

Challenging Chinese American Motherhood in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022): A Matricentric Feminism Analysis

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Abstrak

Peran sebagai ibu dilakukan hampir oleh semua perempuan dari latar budaya yang berbeda-beda, namun masyarakat sering kali gagal dalam mengatasi dan memberi dukungan terhadap tantangan unik yang dihadapi oleh para ibu. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan bagaimana tokoh utama dalam film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) menentang model keibuan Tionghoa-Amerika. Dalam menganalisis data, feminisme matrisentrik yang dikemukakan oleh Andrea O'Reilly (2016) digunakan sebagai pendekatan. Penelitian ini menganalisis dialog-dialog dalam film untuk menyelesaikan permasalahan. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa dalam menentang model keibuan tradisional Tionghoa-Amerika, tokoh utama dalam film merubah praktik keibuan yang diterapkannya menjadi tiga model baru, yaitu keibuan yang demokratis, keibuan yang merangkul keragaman orientasi seksual, dan keibuan yang utuh.

Kata Kunci: keibuan, Tionghoa-Amerika, feminisme matricentrik.

Abstract

Motherhood is practiced by nearly all women across different cultural backgrounds worldwide, yet society often fails to address and support the unique challenges mothers face. This study aims to depict how the protagonist in the movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) challenges the Chinese American model of motherhood. Matricentric feminism, as proposed by Andrea O'Reilly (2016), is used as the analytical approach. The research examines the movie's dialogues to reveal the issues. The results indicate that, in challenging the traditional Chinese American motherhood model, the movie's main character transforms her motherhood practices into three new models: democratic motherhood, embracing sexual orientation diversity, and self-fulfilled motherhood.

Keywords: motherhood, Chinese American, matricentric feminism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of motherhood is broadly applicable and exists throughout diverse cultures worldwide, reflecting variations of perspective and experiences within the practice of motherhood across diverse cultures. Although the concept of motherhood is pervasive, and its practice is undertaken by most women globally, the predominant culture and societal structure surrounding motherhood are frequently unable to address the requirements and difficulties women face. According to Rich (1976), parenting is an institution designed to maintain male control over all women, including prospective mothers. Therefore, the responsibilities assigned to mothers are substantial and complex, often presenting significant challenges. Cultural and historical factors have influenced the concept of motherhood, resulting in various challenges in practices across cultural divides. Motherhood in Chinese American culture is one noteworthy example of the complex dynamics and cultural adjustments resulting

from combining traditional beliefs with modern societal influences.

A Chinese American mother handled the pressures of practicing motherhood under the influence of two distinct cultural values. The traditional Chinese cultural expectations mothers attempt to uphold frequently conflict with the realities and conditions faced by children growing up in American society. Therefore, it often resulting tensions and conflicts within the mother-child relationship. A movie that vividly illustrates the specific complexities of Chinese American mothers is *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). This movie was first released on March 11, 2022, directed by the Daniels, Daniel Kwan, and Daniel Scheinert and distributed by American film production A24. Last year, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) became a global phenomenon after winning seven Academy Awards nominations, including the Best Pictures. Its popularity attracted a lot of attention from the general public and

movie enthusiasts, marking a pivotal moment in the representation of Asians on a global scale.

The movie depicts Evelyn Wang (Michelle Yeoh), a Chinese American mother who is abruptly propelled into a multiverse pushed by circumstance to safeguard humanity from a black hole that the villain Jobu Tupaki created. In this movie, Evelyn must overcome Jobu Tupaki, reconcile the conflict with her daughter, Joy, and undergo an audit of her laundromat. Despite Evelyn's multifaceted role, her relationship with her daughter remains the central issue. Evelyn's Chinese American motherhood practices, characterized by authoritarian control, internalized heterosexualism, and sacrificial motherhood, emerge as the primary source of conflict in their relationship. Thus, to reconcile with Joy, Evelyn must confront and redefine the traditional Chinese American motherhood practices she has long upheld.

This movie's popularity surge is attributed to its unique narrative and remarkable achievement of winning seven Academy Awards in 2023, significantly elevating its stature in the modern film industry. Consequently, it has become a focal point for numerous academic studies. Previous research has been utilized as a foundation for the current study. Notably, South and Sudhakaran (2023) explored motherhood in the multiverse, comparing *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) and *Doctor Strange: Multiverse of Madness* (2022). Their study examines superhero blockbusters as contemporary melodramas. It redefines the image of the Asian American hero, spotlighting the immigrant mother, a role traditionally dominated by male heroes in the movie industry. Furthermore, Wahyudiputra and Purnomo (2022) investigated the cultural interactions of Evelyn, Waymond, and Joy within the movie's multifaceted multiverse narrative. Their findings indicate that the characters, as diaspora members, navigate a transitional environment, prompting them to create distinct survival strategies. The study proposes that the film symbolically reflects the transitional experiences of the Chinese-American diaspora in the United States.

A review of previous studies on *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) reveals that, although motherhood is discussed, the focus is predominantly on the concept of a mother as a hero within the multiverse rather than on her personal experiences and practices. This gap highlights a lack of detailed literary analysis addressing the depiction and complexity of motherhood in the movie from the mother's perspective. The absence of research centering on motherhood underscores the need for further analysis, as there is still much to explore regarding this concept in the movie.

Motherhood has a wide range of interpretations, especially within the feminist movement. Previous studies have often separated the identities of women and mothers, thereby marginalizing the essential connection between the two. In response, Andrea O'Reilly (2016) developed the theory of matricentric feminism, which places mothers at the center of feminist discourse. The concept of motherhood is still subject to patriarchal oppression, highlighting differing perspectives in feminist literature on its role. Many feminists view motherhood as a hindrance to women's full liberation. As O'Reilly asserts, matricentric feminism distinguishes between the concerns of women and mothers.

"a mother-centred feminism is needed because mothers—arguably more so than women in general—remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism" (p. 2).

Matricentric feminism provides a feminist framework that centers on the role of the mother, recognizing that mothering is a pivotal experience shaping a woman's identity and worldview. This approach emphasizes that motherhood should be integral to feminist discourse, with mothers' needs and concerns forming the foundation of the theory and political strategy for women's empowerment. Despite matricentric feminism being a relatively new approach to analyzing motherhood, several studies in the literature have utilized this framework. One notable example is Okam's (2020) research on Umaru Landan and Dexter Lyndersay's *Shaihu Umar*, which examines the matricentric elements displayed by Fatima, Shaihu's mother, as a product of her motherhood and influenced by metaphysical and messianic factors. The findings highlight both matricentric and mythological themes, emphasizing Fatima's maternal love and care in her search for her son. Another relevant study is Elbayiyeva's (2023) analysis of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* using matricentric feminism. This research demonstrates how motherhood empowers the novel's characters, enabling them to unleash their artistic potential despite their challenges as women and mothers.

This study aims to advance the understanding of matricentric feminism within the literature, particularly focusing on Chinese American motherhood as depicted by the protagonist in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). The analysis explores motherhood issues through a comparative cultural lens within matricentric feminism. An exemplary portrayal of Chinese American motherhood complexity is evident in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). Despite extensive discussions about the film, previous analyses have overlooked Evelyn's experience as

the protagonist in embodying her role as a Chinese American mother. This study addresses this gap by broadening the exploration of diverse cultural perspectives on motherhood in literature, employing contemporary methodologies. It specifically examines the representation of motherhood in the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) using the framework of matricentric feminism, highlighting the protagonist's challenges to traditional Chinese American motherhood norms.

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This study utilized the matricentric feminism approach, established by Andrea O'Reilly in 2016. This framework centers on motherhood, prioritizing the needs and concerns of mothers as the basis for formulating theories and politics aimed at women's empowerment (O'Reilly, 2019). *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) will be used as the source data of the analysis. Furthermore, the data would be collected by closely watching *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) and transcribing the chosen dialogues. The selected dialogues will be carefully arranged throughout the data-collecting process to ensure accurate and structured documentation.

After all relevant dialogues have been documented, the organized data will be examined from the perspective of matricentric feminism. This theoretical framework will clarify and support the main character's actions of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) in challenging the traditional Chinese American motherhood model. The study's last section will present a well-supported conclusion that summarizes the analysis's main results and answers the study's research issues.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section examines how the main character challenges the traditional model of Chinese American motherhood within *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). It presents the transformation of Evelyn's previous motherhood practice. The matricentric feminism of Andrea O'Reilly, a feminist perspective that particularly addresses the experiences and difficulties connected to motherhood, will be used in the analysis. Matricentric feminism, centered on empowering mothers through the recognition of their experiences, stands in contrast to traditional Chinese American motherhood.

1. Democratic Motherhood

Motherhood in Chinese households has traditionally been characterized by the authoritarian control model, distinguishing them apart from other cultures. Chinese immigrants subsequently adopted this motherhood model in their new countries, which is marked rigid in their rules

and shows little affection or response to their children (Baumrind, 1971). In *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), the model of authoritarian motherhood is portrayed in Evelyn Wang's motherhood in raising her daughter, Joy Wang. As the first generation of Chinese Americans, Evelyn adopted an authoritarian motherhood model to raise her daughter. This model of motherhood demanded strict respect and obedience towards elders and expected a significant emphasis on academic achievement. Nevertheless, the authoritarian control's implementation subsequently led to conflict between her and her daughter. Joy's behavior is perceived as a reflection of Evelyn's as a mother. As a result, Evelyn gets offended when Joy behaves disrespectfully or fails academically, indicating that Evelyn is not a "good mother".

Evelyn perceives herself as a failure in raising her daughter due to Joy's differing from authoritarian motherhood principles. Joy opposes Evelyn's ideals with her rude actions and disobedience. Joy's disrespectful behavior and disobedience contradict the values Evelyn implemented. Apart from that, Joy's academic failure, having dropped out of school, is a big issue for Chinese American mothers. Evelyn's authoritarian control practice of motherhood created a crucial conflict and gap in her mother-daughter relationship. Evelyn began to resolve this conflict by challenging the authoritarian control model of motherhood. Evidence of how Evelyn challenges this model, contributing to the resolution of her conflict with Joy, is presented in the dialogue below.

Alpha Gong Gong: Evelyn, let her go.

Evelyn : I can't, Father. I am no longer willing to do to my daughter what you did to me. How did you let me go? How on earth did you do it so easily? It's okay if you can't be proud of me. Because I finally am. (Grabbed Joy) You may see in her all of your greatest fears squeezed into one person. I spent most of her childhood praying she would not end up like me. But she turned out to be stubborn, aimless, a mess. Just like her mother. But now I see. It's OK that she's a mess. Because just like me... (starring to Waymond) the universe gave her someone kind, patient...and forgiving to make up for all she lacks.

(Timecode 01:59:37-02:00:55)

The dialogue presented above demonstrates how Evelyn challenges the Chinese American's authoritarian control model of motherhood. She expresses her disapproval of the authoritarian control of motherhood that caused her father to perceive her as lacking since she was unable to live according to the expectations of society. Furthermore, Evelyn approaches her father directly and

declares she would no longer follow to his parenting style. She acknowledges that her treatment of Joy was impacted by her father's attitude toward her, especially regarding her daughter's inability to live up to social expectations. Evelyn's rejection of the authoritarian model is an important turning point in her acceptance of Joy's flaws. This acceptance changes Evelyn's viewpoint on motherhood and enables her to sympathize with Joy's actions, behavioral issues, and academic failure. Her willingness to embrace a new, more democratic model of motherhood is symbolized by how she adopted a more loving and encouraging motherhood practiced by embracing Joy's individuality and personal choices.

From the perspective of matricentric feminism, the mother-daughter relationship is crucial because a daughter's identity is deeply intertwined with her mother's influence. A daughter's self-perception and development are closely linked to the type of motherhood practiced by her mother. In the movie, Joy's extreme actions to distance herself from Evelyn highlight her deep disapproval of Evelyn's authoritarian control and poor communication. This act of separation demonstrates matrophobia, which is the fear of becoming like one's mother rather than a fear of mothers or motherhood.

"The daughter resists this identification because she does not want a life like her mother, nor does she wish to be aligned with someone who is oppressed and whose work is so devalued" (p. 21).

Joy perceived Evelyn as a flawed outcome of authoritarian motherhood, recognizing that Evelyn had imposed the same model on her. This led Joy to realize the potential for similar failings within herself. Their conflict resolves when Evelyn finds the courage to challenge and confront these entrenched traditions and beliefs. According to O'Reilly, the mother's life experiences and behaviors, which the child often imitates, significantly shape the mother-daughter relationship.

"To fully and completely liberate children from traditional childrearing, mothers must first seek to liberate themselves from traditional motherhood; they must, to use Rich's terminology, mother against motherhood" (p. 180).

Evelyn exhibited courage by challenging and evolving her approach to motherhood, adopting a more empathetic and democratic style for her daughter's benefit. This transformation positively impacted Joy's perception

of her mother, deepening their relationship. Evelyn's actions in challenging traditional motherhood indirectly empowered Joy, demonstrating proactive steps to repair their bond through a more empathetic and democratic parenting approach.

2. Embracing Sexual Orientation Diversity

As the first-generation Chinese American of her family, Evelyn has certainly internalized Chinese values, particularly those relating to the concept of sexual orientation. According to Szymanski & Sung (2013), Asian values preserve the idea of internalized heterosexuality and refuse sexual orientation diversity. In Chinese culture, homosexuality is believed as deviant behavior in a family (Huang et al., 2016). At the beginning of the film, Evelyn is profoundly confused and uncertain about her daughter identifying as a lesbian, which deviates from traditional Chinese values. Evelyn is incredibly unsure and perplexed at the start of the movie about her daughter's decision to identify as a lesbian, which goes against conventional Chinese values. Evelyn experiences intense internal struggle as a result of this contradiction between her daughter's identity and her fundamental values.

On the other hand, there has been a steady change in American culture toward increased acceptance of different sexual orientations and inclusivity. Growing up in this environment, Joy embraced the freedom to choose her identity. This cultural clash between Chinese and American values placed Evelyn in a difficult position, as she had to navigate the intersection of these differing values. One of the main conflicts in the movie was her struggle to accept her daughter's identity while keeping her family's traditional values. To overcome her internal confusion, Evelyn challenges the traditional Chinese American motherhood, which internalized heterosexism, as seen in the dialogue below.

Evelyn: Father. This is Becky. She is Joy's girlfriend.

Girlfriend (speaking in Chinese).

Timecode 02:01:04-01:02:14)

In this dialogue, Evelyn displays remarkable bravery by introducing Joy's girlfriend, Becky, to her father during the Chinese New Year celebration thrown in his name. To conceal Joy's identity and uphold traditional Chinese ideals around sexual orientation in front of her father, Evelyn had earlier rejected Becky's presence at the party. She used Gong Gong as the excuse for refusing

Becky. Evelyn's choice at this moment is significant because it shows how she defied the traditional Chinese American motherhood she had always committed to. Evelyn overcomes her own struggles as a mother and builds a more supportive relationship with her daughter by challenging this traditional concept of motherhood. The process of receiving and adapting cultural components, known as acculturation, significantly impacts her choice. Evelyn's decisions are significantly influenced by this interaction. Mothers are expected, as noted by Chiu (1987), to balance traditional Chinese beliefs with the progressive viewpoints that are prevailing in American society when it comes to sexual orientation.

Matricentric feminism aims to define motherhood more broadly to encompass a greater range of identities. O'Reilly uses Margaret Gibson's idea of Queering Motherhood to discuss the inclusion of queer mothers in her writing. This approach acknowledges that queer motherhood is crucial to deconstructing the patriarchal conceptions of motherhood that dominate society.

"Queering motherhood means that not all mothers are women or that there is one right or correct way to create a family. It means as well that the desire and ability to mother is not innate to one sex over the other and that kinship is not defined only by blood" (p.100).

This quote exemplifies how matricentric feminism rejects the patriarchal conception of motherhood, which limits mothering to specific genders or sexual orientations and instead supports diversity. By embracing her daughter's relationship with Becky, Evelyn indirectly supports her challenge to internalized heteronormative motherhood, contrasting with the traditional Chinese American practices she once adhered to.

Furthermore, Joy's sexual orientation and Evelyn's response align with Carol Gilligan's "ethic of care," which emphasizes the value of justice, fairness, love, peace, and decency. Motherhood needs to be based on the values of equality and respect. Consequently, matricentric feminism—which values and appreciates children's choices—connects with Evelyn's critique of the traditional Chinese American motherhood she had practiced.

3. Self-Fulfilled Motherhood

Various cultures, including Chinese American culture, have a solid basis in the idea of sacrificial motherhood, in which mothers are recognized as "good mothers" for

prioritizing their children's needs before their own. According to a study by Chao & Kaeochinda (2010), adolescent beliefs about maternal sacrifice function as a mediator between the psychological competence of adolescents from poor single-mother homes in Hong Kong and maternal Chinese cultural attitudes about familism. Moreover, Leung & Shek (2011) noted that parental sacrifice is a key component of Chinese families' socialization process.

Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022) effectively portrays the topic of sacrificial motherhood through Evelyn's unwavering devotion to her daughter. Evelyn is an actual example of this idea since she prioritizes her daughter's needs ahead of her own safety and autonomy. However, this frequently results in negative consequences and cannot be following the child's preferences. In the movie, Jobu Tupaki is interested in preventing Evelyn from more sacrifices as a mother, which is why she intends to bring her into the bagel. As a daughter, Jobu Tupaki expressed her discomfort at seeing her mother constantly sacrificing herself for her and their family until she lost her agency. The complexion of sacrificial motherhood raised a conflict between Evelyn and Joy. This constant of sacrificial motherhood created significant conflict between Evelyn and Joy, driven by miscommunication; Joy was unable to comprehend Evelyn's reasons for her sacrifices, and Evelyn found it difficult to understand Joy's actions as Jobu Tupaki. Jobu Tupaki, as a daughter, voiced her discomfort in watching her mother continually sacrifice her own well-being for the family, leading to a loss of personal agency. The dialogue below captures a critical moment where Evelyn challenges the concept of sacrificial motherhood and expresses her vision of a more fulfilling approach to motherhood.

| | |
|---------------|---|
| <i>Evelyn</i> | <i>: Wait. You're getting fat. And you never call me even though we have a family plan.</i> |
| <i>Joy</i> | <i>: What?</i> |
| <i>Evelyn</i> | <i>: And it's free. You only visit when you need something. And you got a tattoo and I don't care if it's supposed to represent our family. You know I hates tattoos. And of all the places I could be,</i> |

*why would I want to be here with you?
Yes, you're right. It doesn't make sense.*

Waymond : Evelyn! Stop. That's enough.

Joy : Let her finish.

*Evelyn : Maybe it's like you said. Maybe there
is something out there, some new
discovery that will make us feel like
even smaller pieces of shit. Something
that explains why you still went
looking for me through all of this
noise. And why, no matter what, I still
want to be here with you. I will
always...always...want to be here with
you.*

*Joy : So what? You...You're just gonna
ignore everything else? You could be
anything, anywhere. Why not go
somewhere where your...where your
daughter is more than just...this? Her,
all we get are few specks of time
where any of this actually makes any
sense.*

*Evelyn : Then I will cherish these few specks of
time.*

(Timecode 02:05:30-02:07:42)

Prior to this dialogue, the relationship between Evelyn and Joy was fraught with tension as Joy wanted to distance herself from her mother. Evelyn, unable to

articulate her emotions, chose to sacrifice her own feelings and let Joy go, believing it would bring her happiness. However, Evelyn eventually mustered the courage to convey her true emotions, expressing her sincere wish to remain connected with Joy and showing acceptance of her daughter's choices. From Joy's perspective, she felt her mother could never find happiness while maintaining a relationship with a daughter who perpetually disappointed her, forcing Evelyn into constant sacrifices. Joy wished her mother to be detached from the responsibilities of the family and pursue an enjoyable existence in a different multiverse. In this dialogue, Evelyn challenges her tendency to give up on everything and redefines fulfilled motherhood as establishing an intimate connection with her daughter while taking a new perspective at motherhood.

Matricentric feminism argue that sacrificial motherhood is an important issue. Practices such as "intensive mothering," which requires mothers to prioritize the requirements of their kids over all other elements of their lives, frequently support the idea of sacrificial motherhood. On the other hand, "new momism" gives mothers greater autonomy in determining how to raise their children. However, in spite of this autonomy, mothers can continue to practice sacrifice motherhood if they decide implemented "intensive mothering." The dialogue above might indicate that Evelyn is upholding the sacrificial motherhood concept by not prioritizing her own agency, aspirations, and goals first. However, Evelyn's acts are not considered unsuitable within the framework of matricentric feminism. Her choice to remain closely involved in her daughter's life is seen as a form of "empowered mothering."

"Empowered mothering is essential for maternal wellbeing, as it enables women to mother comfortably, competently, and confidently" (p.67).

"...empowered mothers are more effective mothers for children, that such mothers are healthier women and more productive workers, and that empowered mothering is beneficial for families and society at large" (p. 67).

"Overall, empowered mothering allows mothers to effect real and lasting change in their lives, in the lives of their children, and in the larger society" (p. 67).

Evelyn challenged the notion of sacrificial motherhood by adopting an empowered approach to mothering. She focused on improving her relationship with her daughter, addressing a fundamental aspect of her motherhood practice. This empowerment allowed her to fulfill her motherly responsibilities more comfortably while also effectively managing her responsibilities at the laundromat. As an empowered mother, Evelyn no longer needed to sacrifice everything for the sake of her child and family. Evelyn is no longer obligated to put herself up for her child and family because she considers herself an empowered mother.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this analysis correspond directly to the analysis problem, which examines how the main character of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) challenges the Chinese American model of motherhood. These issues are resolved by using Andrea O'Reilly's (2016) matricentric feminism, a feminist methodology that prioritizes motherhood experiences in research.

The result of the analysis demonstrates how the main character challenges the traditional Chinese American conception of motherhood, depicted in how she transforms her practice of motherhood into three new forms of motherhood practice. First, Evelyn adopts a democratic model of motherhood by rejecting authoritarian control and changing her motherhood practice to be more empathetic and inclusive. Second, by embracing her daughter's sexual orientation, she challenges the deeply rooted heterosexuality in Chinese American motherhood. Finally, in her dialogue with her daughter, she rejects the idea of sacrificial motherhood and instead promotes a kind of motherhood that emphasizes personal fulfillment and empowerment.

To summarize the conclusion above, the movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) provides a comprehensive matricentric feminist examination of motherhood. The main character, Evelyn, exemplifies various motherhood practices that improve her understanding of being a mother. Moreover, Evelyn's Chinese American background contributes to the diversity of this analysis within the framework of matricentric feminism by expanding its focus to include a range of maternal experiences that are related to race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, age, and place of residence.

Suggestion

The insights from this analysis offer valuable direction to future researchers studying motherhood in literature. According to the study's findings, matricentric feminism is recommended for exploring the concept of motherhood, focusing on mothers' experiences as the central aspect of analysis. Moreover, future researchers analyzing motherhood in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) are encouraged to broaden their perspectives by examining other characters' viewpoints, including the daughter, husband, and father. This analysis provides a crucial reference for future research in this area.

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