaii and see if he could recommend someone who could translate. That was One. She would retrieve the other pages from home. That was Two. She would call Auntie Gal and see what she knew. That was Three,"* shows Ruth tries to get a complete memory of her mother's trauma. Ruth, unable to return to her mother's traumatic past, makes three attempts to gather complete information about her mother's past. These traces aim to illuminate distant memories and bring the realities previously told by her mother.

As a result, Ruth's steps in reconstructing memories have provided more extensive information about previous vague memories. This is proven in the following quotation:

*Ruth stayed up all night to read the pages Mr. Tang had translated. "Truth," the account began. She started to enumerate all the true things she was learning, but soon lost count, as each fact led to more questions. Her mother was really five years older than Ruth had always thought. So that meant she had told Dr. Huey the truth about her age! And the part about not being GaoLing's sister, that was true as well. Yet her mother and GaoLing were sisters, more so than Ruth had ever thought. They had had more reason than most sisters to disavow their relationship, yet they had been fiercely loyal, had remained irrevocably bound to each other by grudges, debt, and love. She was elated to know this. (p.271)*

The quotation shows how Ruth finally discovers new facts about her mother's life so far. In this novel, Ruth reconstructs her family's memory through reading translated documentary notes with Mr. Tang's help. Through this process, she discovers many facts about her family background, including the relationship between her mother and her mother's sister. Post-generations have increased awareness to understand and accept the past experiences of previous generations. The sentence "*And the part about not being GaoLing's sister, that was true as well.*" shows Ruth finding

out the truth about her mother's words that Aunt Gal is not her biological sister. Through this reconstruction, one by one the puzzles of her mother's life began to be answered which allows Ruth to build awareness of her mother's past so that she can accept the facts about her mother's life. The sentence "*She was elated to know this*" shows Ruth's expression of happiness because knowing her mother's story can help Ruth understand why her mother behaved like that all the time.

#### **4.2.2 Identification**

The second process of cutting off trauma memory is identification. Individuals who grow up in families that have experienced trauma must identify themselves with that trauma. Identification refers to the process of recognizing previously experienced events, objects, or people. This identification is very important because it is related to the formation of trauma in the next generation. Ruth identified her mother's trauma as intergenerational, using heteropathic identification. Hirsch's heteropathic identification suggests that *the self* is the recipient of trauma transmission, while *the other* is the one who has it.

This identification influences understanding, feelings, and identity construction. Ruth begins to recognize her mother's trauma, which she believes is her own, as it was passed down through her mother's tragic loss. This loss, interpreted as the absence of a grandmother or mother, has become her own trauma. As Ruth reconstructs her mother, she realizes she must resolve the trauma she has been feeling about Precious Auntie, revealing that the trauma she has been experiencing is her mother's. This can be shown by the following quotation:

*But then Ruth remembered that as a girl, she had been terrified of Precious Auntie. She had resented her presence in their lives, had blamed her for her mother's quirkiness, her feelings of doom. How misunderstood Precious Auntie had been by both her daughter and her granddaughter. Yet there were moments when Ruth sensed that Precious Auntie had been watching her, that she knew when Ruth was suffering. Ruth mused over this, lying in her childhood bed. She understood more clearly why her mother had always wanted to find Precious Auntie's bones and bury them in the proper place. She wanted to walk through the End of the World and make amends. She wanted to tell her mother, "I'm sorry and I forgive you, too." (p.271)*

From the quotation above, it can be seen how Ruth started to identify what her mother had experienced. Postgenerations who reject the trauma that has been transmitted will feel sympathy for the trauma that the previous generation had. This can also give rise to feelings of guilt for having been prejudiced because the narrative trauma received so far is incomplete. The sentence "*How misunderstood Precious Auntie had been-by both her daughter and her granddaughter*" shows Ruth's awareness of her feelings for Precious Auntie all this time, which makes Ruth feel unhappy with her presence. Ruth felt sorry for her grandmother's trauma, highlighting the desire of post-generations to break the intergenerational chain of trauma. Her awareness of her mother's trauma freed her from being trapped in it, allowing her to cut off the trauma simultaneously. The following sentence "*She wanted to tell her mother, 'I'm sorry and I forgive you, too'.*" shows Ruth's expression of regret toward her mother, where she always felt annoyed by her mother's quirkiness, who always believed in curses without wanting to know what her mother had experienced.

Identification in the context of postmemory refers to the way younger

generations feel emotionally and psychologically connected to the experiences of trauma experienced by previous generations. It is not just about remembering or knowing about past events, but about feeling and understanding those experiences. Identification with the experiences of previous generations can increase awareness in the post-generation. Ruth, as the post-generation, effectively identified with the experiences of her mother, focusing on the positive aspects rather than the negatives, thereby preventing intergenerational trauma from recurrence in the next generation. This can be proven from the quotation data below:

*As Ruth now stares at the photo, she thinks about her mother as a little girl, about her grandmother as a young woman. These are the women who shaped her life, who are in her bones. They caused her to question whether the order and disorder of her life were due to fate or luck, self-determination or the actions of others. They taught her to worry. But she has also learned that these warnings were passed down, not simply to scare her, but to force her to avoid their footsteps, to hope for something better. They wanted her to get rid of the curses. (P.310)*

Ruth learned valuable lessons from her mother's trauma narratives, demonstrating how identification connects individuals and groups to inherited experiences and memories. It bridges individual and collective experiences, shaping a person's self-perception and worldview by combining elements from the past. Ruth connects her mother's past trauma experiences and behavior with her current self, realizing that these factors shape her life and help prevent similar experiences from occurring in the future. From the sentence "*They taught her to worry. But she has also learned that these warnings were passed down, not simply to scare her, but to force her to avoid their footsteps, to hope for something better. They wanted her to get rid of the curses,*" shows Ruth, who understands the meaning of her mother's behavior, which is intended so that Ruth does not experience the same thing as her mother and Precious Auntie. LuLing doesn't want Ruth to have the same regrets as she did for her behavior towards Precious Auntie, her biological mother, so the curse doesn't happen to Ruth. Ruth who can identify the trauma of her mother's past experiences well makes her aware of understanding her mother's behavior.

Therefore, Ruth can take positive things from the experience and make it a lesson in her life so that she can live a better life than the previous generation.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Intergenerational trauma is a mental health issue passed down through generations, often through memory transmission. It occurs when a family member experiences trauma and shares it with their children, grandchildren, and future descendants, resulting in a cycle of trauma transmission. Trauma transmission can be categorized into familial transmission and affiliative transmission. Familial transmission involves memory inheritance from the previous generation through incomplete narratives, often carried out by parents, while affiliative transmission occurs outside of family relationships through narratives from others or objects related to the trauma experience. Post-generation can resolve intergenerational trauma by developing awareness and using two forms: reconstruction

memory and identification. Reconstruction memory involves remembering and returning to the place where the traumatic experience occurred, aiming to understand the experiences of previous generations. This process is often influenced by a desire to reconcile with the past and seek authenticity through historical archives and family memory. Heterophatic identification involves the experience of trauma encountered by others. This research found two results: first, that old generations' memory is transmitted through familial transmission, where the trauma is inherited through the narrative conveyed by LuLing to her daughter, and second, that post-generation can cut off intergenerational trauma by reconstructing memory through documentary notes and identifying the trauma as her mother's own. By building awareness and helping her mother escape the past, Ruth was able to help her mother create better memories for her mother.

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