The Primal Pain of Mothers in *Joy Luck Club* and *Saving Face*

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Han, Jihee. “The Primal Pain of Mothers in *Joy Luck Club* and *Saving Face*.” *Modern Studies in English Language & Literature* 53.3 (2009): 175–193. Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976) has made a huge influence on the feminist studies of motherhood for the past thirty years. Due to Rich’s insight, they could separate motherhood as an ideology from mothering as an experience and examine the oppressive aspects of a mother’s existence in a patriarchal society. Especially, Rich’s conception of the primal pain of mothers allowed them to look into mothers’ depression and feeling of alienation from a fresh point of view. Therefore, this essay takes up Rich’s theoretical position as a main discursive frame and tries to analyze Chinese mothers’ pain represented in Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* and Alice Wu’s *Saving Face*. By looking into various representations of mothers, this essay ultimately suggests the persistent relevance of Rich’s discursive insight on the issue of motherhood and mothering.

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1. Introduction

Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976) has made a huge influence on the feminist studies of motherhood for the past thirty years. According to Andrea O’Reilly, Rich provided “key theoretical insights” for feminist scholars “to fully study and report upon the meaning and experience of motherhood” and thus “influenced the way feminist scholarship ‘thinks and talks’ motherhood” (1–2). To name several works

The great debt today’s feminist scholars owe to Rich is, probably, her critical perspective that separated motherhood as an ideology from mothering as an experience. According to Rich, “the physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest” and yet “the mother’s very character” and “her status as a woman” are in question “if she has ‘failed’ her children” (52). In other words, mothers would live under the patriarchal ideology of motherhood that mandates them to bring up their children to have socially right gender identity and politically correct values. Thus even though their actual mothering experiences suggest different senses about their children, they often ignore them and distress themselves as well as their children to meet the social standards. Due to such ideological pressure of the ‘right’ mothering, they often abase their actual mothering experiences. They even demean their personal status as a woman when they think they failed the images of the ‘good’ mother. Rich calls such psychological burden under which many mothers suffer “the primal pain of woman” (52).

Developing Rich’s assertion that motherhood is not a natural capacity of women but a patriarchal ideology and institution, many following feminists could examine that there had been various images of the ‘good’ mother, depending not only on such individual variables as race