

Mothers, Memory and Female Agency: Mary, Sarah, Jing-mei Woo and Rose Hsu Jordan in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a comparative literary and theological analysis of two biblical women Mary, mother of Jesus and Sarah, wife of Abraham—and two characters from Amy Tan's fiction: Jing-mei Woo and Rose Hsu Jordan from *The Joy Luck Club*. Situated within the broader thesis framework *Faith, Fate and Female Fortitude*, the study explores how faith (religious, filial and cultural), conceptions of fate and practices of fortitude (resilience, agency and endurance) shape feminine identity across divergent historical and cultural contexts. Employing close reading, intertextual comparison and feminist theological critique, the paper shows that although Mary and Sarah belong to a religious tradition that frames women's roles within covenantal narratives and Jing-mei and Rose belong to diasporic literature negotiating bicultural identities, all four women negotiate meaning through stories of vulnerability, relationality and transformation. The analysis highlights convergences particularly in motherhood, silence and speech and the reframing of destiny and divergences especially in ideological frameworks (divine promise versus cultural memory) and narrative agency. The paper concludes that reading biblical women alongside modern diasporic fiction offers fresh insights into contemporary feminist readings of religious texts and enriches literary approaches to cultural heritage, memory and female resilience.

Keywords: Mary, Sarah, Amy Tan, Jing-mei Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, faith, fate, fortitude, motherhood, diaspora

INTRODUCTION

The intersecting concerns of faith, fate and fortitude form the spine of many narratives about women across history. In Judeo-Christian sacred texts, figures such as Mary and Sarah function as archetypes: Mary embodies obedient faith that participates in divine action, while Sarah represents both the promises and contradictions of covenantal life—barrenness turned into fertility by divine intervention, yet marked by human doubt and struggle. In contemporary literature, Amy Tan's characters negotiate cultural inheritance and personal destiny in the diasporic space of Chinese-American experience. Jing-mei Woo and Rose Hsu Jordan, two of Tan's most carefully drawn characters, illuminate how mother-daughter relations, memory and silence shape female identity under the pressures of migration, cross-generational misunderstanding and cultural expectation.

This comparative study examines how faith, fate and fortitude operate in the lives and narrative functions of Mary and Sarah and in Jing-mei and Rose. While the sacred and the secular, the ancient and the modern and the canonical and the literary may appear to be discrete domains, a comparative reading reveals shared modalities through which women articulate meaning, exercise resilience and reconfigure agency. The aim here is not to equate religious sanctity with fictional representation but to explore the hermeneutic fecundity that arises when biblical women are read dialogically with characters from modern diasporic fiction.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This paper employs a qualitative, comparative method grounded in close textual reading, feminist theological critique and cultural literary analysis. Primary texts include canonical biblical passages (primarily Luke and Genesis narratives as these concern Mary and Sarah respectively) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (focusing on the stories 'Two Kinds'/Jing-mei and Rose's storyline). Secondary literature is drawn from feminist exegesis, literary criticism of Tan's work and theoretical writings on diaspora studies, memory and narrative identity. Feminist theology offers tools to interrogate constructions of female virtue and agency in religious narratives, while diaspora and transnational feminist theory help situate Tan's characters in processes of cultural negotiation.

The comparison is structured around three thematic axes: (1) faith as relational trust and interpretive orientation, (2) fate as destiny, promise and narrative constraint and (3) fortitude as resilience, voice and action. Each axis examines the two biblical women and the two Amy Tan characters, mapping convergences and divergences and reflecting on implications for contemporary readings.

Historical and Literary Contexts

Mary and Sarah in Biblical Memory

Mary and Sarah occupy central, though distinct, places in the Judeo-Christian imagination. Mary, presented in the Gospel of Luke as the virgin who receives an angelic annunciation, is often interpreted as the exemplar of pious submission and receptive obedience—qualities valorized by many theological traditions. Yet modern feminist readings complicate simplistic portrayals by tracing Mary's interpretive agency, her active assent (the *fiat*) and her later presence in Christian memory as a figure of solidarity and sorrow (e.g., the Mater Dolorosa).

Sarah, in Genesis, is integral to the Abrahamic covenant. Her story is layered with human complexity: laughter at the promise (hence Isaac, 'he laughs'), moments of doubt and episodes—most notably Hagar and Ishmael—where familial tension exposes social vulnerabilities. Feminist exegesis has highlighted Sarah's ambivalence: she is both a covenantal matriarch and a woman whose subjectivity gets mediated through patriarchal structures. Sarah's narrative thus affords a rich site for discussing agency under cultural and divine constraints.

Jing-mei Woo and Rose Hsu Jordan: Diasporic Daughters

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) maps intergenerational tensions between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters. Jing-mei Woo (June) and Rose Hsu Jordan are emblematic of second-generation struggles: they inherit stories and expectations yet must forge identities within American cultural frameworks.

Jing-mei's story—charged with her mother's high expectations and the haunting absence of a twin—centers on performance and the attempt to reconcile personal failure with filial duty. Rose's narrative, by contrast, engages the dissolution of marriage, passive acquiescence versus assertiveness and the reclamation of voice through remembering and retelling. Both characters negotiate memory, silence and translation between cultures.

Faith as Relational and Interpretive Practice

Faith appears in different registers in sacred and secular narratives. For Mary and Sarah, faith is primarily theological and covenantal; for Jing-mei and Rose, faith often functions as filial trust in maternal narratives and cultural memory.

Mary: Trusting the Divine and Embracing Mystery

Mary's faith, as depicted in Luke 1, is remarkable because it is both personal and ecclesial. Her *fiat*—"Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38)—is an affirmation that participates in God's salvific plan. Feminist theologians note that Mary's assent is not passivity but a vocalized commitment that inaugurates a new social reality: the incarnation. Mary's faith is embodied trust; it is trust that reorients bodily, social and theological horizons.

Sarah: Faith Negotiated Through Doubt and Covenant

Sarah's faith is paradoxical. Genesis portrays her as recipient of a promise (descendants as numerous as the stars) yet as subject to doubt (laughing at the promise) and social vulnerability (sending Hagar into concubinage). Her faith cannot be read merely as unquestioning acceptance; rather, Sarah is an actor within a covenantal drama where divine agency and human frailty intersect. Feminist readings emphasize Sarah's endurance (long-suffering) and her contingent faith—a faith that sustains but is never untroubled.

Jing-mei and Rose: Filial Faith and Cultural Trust

For Jing-mei and Rose, faith is less about theism and more about confidence in personal and familial narrative structures. Jing-mei's early belief in her mother's authority—"Two kinds" of daughters, prodigies—reflects a filial faith that shapes her self-expectation. When she fails to fulfill this role, the rupture is existential. Rose's faith in external authorities (doctors, lawyers, or fate) leads initially to passivity; her journey toward reasserting agency is a movement from transferred faith (trust placed in others) to self-trust and an ethical reclamation of voice. In both cases, the mothers' cultural and personal beliefs function analogously to religious promises: they orient daughters' lives, even when they become contested.

Fate as Divine Promise and Cultural Script

Fate in biblical narratives often appears as divine promise or destiny; in Tan's fiction, fate operates through cultural scripts, maternal stories and the immigration experience.

Divine Promise and Human Timing: Sarah's Narrative

Sarah's life revolves around a divine promise—the birth of Isaac—that subverts biological expectation. Her eventual motherhood complicates understandings of fate: the promise arrives unpredictably, entangled with human decision-making, jealousy and social cost. Sarah's laughter and subsequent naming of Isaac captures the ambivalence: fate is both given and awkwardly received.

Mary: Participation in a Cosmic Fate

Mary's fate—motherhood of the messianic child—is unique in theological weight. It is not merely personal fulfillment but cosmic participation. Mary's narrative shows fate as vocation: a call that reshapes personal history into salvific history. Theologically, Mary's role reframes fate as participatory obedience rather than deterministic imposition.

Jing-mei and Rose: Fate as Cultural Script and Personal Agency

For Jing-mei, fate was scripted by her mother's immigrant aspirations; the “prodigal daughter” narrative created an expectation that nearly became destiny. Her refusal and later reconciliation with her mother's story represent a dialectic of fate and freedom: Tan suggests that fate in diasporic life often masquerades as cultural expectation.

Rose's story involves a different sense of fate—one of legal and relational consequences (the loss of a child through divorce, the splitting of a self). Rose initially accepts a fate of passivity; through witnessing her mother's storytelling and visiting ancestral roots, she learns to reinterpret fate as mutable. Diasporic fate thus becomes negotiable through remembrance and linguistic reclamation.

Female Endurance, Voice and Moral Agency

Fortitude denotes the capacity to endure hardship and to act courageously in face of constraint. Each of the four women displays fortitude in distinct registers.

Mary: Silent Strength and Maternal Courage

Mary's fortitude is often depicted in her presence at pivotal moments—the annunciation, the visitation, the crucifixion. She is a figure of contemplative courage, whose silence at times is theologically resonant. Marian fortitude is relational: she endures in solidarity with the suffering of others (e.g., in the passion narratives) and models a form of maternal courage that is both tender and steadfast.

Sarah: Fortitude as Survival in a Precarious Patriarchal World

Sarah's fortitude emerges from survival strategies. She negotiates social stigma (barrenness), household tension (Hagar) and the dislocations of nomadic covenantal life. Sarah's story is not one of serene acceptance but of complex endurance—ambivalent, strategic and often morally fraught.

Jing-mei: From Defiance to Empathy

Jing-mei's fortitude evolves: youthful defiance against imposed expectations gives way to mature empathy and acceptance. Her final acceptance of the piano, the stories of her mother and her later assumption of the role at the Joy Luck Club's memorial—taking her mother's place at the table—symbolize a fortitude shaped through remembrance rather than mere stubbornness.

Rose: Finding Voice through Narrative Repair

Rose's fortitude is perhaps most visibly narrated in her reclamation of voice. Initially passive in marriage and law, she learns to speak—first in small acts that reconfigure legal realities (contest the terms of her divorce) and then in the larger act of telling and receiving stories from her mother. Rose's fortitude is therapeutic and reconstructive: narrative repair enables moral courage.

Intersections: Motherhood, Silence and the Power of Story

A crucial intersection among these four figures lies in motherhood and the transmission of narrative. Mary and Sarah occupy distinct maternal paradigms within sacred memory—one as the mother of God (Maternal sanctity), the other as matriarch of a people (genealogical anchor). Jing-mei and Rose inherit maternal stories that both constrict and free them.

Silence functions ambivalently. Mary's silence can be read as contemplative consent; Sarah's silence (or gaps in the text about her interiority) reveal textual marginalization. Jing-mei's early refusal and Rose's initial passivity are forms of imposed silence—socially produced rather than divinely ordained. Yet in Tan's fiction, story and speech become instruments of liberation: when daughters listen to mothers' stories, a reparative process begins.

Stories function as vessels of fate and faith. Sarah's life is shaped by covenantal stories; Mary's life enters scriptural narrative at a turning point. Jing-mei's and Rose's identities are forged in the dialectic between immigrant mothers' narratives and American cultural scripting. Thus narrative is both constraining and enabling: it prescribes roles, but it also provides the language for resistance and reinterpretation.

Divergences: Cultural Logic and Ideological Frameworks

Despite resonances, significant divergences exist. Biblical narratives operate within an explicit theological horizon where divine agency is primary; women are often positioned within covenantal schemes that privilege lineage and sacramental 意味 (significance). In Tan's fiction, causal agency is social and psychological—rooted in historical trauma, immigration and gendered cultural expectation rather than divine teleology.

Moreover, the meaning of fortitude differs: biblical fortitude often takes a sacrificial, communal form; Tan's female fortitude frequently emphasizes psychological repair, narrative reclamation and personal assertion within legal and familial structures.

Implications for Feminist Theology and Diasporic Literary Studies

Comparing biblical women with diasporic fictional characters yields productive interdisciplinary gains. For feminist theology, reading Sarah and Mary alongside Tan's daughters invites attention to narrative dynamics—how promise, silence and maternal voice shape female subjectivity. The diasporic perspective emphasizes memory, hybridity and the material conditions of storytelling, enriching theological reflection about agency and voice.

For literary studies, biblical figures offer archetypal frameworks that reveal the cultural legacies embedded in diasporic narratives. Theologically inflected categories—vocation, covenant and sanctity—can illuminate the structural forces that shape immigrant mothers' imperatives and daughters' rebellions. Conversely, Tan's emphasis on cultural translation and psychological nuance challenges reductive theological readings of biblical women.

CONCLUSION

Mary, Sarah, Jing-mei Woo and Rose Hsu Jordan inhabit narratives that, though separated by millennia and genre, participate in ongoing conversations about what it means to be a woman who trusts, endures and narrates. Faith in these lives can be religious, filial, or cultural; fate can be divine promise or diasporic script; fortitude can be contemplative endurance or narrative reclamation. Reading these figures together highlights how stories—sacred and secular—shape identity and agency.

This comparative study argues that engagement across texts and traditions deepens our appreciation for female resilience. Mary and Sarah remind readers that faith and promise often come with ambiguity and cost; Jing-mei and Rose show how memory and storytelling enable reparative fortitude. Together, they propose a model of female agency that is neither purely passive nor triumphalist but dialogical: women negotiate constraints through relationship, speech and the reworking of inherited stories.

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