

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Defiance of Patriarchy in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

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By

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Shankar Prasad Dhungana has completed his thesis entitled "Defiance of Patriarchy in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*" under my supervision. He carried out his research from August 2007 to November 2008. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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Approval Letter

This thesis titled "Defiance of Patriarchy in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*", submitted to Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mr. Shankar Prasad Dhungana has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Abstract

This thesis "Defiance of Patriarchy in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*" studies the novel from feminist perspective. The thesis also touches upon how both Japanese imperialism and Chinese patriarchy are inimical to the freedom and expression of the female protagonist and therefore female gender in general. The political expansionist policy of imperialism includes control and domination of another land, as the masculinist ideology of patriarchy also dominates the life and personality of female.

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I: Introduction

An immigrant writer of the Chinese origin, Amy Tan was raised up and educated in the free but not actually very congenial society of the United States of America. Consequently, she faced tussles with her family members, especially with her mother who is old-fangled in her outlook of life owing to the family and country history. This tussle is somehow reflected, if not literally, then symbolically, in the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991). The novel is about immigrants who are living in America after the world disrupted by the infamous Second World War. The central character of the novel is Winnie whose, often problematic but inextricable, relationship with her mother in particular and family members in general propels the story line and the plot to such a pass that there arise serious disputes about the very possibility of a traditional family migrating to and surviving in a foreign, much more developed and modern society.

Brief biographical information of the author helps us grasp the context in which the work was produced. Amy Ruth Tan was born as the second child of her immigrant parents in 1952 in California. When she was nineteen, she lost her father and elder brother in a matter of a month. Then she accompanied her mother to Switzerland and completed her schooling there. Then they returned to America in 1968 and she started up her career as language development consultant for disabled children and a freelance writer. But she got dissatisfied with the job and took up jazz piano and writing fiction instead. Her first published story *The Rules of the Games* got her entrance into the Squaw Valley Community of writers in 1985, and the story also became a part of her first novel *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989. The novel explores the complicated relationship between the four Chinese immigrant mothers and their America-born daughters.

Along the same line came her second famed novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* depicting the strained and complicated but finally settled relationship between a mother and her daughter. Her third novel *The Hundred Secret Sense* (1995) is centered on the sisterhood relationship between two half sisters Kwan and Olivia. Then Tan published her fifth novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter* which is a sort of biography of her mother. Thus, as an American novelist of Chinese descent, she takes much interest on the theme of the life stories of Chinese women who are somehow or other affected by the fact of their cultural displacement and dislocation. In this regard, some critics have underlined the importance of the novel in terms of its historicity. Yuan Yuan argues that the novel is a China narrative which recounts the Japanese invasion with personal touch and minuteness:

The China narrative is based on Winnie's constant painful experiences in China. In fact the pain and suffering that are central to Winnie's recollection invite repression, rather than recall. Her China narrative is subject to constant postponement and erasure to conceal the unspeakable experience and repressed memory. Winnie's experience of china is transfigured into a discourse of repression and recollection of china experiences is translated into a loss narrative. (292)

Thus, as Yuan contends, both the recollection of her personal suffering at the hands of her brutal first husband, and the national suffering of China by the Japanese invasion form the basic narrative of the novel, thereby rendering it a proper China narrative.

The Kitchen God's Wife is the study of history as claimed by Bella Adams. She comments:

Specifically the section narrated by Winnie Louie (known as Jiang Welli), this novel is valuable because in representing a particular

period of Chinese history, namely Japan's occupation of China during the 1930s and 1940s as well as the rape of Nanking. (9)

Michelle Nealy argues that the novel is about the secret relationship of mother and daughter. He says:

One family and two big secrets shared between a mother and daughter. Both secrets will manage to revise the family's past and future. As the mother is forced by Helen, another relative, to tell her daughter about her life story of growing up in China against the back drop of World War II the American born daughter Pearl must reflect on her own line and behaviour. (22)

The mother and daughter are finally brought to admit their secrets with each other this indicates the strengthening of bonds between them.

Cheng Scarlet comments:

In a haunting way, Tan has also successfully taken on her mother's voice in *The Kitchen God's Wife* or at least, the voice of someone of her mother's generation, who lived through the tumultuous period of history her mother did. [. . .] Tan shows us that a life can encompass all that grief, imperfection, ambiguity and still add up to triumph of the spirit, of the human soul to endure, to show compassion and to hold fast to dreams" (15).

So, Cheng too notes the historical elements in the novel which make it worth reading. In her book *A Chinese Banquet of Secrets* Helen Zia comments that, "Tan juxtaposes the China-born mother's inner turmoil with U. S. born daughter's trepidation. The cultural distance between mother and daughter contribute to fears they have for each other" (76).

The critics have studied this text from various perspectives. However, the present study seeks to prove that Winnie revolts against the Chinese patriarchy by getting herself assimilated into the American culture. She has done that by divorcing from her first husband, suffering a year's jail term and finally getting to America to be united with her lover.

As the plot of the novel unravels, Winnie is a widow, presently settling in San Francisco jointly with her friend Helen. She has a daughter named Pearl who is married to a non-Chinese husband and they have two daughters at their home in San Jose. The family drama moves forward with the impetus derived from the fact that Winnie and her daughter Pearl have trouble in coming to term with each other. This begins since the very childhood of Pearl who sees her mother as very conservative, superstitious even as one who typifies an average Chinese woman and mother. The same problem of failing to understand her daughter occurs to Winnie as well. The mother sees her daughter as too much Americanized, with little interest in and reverence for the Chinese way of life, culture and tradition. This failure to connect each other, the two female persons are invariably drawn off from each other towards an abysmal pit of misunderstanding and their mutual relationship becomes more and more strained with the passage of time. It is a general maxim that time removes wounds and heals them, but in the case of the women of Chinese descent, nothing significant occurs in the direction of ameliorating their relationship until it becomes almost too late to live their life freely in the company of each other. The beginning of the novel captures this very theme.

The physiological ailment that Pearl suffers from, namely multiple sclerosis, is an unknown fact to the mother. In the same way, Winnie also keeps her past life in China a secret. But there is Helen, who knows both secrets and succeeds in

persuading the mother to call her daughter back to see her in the pretext of falling seriously ill. Pearl, no sooner had she heard of this news, rushes back to her mother. There follows a moving scene the of family reunion, of stories and histories told and retold, including how they came to America.

Winnie reveals the story from her early childhood: she had lost her beautiful young mother when she was barely six. Her mother, an educated urban Shanghai woman, was the fourth wife of the husband, Winnie's father. Her mother suddenly disappeared, leaving back the mystery of her disappearance; nobody ever told the daughter how or why her mother disappeared. Subsequently, she was sent to stay with her uncle's family in a remote area. There, in the new environment and home, she was discriminated for the fact that her mother had acted as the black sheep of the family by being thus suddenly vanished. She never was allowed to ask or speak about her mother; as a result she developed a complex, a sort of painfully haunting memory of what a child feels like when deserted by her mother.

As marriage is an inescapable social institution for girls, Winnie was married, in her teens, to her cousin sister Peanut's boyfriend, Wen Fu. The fact that Wen Fu was not a good character did not deter the marriage, for the family wanted to get rid of her. This is indicative of the powerless situation of women in the mid twentieth century Chinese society. She also hoped the married life would be more tolerable, but it was a vain hope. Wen Fu turned out to be a very moody, unkind and disloyal husband. Despite her hard efforts to please him, he was never happy at her and despised her. The time was a socially ripe time for revolution, and she also had a full share of her trouble there. The country was caught up in the quagmire of internal party strife, and the Japanese imperialist power was invading the sleeping boa. As was a war time, every where there was a sense of insecurity, fear, confusion and general

chaos and disorder. The personal tragedy of Winnie was accompanied, even surpassed by the collective tragedy of the Chinese nation facing the Japanese invasion.

Wen Fu, an air force personnel, took his family wherever he went in the course of the war. This mobility took them to the meeting with Helen who was also a wife of another military personnel in the Chinese Air Force. Helen and Winnie turned out to be intimate friends soon because they had to suffer from similar troubles in their life. However, in terms of sense and sensibility, they are opposed to each other. Winnie believes that Helen has a habit of making up plausible that are implausible. So, she takes the role of recounting her tale fearing that Helen might distort the story and that would only lead Pearl to misunderstand the mother.

It was actually Jimmy, her second husband who really loved her and did everything possible to make her happy. He was jovial, friendly and decent Chinese American. When Winnie first met him during the war time, he was working with the United States Information Service as a translator for American volunteers. Then, for a long time they did not meet, and only after her marriage started to deteriorate, she met him in the streets of Shanghai. She had now lost all the three babies, and treated badly by her husband . Jimmy wanted to rescue her from this miserable plight and offered his helping hand. She also understood that her life with Wen Fu was not going to work successfully; so they both fled from China to America. But before that Winnie was raped by Wen Fu. There in the new land, she gave birth to Pearl as the daughter of Jimmy but she was actually fathered by Wen Fu. Winnie, thus, had to come to America not because she did not love her motherland but because she had to flee from the monster of her first husband. Going to America was her only possible alternative.

This disclosure opens up the eyes of the daughter so that she can see how her mother had come through difficult times in life. Pearl realizes how she has ever been

judgemental towards her mother without understanding the real story. Her mistake was in failing to see the story and history her mother had been living with through out all these years in America as an immigrant family. After this the mother and daughter become more intimate and respectful to each other. The generational and cultural gap between them is thus filled with understanding and love.

II: Defiance of Patriarchy in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

Feminist Perspective

Feminist criticism comes in many forms, and feminist critics have a variety of goals. Though it came out in its full shape only in the 1960s, behind it lies two centuries' struggle for women's rights. This struggle was marked by books such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, John Stuart Mill's *The Subject of Women*, and Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Through their books, these writers present very important lines of women's thought.

Many women writers have been writing since the Medieval Period. Nevertheless, since all the female writers may not be feminists, the earlier women writers followed the male tradition in their literary works and arts. Upto the nineteenth century women were expected to cultivate domestic virtue, so their place was home. We can find some aspects or features of feminism in the writings of Bronte sisters, Eliot and Jane Austin in the Victorian period. Though during the Victorian period, feminism was not introduced as it is developed today, we can see some aspects of feminism in the writings of the women of the period.

After the 1960s feminist literary criticism is closely interrelated with the movement called political feminism which denotes social, economic and cultural freedom and equality between males and females. So feminist literary criticism indicates a revolt against patriarchy. Therefore, feminism always indicates the attempts against the male order or the patriarchy. For this reason male can be feminist and even female writers may not be feminists. Nevertheless, women naturally tend to be feminist on the ground that their target is always female study.

Although Mary Wollstonecraft was the first feminist in the sense that she claimed women's rights through her remarkable essay *A Vindication of the Rights of*

Women, Virginia Woolf's role in the modern context is a significant one. Her *A Room of One's Own* and other important essays and fictions on women authors as well as on cultural, economic and educational disabilities raised women's awareness against what she called the 'patriarchal' society. Another most important precursor of feminist theory was Simone de Beauvoir. Commenting on her classic work M.H. Abrams says:

A much more radical critical mode was launched in France by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, a wide ranging critique of the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object, or 'Other' to man as the defining and dominating 'subject' who is assumed to represent humanity in general, the book dealt also with "the great collective myths of women in the works of many male writers. (230)

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), established with great clarity the fundamental questions of modern feminism. According to her, all the male writers assume the females as a negative 'objective' or other to man who is supposed to be the dominating and defining subject. Subject, here means that man is supposed to represent humanity in general. Not only this the book also deals with the great collection of myths of women especially in the works of many male writers.

As mentioned above feminist criticism come in many forms and feminist critics have variety of goals. Some feminist critics try to rediscover the works of women writers overlooked by a male -dominated culture. Others have revisited books by male authors and reviewed them from women's point of view to understand how they both reflect and shape the attitudes that have held women back. Still others have been interested in more fundamental question involving the psychological and linguistic development of women in a patriarchal or male-dominated culture.

Since the early 1970s, three strains of feminist criticism categorized as French, American and British have emerged . French, American and British feminists have examined similar problems from somewhat different perspectives.

French feminists have tended to focus their attention on language analyzing the ways in which meaning is produced. They believe language to be a decidedly male realm. Drawing on ideas of the psychoanalytic philosopher Jaques Lacan, French feminists remind us that language is a realm of public discourse . According to them, a child enters the linguistic realm first as it comes to grasp its separateness from its mother, just about the time that boy identifies with father, the family representative of culture.

French feminists have said that the structure of language is phallogocentric: it privileges the phallus and, more generally, masculinity by associating them with things and values more appreciated by the culture. They believe that masculine desire dominates speech and posits women as an idealized fantasy fulfillment for the incurable emotional lack caused by separation from mother. The French, thus opined that language is associated with separation from the mother.

Language systematically forces women to choose either they can imagine and represent themselves as men imagine and represent them (in which case they may speak, but will speak as men) or they can choose "silence" becoming in the process the invisible and unheard sex.

Also there are some French feminists who have argued that language only seems to give women so narrow range of choices. There is another possibility, namely that women can develop a feminine language. Recently Julia Kristeva has said that feminine language is "Semiotic" not 'symbolic'. They say feminine language is rhythmic and unifying.

Kristeva says that feminine language is derived from the periodical period of fusion between mother and child. Associated with the maternal, feminine language does not only threaten culture, which is patriarchal, but also a medium through which women become new ways. Therefore a feminine language risks being relegated to the outskirts of what is considered socially and politically significant. Similar views have been expressed by other French feminists. Helen Cixous, for instance, posits essential connection between the woman's body, whose sexual pleasure has been repressed and denied expression, in women's writing. "Write yourself. Your body must be heard", she urges. Once they learn to write their bodies women will not only realize their sexuality but enter history and move towards a future based on a "feminine" economy of giving rather than the "masculine" economy of hoarding. Luce Irigaray says women's sexual pleasure can not be expressed by the dominant, ordered, logical masculine language.

However, Cixous's and Irigaray's emphasis on feminine writing as an expression of the female body has drawn criticism from other French feminists. According to many of them, an emphasis on the body either reduces "the feminine" to a biological essence or elevates it in a way that shifts the valuation of masculine and feminine but retains the binary categories. For Christine Faure, Irigaray's celebration of women's difference fails to address the issue of masculine dominance, and a Marxist-feminist Catherine Clement has warned that 'poetic' description of what constitutes the feminine will not challenge that dominance in the realm of production.

American feminist critics have shared with French critics both an interest in and a cautious distrust of the concept of feminine writing. Annette Kolodny is one of such American feminist critics who have expressed such views. She has said

"richness and variety of women's, writing" will be misled if we see by it only its feminine 'mode' or style' (333).

Interested as they have become in the French subject of feminine style. American feminist critics began by analyzing literary texts rather than by philosophizing abstractly about language. Many American critics reviewed great works by male writers, embarking on a revisionist rereading of literary tradition. These critics examined the portrayals of women characters expressing the patriarchal ideology implicit in such work and showing how clearly this traditions of systematic masculine dominance is inscribed in our literary tradition. Kate Millett, Carelyn Heilbrunn and Judith Fetterely, among many others, created this model for American feminist criticism. Elaine Showalter has named the model 'the feminist critique' 'of male constructed literary history.'

Again another group of critics including Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Patricia Mayor Spacks, and Showalter herself created a somewhat different model. Practitioners of this new model named 'gynocriticism' have studied the writings of these women who against all odds produced what Showalter calls "a literature of their own". Spacks examines the female literary tradition to find out how great women writers across the ages have felt, perceived themselves, and imagined reality. Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), concern themselves with well-known women writers of the nineteenth century, but they too find that general concerns, images, themes, because the authors that they have treated wrote in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are both overtly and covertly patriarchal.

The main propose of Gynocriticism in to study well-known women authors, another is to rediscover women's history and culture, particularly women's

community that have nurtured female creativity. Another related purpose is to discover neglected or forgotten women writer.

In *A literature of Their Own* Showalter tried to fulfill this purpose; providing a remarkably comprehensive overview of women's writing through three of its phases: Feminine, Feminist and Female. She has defined the period between 1840-1880 as feminine. During this period the women writer followed masculine tradition. The second period is called feminist in which the women writers protested against the patriarchal standards and values. And, in the final period from 1920 onwards writer, according to Showalter started advocating their own autonomous female perspective.

Indeed Showalter's historical approach to women's culture allows a feminist critic to use theories based on non-feminist disciplines. Kolodny has advocated a 'playful pluralism' that encompasses a variety of critical schools and methods.

In the view of British feminists, the American opposition to male stereotypes that denigrate women has often led to counter stereotypes of feminine virtue that ignore real difference of race, class, and culture among women. In addition British feminists argue that American celebrations of individual heroines falsely suggest that powerful individual, may be immune to repressive condition and may even imply that any individual can go through life unconditioned by the culture and ideology in which she or he lives.

Similarly the American endeavour to recover women's history is seen by British feminists as an endeavour that 'mystifies' oppression, disguising it as something that has created for women a special world of opportunities more important from the British point, the universalizing and essentialising tendencies in both American practice and French theory disguise women's oppression by

highlighting sexual difference, suggesting that a dominant system is important to political change. By contrast, British feminist theory emphasises an engagement with historical process in order to promote social change. Though French feminists seem somehow to be different from British and American feminists, all of them have examined similar problems from somewhat different perspectives. French feminists have specially tended to focus their attention on language and said that the language they use is always patriarchal--male dominated and phallogentric. That's why critics argue, if they really want to write something of their own, they should have their own language. Since they lack their own language in writing, they are bound to express the male values. Thus whether they speak or keep silent they suffer.

But British feminists tend to distinguish themselves from what they see as an American emphasis on texts linking women across boundary and deeds and an under emphasis on popular art and culture. They regard their own critical practice as more political than that of American feminists, whom they have faulted for being uninterested in historical detail. In fact, British feminist theory emphasises on engagement with historical process in order to promote social change. In short, as Showalter has said. English feminist criticism stresses oppression, French repression and American expression.

Feminist movement is, in fact, the result of male domination over the females. We find in our ancient and medieval literature that women's status was lower than that of slaves. In the course of defining feminism, showing the poor status of women. Rammon Seldon says- "In pre-Mendelian days men regarded their sperm as the active seeds which give form to the waiting ovum which lacks identity till it receives the male's impress..." (134)

In this way, they underestimated females by comparing them with the waiting ovum. They argue that males are something superior and definite having separate identity but females are without separate identity and history.

Seldon quotes Simone de Beauvoir :

When a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying 'I am a woman'. No man does so. This fact reveals the basic asymmetry between the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Man defines the human, not woman . . . Being dispersed among men, women have no separate history, no natural solidarity, they have not combined as other oppressed groups have. Woman is riveted into a lop- sided relationship with man, he is one she is the other. (135)

As pointed above women have to define themselves as a woman and as a human. Women have not their own history and culture. They are always dominated by the male member of the society. They are behaved as the second sex. That 's why directly or indirectly females started revolting against the suppression and patriarchy.

Chery Register opines that in feminist writing female experience should be presented. Similarly another feminist writer, Ellen Morgan, a more radical feminist writer of present time in an essay says, "Feminist criticism should, I believe encourage an art true to women's experience and filtered a male perspective or constricted to fit male standards" (223).

Although numerous writers are raising question mark against patriarchy, some of the outstanding feminists writers of the twentieth century are Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, Marry Elmann, Helen Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Juliet Mitchell, Gilbert and Gubar, Patrica Meyer Spacks, Margaret Homans etc.

Elaine Showalter's Approach

Elaine Showalter, an eminent feminist critic and professor of English at Princeton, has been teaching English and women's studies for many years. She has written many books on feminism. Among them her *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) is the outstanding one. Since she finds feminist criticism no more unified she presents her view in her essay entitled *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*. In this essay she finds that feminist criticism is not unified, but more adventurous in assimilating and engaging with theory. Therefore, pointing out the pluralism of feminist criticism she says that recent criticism comprises many modes.

As Showalter claims black critics protest the 'massive silence' of feminist criticism about black and Third World women writers call for a black feminist aesthetic that would deal with both racial and sexual politics. Marxist feminists wish to focus on class along with gender as a crucial determinant of literary production. Literary historians want to uncover a lost tradition. Critics training in deconstructionist methodologies wish to synthesize a literary criticism that is both textual and feminist. Freudian and Lacanian writers want to theorize women's relationship to language and signification.

Feminist criticism does not emphasize the other aspects of women's being black. So black and women of Third World complain that they are suffering from both aspects of racial and sexual politics. Marxist feminists focus on class and gender. In the same way literary historians want to disclose the lost tradition in history. Deconstructionists wish to synthesise a literary criticism which is textual as well as feminist. On a similar way Freudian and Lacanian critics try to associate women's relationship to language and its significance.

Showalter distinguishes between two forms of feminist criticism:

There are two distinct modes of feminist criticism and to conflate them (a most commentator does) is to remain permanently bemused by their theoretical potentialities. The first mode is ideological, it is concerned with the feminist as reader, and it offers feminist reader, and offers feminist reading of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature. The second mode of criticism engendered by this process the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles themes, genres, and structures of writing by women, the psycho dynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual or collective female, and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition.

(335)

This first type is concerned with woman as reader, which Showalter labels 'feminist critique'. The second type deals with woman as writer and Showalter calls this 'gynocriticism'. Its subjects are the history, styles, themes genres and structures of literature by women as well as 'psychodynamics of female creativity of female creativity and studies of particular writers and works. For this second mode of feminist criticism Elaine Showalter coined the term 'gynocritics'.

Patriarchy: Male-centered World View

A society can be called patriarchal to the extent it valorizes male values at the cost of female ones and helps perpetuate the domination of women at the hands of men. Patriarchy, understood in its literal sense, means the rule of the father. This sociological and anthropological meaning retains its relevance in the political and philosophical movement of feminism too. But feminists would like to contend that

patriarchy would refer not simply to a society where men hold power, but rather to a society ruled by a certain kind of men wielding a certain kind of power. And such a society reflects the deep-rooted values of traditional male ideal. In this sense, patriarchy denotes a culture whose central and driving ethos is an embodiment of male or rather masculinist ideals and practices conforming to those ideals. Patriarchy has determined to a considerable and virtually indelible extent the nature and quality of human societies across the world irrespective of time and space, the values and priorities, and the place and image of women within the societies, and the relation between the sexes. Feminism, therefore, as socio-political movement which aspires to enhancing healthy and just relations between the two sexes, has to expose how masculinist ideals have been dehumanizing, subordinating women on the basis of grossly unfounded myths and norms.

Masculinism is in part the mistaking of male perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, standards and values and perceptions for all human perceptions. Masculinism has been the root cause behind women's social and intellectual disenfranchisement. And the major problem with this is that masculinism is unconsciously embedded even in the female psyche. As Sheila Ruth writes, the goals of feminism acquire the status of a supremely noble ideology, a sort of spiritual dignity. As she records the goals of feminism are: to change women's sense of themselves; to change women's aspirations, based on an increased sense of worth and rights, their presence in the world; to alter the relations between women and men, to create true friendship and respect between the sexes in place of "the war between the sexes"; to give all people, women and men, a renewed sense of human worth, to restore to the center of human endeavours a love for beauty, kindness, justice, and quality in living; to reaffirm in society the quest for harmony, peace, and humane compassion.

III: Defiance of Patriarchy in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

Female Narrative and Female Values

The novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* is noteworthy for a feminist reader simply for the reason that female characters claim the most interest. The major characters of the novel are two women, mother and daughter, the mother confiding her story to the daughter and strengthening the bond between them. Thus, through female character of the novel and the novelist we come to know the fact that a good work of literature is spun around the life stories and the sufferings of the women back in the mid twentieth century. It is a debatable issue whether any story or literature on women should have a world class significance to be counted a good piece of literature or merely the fact that it contains the narrative centered upon women makes it a worthy work to read. To feminists, such as Adrienne Rich and the like, a literature can be important if it recounts the histories and stories of the female kind. If a novel, in this case *The Kitchen God's Wife*, centers mostly on the female story, it can be considered a feminist work in as much as it acknowledges the fact that even female can be the good stuff for literature. In this light, the novel is a truly feminist work, as it is mostly centered on two women, a Chinese mother settled in America and her Americanized daughter. Taking this starting premise of feminism as a literary movement which counts women stories as worthy of being treated in literature, one can cite a reference as to how the novel explores the secrets and stories of the mother-daughter relationship often straightened by the unfavourable circumstances of life. The legacy of muteness or speechlessness is inherited by the mother until it is almost late for her to come to terms with her daughter. But she manages to tell her daughter about her mother, thus explaining the cause of her own trouble in keeping the

relationship with her daughter a smooth one. A glimpse of the family narrative can be seen from what is quoted here below:

It is the same pain I have had for many years. It comes from keeping everything inside, waiting until it is too late.

I think my mother gave me this fault, the same kind of pain. She left me before she could tell me why she was leaving. [. . .] I never told you about my mother? That she left me? Oh. That's because I never wanted to believe it myself. So that's why I did not tell you about her.

(102)

Winnie conjures up the romantic as well as sorrowful memory of her mother, the first of the moderns of Chinese society to have unbound feet. Her mother received education which some later called "Bad". Her education only made her unhappy thinking about it that no matter how much she changed her life, she couldn't change the world that surrounded her.

Critique of Stereotypical Images of Female in the Novel

As intellectual beauty and virtues are supposed to be alien to women in traditional or patriarchal society, the only weapon women have in life for attracting and charming the men is their carnal and physical beauty. This view is supported by so great a bulk of literature in any culture in the world. When it comes to say women are beautiful, a plethora of epithets and symbols and images and similes are used. The same is not the case with male beauty, which is reflected in terms of their character, strength, intellectual prowess, and moral nobility. Since females are not entrusted with such noble virtues, they are given only the weaker weapon of charm and mannerisms and beauty which are at best disarming if the concerned party is ready to appreciate such qualities. Otherwise, female are without any significant positive power of their

own. Whatever power they have in life comes from being submissive, weak and in need of love and protection. It is induced by their physical beauty.

This observation leads one to face an excerpt from the novel under the study. Here in is the accepted underlying meaning that if a women is beautiful, she would be lucky enough to get married with a [person of rank and standing. If not, her other qualities may not be able to secure her a good and rich family. Pearl' mother, Winnie is telling the story about her mother, that is Pearl's grandmother back in China:

May be my mother was not pretty at all, and I only want to believe that she was. But then I think, why else did my father marry her? He was an important man. He could have had all kinds of wives—which he did. Back then there was no other reason to marry a second, third, or fourth wife, except to use a woman's pettiness to add to a man's prestige. So I think my mother must have been pretty. (120)

Another social restriction upon women is also directed at making them mute and crippled by imbibing the false ideas of gentility and mannerism. The clear instructions of this school are that a woman should not open her mouth to ask question or to tell stories, that she should just say words of appreciation:

Old Aunt, on the other hand, did not go to that school. No school whatsoever. She was raised in a feudal family, the traditional way: the girl's eyes should never be used for reading, only for sewing. The girl's ears should never be used for listening to ideas, only to orders. The girl's lips should be small, rarely used, except to express appreciation or ask for approval. (121)

This is like using blinders for making the horse to see straight and walk straight.

Women, well trained from childhood, would make better servants, play mates and

caretakers of the households. This is an idea patriarchy has in limiting the intellectual and critical horizons of female members of the society.

The life and skills of a girl are all preparations for a happy home of her in-laws and husband. This attitude is practised early on in the life of the girls raised in a typical patriarchal society. Reference here is to the upbringing of Pearl's mother who was meticulously taught by her Old aunt to cook well, maintain the house well for her married life. After recounting the lessons she tells of her training back at home in those times, and how she wanted her daughter to follow the same too:

I learned all those lessons for my future. Oh, I tried to teach you these same things when you were growing up. But you never listened. [. . .] you see how eager I was to learn? when I was young, I already knew everything must look good, taste good, mean good things. That way it lasts longer, satisfies your appetite, also satisfies your memory for a long, long time. (137)

Thus, the early life training of a girl in education, mannerism and other practical skills are all directed towards keeping her future happy in relation to her home to be.

Primarily, it is not the enhancement of the personal skills in itself, nor the realization of her personality, but of rendering her an effective, cultured persona in the art of managing homely relations and conduct. That is finally to make her a servant, subservient and pleasing figure to the husband's family. This is the teaching of patriarchy anywhere in the world, not least in the China of the mid- twentieth century. By exposing such stories, the writer is really passing a critique upon such masculinist mode of thought process and behaviour toward female personality.

Women as Possessions and Properties of Male

Chapter seven of the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* is titled "Dowry Counting", is a much telling title for a feminist investigation of the novel. The section is related to the marriage of the narrator of the novel. When she was going to be married, as was usual in the Chinese society of those days, the father or parents of the girls would dole out enough money to the daughter for her future use. This used to be a great attraction to the bridegroom's side. So, more often than not, the bridegrooms-to-be would search for a wealthy family with only one daughter. The intention was more to get connected top the family than to find a matching spouse. This fact was not hidden from the discerning eyes of Pearl's mother, then bride-to-be. She thus recounts of the marriage proposal to her:

You see, Wen Fu decided he really did want to marry Peanut, not because he loved her sincerely – he wanted to marry into her family. And really, he was no different from most men back then. Getting married in those days was like buying real estate. Here, you see a house you want to live in, you find a real estate agent. Back in China, you saw a rich family with a daughter, you found a go-between who knew how to make a good business deal. (164)

Thus, marriage was rendered a sort of business deal for getting entrance into higher circle of people. It was purely business deal, a money-minded approach to the most fundamental of human relationship—marriage. It is an affront for any sensitive human being, let alone the female kind, to hear of such transaction-like approach to relationship and establishment of a home on conjugal basis calculated from material profit viewpoint.

The father thinks it his duty to educate his daughter about succumbing her will to that of his. One is well reminded of what Mary Wollstonecraft wrote about this very issue back in the eighteenth century. It is relevant to cite her here.

He turned around to face me. "From now on," he said at last with a stern look, "you must consider what your husband's opinions are.

Yours do not matter so much anymore. Do you understand?"

I nodded eagerly, grateful that my father had taught me this useful lesson in such a subtle way. And then he said I would stay in his house for the next week so I could shop for my dowry. (178)

The reality is exactly the same: in a patriarchal society, the ideas, opinions and desires and aspirations of a female are not counted. They have to be subsumed under the patronizing will, plan and opinions of her husband. This is a point of severe criticism in the novel. The way the mother revisits those memories make it clear to the reader that she is disapproving of those opinions of her father who wanted his daughter to totally lose her identity and personality and will so as to be a pleasant and civilized wife to her husband.

The pity with a female body in relation to her married life is that she does not have control over it. Now it is a sort of pledged with her husband; whenever he wants he can use it and if he does not want he can just let it go unused. The legality of marriage has thus reduced the marital relationship to an accepted rape, speaking blandly. Winnie tells similar story of forced and unnatural sexual relation her monster of a husband Wen Fu used to inflict upon her. The behaviour of Wen Fu is representative of the male view about wife in a patriarchal society:

Every night Wen Fu wanted me. But it was not the same way as when we were at his parents' house. I had been shy then, and he had been

gentle, always coaxing me, soothing me, stopping when I became too afraid, before I screamed too much. But in Hangechow, he said it was time I learned how to be a proper wife. (208)

It is always the man telling the woman to be a proper wife, never the other way round, that is, not the man being the proper husband. It seems, as if the wife was made only for fulfilling the sexual and societal needs of the husband, at the cost of her personality, individuality and happiness ultimately. This code of ethics has its roots in the distinctly masculinist philosophy which holds that a wife is measured of her wifely success by how much she pleases her husbands and keeps his house happy in all respects.

The personal story of Winnie, as it is evident from what has been explained up now, is inextricably intertwined with the history of China. In this regard, it is fruitful to see side by side the onset of Wen Fu on Winnie and the Japanese invasion on China. In addition to articulating the harmful impact of imperialist understanding of history, the novel acknowledges the historical role played by patriarchal ideology in its moulding of Chinese women. As Winnie puts it, "all those phrases about ladies with voices as pretty-sounding as lutes, skin as white as jade, their gracefulness flowing like calm rivers. Why did stories always describe women that way, making us believe that we had to be that way too?" (120). These stories objectify Chinese women, perhaps helping to explain why Japanese soldiers used them as "chamber pots" (195) or public toilets during the rape of Nanking. Moreover, these stories imagine Chinese women having skin "the colour of summer peach" (120) could also help to account for them being eaten. As the novel so gruesomely records, "a Japanese sergeant-major raped and murdered a number of Chinese women. Then . . . he sliced

off piece from the woman's thigh, fried them and made a meal for the members of the unit" (245).

After their son Danru also has grown up, Winnie thinks it would please her husband that she agrees to the divorce proposal he once had talked about. So, she prepares one, and presents it to him. To her surprise and consternation, he does not at all take it positively. It is not that he is sorry to have his wife mad so dissatisfied with him as to compel her to draft a divorce paper, but only that she has taken the lead in proposing the divorce. By doing that she had proved that she dares to be independent, that she had the guts to challenge, and that she is in the position of power to take that decision. So, he disapproves this act of Winnie and clearly tells her that it is not she who can tell when they should have divorce. It is solely up to him to take the decision. He sat down and looked at the divorce paper.

"I did not write this," he said quietly. "I am not asking for a divorce."

He tore the paper up and threw the pieces into the lake behind him.

And I knew he did not do this to say that he loved me, that he was so sorry for what he had done. He did this to show me who was the boss.

Because after he tore up my chance, he pointed his finger at me and said in a hoarse voice, "When I want to divorce you, I will tell you.

You don't tell me what to do." (355)

Here, the crux of the contention is not that the husband loves his wife so he cannot let her be separated from him. Rather it is the gesture she has taken in affirming her will power and decision making capacity by proposing the divorce in the first place. If the divorce is to be undertaken, it must be proposed by him, not by her. Only then there would be space for him to show off that it was he who had the power to get the

divorce materialized. The power politics, so pervasive in life, is seen operating here in the masculinist arrogance of Wen Fu.

There are several instances in the novel in which Wen Fu shamelessly indulges in promiscuities and aberrations on sexual matter, outright at the house he lives with his wife and others. He tolerates no comment or concern over his activity. But once, when his wife was requested and was dancing with a Chinese American Jimmy Louie who worked as translator at the American Information Service, he gets mad at her. This is one example of how much envious and possessive nature he harbours about his wife, easily forgetting that it was just a social etiquette for her to dance with him at the function. He calls her a “Whore! Fox-devil! Traitor!” because she danced with an American (392). This is indicative of the double standard of male in a patriarchal society. He cannot see his wife socializing with any other male, but himself takes the liberty of sporting with any woman of his fancy.

Chinese Patriarchy and Japanese Imperialism

The novel presents the personal experiences of the character named Winnie Louie. She acts like a tape recorder, a memory device retelling her personal story and at the same time unfolding the national history of China as well. To put otherwise, in addition to discussing Japan’s onslaught on China, Winnie narrates her personal bad dream like experience with a husband in China.

It is commonly accepted among the critics of imperial discourse and imperialism that without failing, the military power is always on the position of an invader, a rapist and an oppressor. Meaning, there is similarity between the rapist instinct of male and the invasive motive of an imperial and colonial power. This type of reading is not without textual; support too in the case of the novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife* too. The Japanese imperial power is the bad guy, the rapist, of the country

of China. Literally too, many Chinese women are raped throughout the country. The novel also records the similar terminologies while narrating the tortures the Japanese military brought upon the Chinese people.

Although a Chinese air force pilot, Winnie's husband Wen Fu is also likened with the Japanese in as much as he turns a torturer to his wife and other female characters in the novel. He literally rapes his wife and others as well. One account of how he molested the servant girls is recorded in the novel thus. Winnie recalls how she knew the secret of the girl being raped:

And now I don't remember exactly how I got all her words out, how I pulled them out, one by one. But that afternoon I found out that my husband had started to put his hands on her while I was in the hospital, that she had struggled each time, and each time he had raped her. She did not say "rape," of course. A girl that young and innocent, how could she know such a word? She knew only how to blame herself.

(328)

As the invaded country is not able to stand up with due resistance against the invading Japanese military power, so the two women, the wife and the raped girl, are not able to protest against the acts of Wen Fu either. The girl blames it was her fault she let him touch in the first place. And the wife is embarrassed that if she raises the issue everyone would laugh at her for having husband "who chases after a servant girl because his own wife is not enough –the classic old story" (328). Both ways, it is the female who is made to suffer.

Similar is the plight of Nanking, a most damaged province of China during the Japanese invasion. Nanking is literally raped and molested and murdered. According to Adams, *The Kitchen God's Wife* represents both the rape of Nanking and the rape

of Winnie, drawing attention to the similarities between Japanese military and a Chinese husband (16). For instance, neither Japan nor Wen Fu decompensate for their crimes and damages over China and Winnie respectively; both stand out as the brutal oppressors. Instead, they both distort the history, the truth and claim they are the victims indeed. As the critic Chang puts it, they both “assume the role of the victim” (21). They falsely propagate the cooked up and crooked story that they were insulted and demoralized. As Chang further writes, “With respect to *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, the patriarchal institutions of marriage and of law operate to ensure that Wen Fui’s version of things stands” (21). Wen Fu falsifies the reality of his torturing his wife, of divorcing her and hating her, and acts as if he is robbed of his husbandly rights and his son. In the court, he falsely accuses Winnie that “She had given up a respectable life, turned her back on her father, let her own son die – all because she was crazy for American sex” (478). And the courts accept this reason enough to pass the verdict on his side, sentencing Winnie to two years imprisonment. It is interesting to see the Chinese court, one of the patriarchal institutions that legalize and support the patriarchal code, permits the sexual and textual violator – textual violator in the sense that Wen Fu has twisted the reality and created another version of the story – to transform into the violated. There is no space for the real victim to appeal to, and get compensated for her tortures from the husband. There is no language even for “criticizing men or the society” (325). Winnie is both marginalized and misrepresented in the Chinese society which patriarchal even in its justice system which can accuse the victimized wife and mother.

As the territory of a country is invaded by the imperial power, in the case of the novel China being invaded by Japan, so the body and life of a woman is controlled, used—and worse, abused— by a man. This act is done even in public, in the

presence of one's seniors and friends. Once so happens that after a dinner party Winnie sings a song with one of the army man among the diners. Wen Fu her husband blames her of insincerity. He gets mad without reason and tells her to kneel down and ask for forgiveness. She is expected by her friend Helen to do the same so that his anger would be soothed. But the terrible humiliation she suffers from is not noticed by them. When she is thus tortured, nobody dares to come ahead for her assistance. She feels puzzled why they were all so scared of siding with her despite the all irrational blames and injustices cast upon her by her husband. Years later in America Winnie recalls the incident and tells her daughter:

I remember this: All those men, Hulan – nobody tried to stop him. They watched and did nothing as I lay with my head touching the floor. They said nothing when my husband ordered me to say, “Sorry, I am wrong, you are right. Please forgive me.” They did not protest and tell Wen Fu, “This is enough,” when he told me to beg for forgiveness, again and again. (318)

Her beaten up and tortured body, her humiliated psyche does not rouse any response and appropriate action from those present there at the party. They might have thought that she is his wife anyway, why bother about such beating which is only too common in the society. Politically, the world is no different for the small and weak countries. The powerful ones invade and annex their land and the people forcibly; they attack without any justifiable reason, and the world peace-keeping body just keeps silent, at best issues a communiqué and stops there. One can see this in the world today where the military powers are in the look out for pretexts to force the small countries to agree with their unjust demand and conditions.

The death of Wen Fu and Winnie's daughter Yiku provides another occasion for exposing the true character and nature of an irresponsible and biased male. Yiku falls seriously ill and Winnie hurries to inform the father about her illness. At that time Wen Fu is at his friend's house playing Mah Jong. The doctor also is there. When the doctor sees the mother is greatly troubled, he feels the seriousness of the case and stands ready to help the sick child. But the insensitive father just rebukes the mother and mocks that she has exaggerated the case. He is much more interested in enjoying the game than in saving the life of his daughter. He not only does not believe in the seriousness of the case, but stops the doctor from going to treat the child too. Disturbed in the game, he gets furious and blames his wife of exaggerating the case and swears he would not care even if the girl dies. He tells them all: "Play! Keep playing! My wife is exaggerating." He laughed. "She sees an ant, thinks it is a lion. The baby sneezed once, she thinks it's pneumonia. Sit down, sit down, keep playing a little". When Winnie says that the child may die, he gets mad because she contradicts him and swears, "If she dies, I wouldn't care!" (336).

After about an hour of that incident, the baby turns visibly serious. Her little body starts throwing and tossing itself up, and the mother takes her to the place where Wen Fu is still playing the game. Seeing the condition of the child, all the men there stop playing and all is quiet there. Then, without any shame, as if it is the first time he has come to know about the seriousness of the illness of the child, Wen Fu gets furious at Winnie and starts abusing her with epithets, "You stupid woman!" Wen Fu he shouted, then cursed. Why didn't you tell me she was this way? What kind of mother are you!" (337). Easily does the husband blame the wife of not being a caring mother. But he forgets and pretends to forget how nastily he had sworn that he would not care even if the child dies. This is sheer shameless and lack of moral sense and

irresponsibility on his part to blame his wife. She had already warned and that time he laughed at her, accused her of disturbing his good mood and game.

This scene, together with the former one in which the mother is humiliated, has been of great attention to critics in explicating how worthless a female life is for the male. Adams observes this scene thus:

What these two events reveal is that a beaten woman and a dying child do not function as evidence of suffering. In this context, their bodies fail to signify in a way that acknowledges both Winnie's and Yiku's pain. Mother and daughter bear the marks of abuse on their bodies, but this is not enough to call into question the authority of Wen Fu's interpretation. (20)

It is in the hands of the men that meanings to the experience and feelings of women are given. The women's own ideas, life and feelings count for nothing. They are not accepted as individuals with their own rights and identities. Rather they are supposed to be available to the use of the men, as if they were just some sorts of possessions and use and throw type of articles. Even the life and death issue of women are not so importantly taken by the men, as it is proved by the case of the negligence shown by Wen Fu towards his daughter Yiku's serious illness.

The novel attempts to invite the readers to take a side with the inflicted party by recounting the rape of Nanking on the one hand and of the Chinese women on the other. After reading the novel, one with a bit imagination and compassion is forced to review world history. One is invited to ask such questions as to why people and countries try to manipulate others. The answer lies in the insight that politics is pervasive and that it affects even familial relationship. No matter what the socio-economic condition of a family, the male, the father is supposed to know all and be all and control all. Similarly, despite the injustice involved in dominating over other

countries, an imperial power always finds pretext to control other countries. The story of rapes and history of invasions are ultimately explained by the power mania of the concerned invaders.

Breaking Silence and Female Selfhood

There are two kinds of daughters in Amy Tan's stories: the obedient and disobedient, then there are also two kinds of mothers: the assertive/strong-willed and the submissive weak-willed. What distinguishes the assertive and strong-willed mother from the submissive and weak-willed one is how she perceives or defines herself as a woman in the patriarchal structure. Generally speaking, Chinese mothers in Amy Tan's fiction, both assertive/ strong-willed and submissive/ weak-willed, have suffered from the impact of the negative ideals of traditional womanhood. However, the assertive and strong-willed mother always knows the importance of self-appreciation and self-assertion so that she is able to break free from the traditional womanhood and obtain her own happiness. Lindo in *The Joy Luck Club* can be seen as a typical strong-willed mother. Comparatively, the submissive and weak-willed mother is apt to give up her will to fight for her selfhood and she is thus caught in a submissive and depressive mode of life. An-mei Hsu and Ying-ying St. Clair in *The Joy Luck Club* and Winnie Louie in *The Kitchen God's Wife* belong to this category of weak-willed mother.

Similarly, Winnie is taught to give up her intellectual development and to renounce the positive use of her speaking and seeing abilities. The Old Aunt, who "was raised in a feudal family" and asked by Winnie's father to take care of her, shows Winnie the forbidden rules for girls:

The girl's eyes should never be used for reading, only for sewing. The girl's ears should never be used for listening to ideas, only to

orders._ The girl's lips should be small, rarely used, except to express appreciation or ask for approval. (102)

Back to the old China, a woman's life thus is full of admonishments, warnings and rules concerning female obedience and silence. She learns all those lessons hindering her self-development from the elders around her, male and female, in her natal family and her husband's house. Take Winnie, for example. At the eve of her wedding, she pays a visit to her father. While asking about her comments on an old Chinese painting on the wall, Winnie's father appreciates her aesthetic knowledge but firmly urges her to renounce her own judgment and accept her husband's in her marriage life. He tells Winnie from now on, you must consider what your husband's opinions are. Yours do not matter so much anymore. Do you understand? (145)

After getting married, Winnie is also admonished by her mother-in-law to take her husband as the center of her life and be ready to sacrifice for him in daily life. Winnie states:

So this is what my mother-in-law taught me: To protect my husband so he would protect me. To fear him and think this was respect. To make him a proper hot soup, which was ready to serve only when I had scalded my little finger testing. "Don't hurt!" my mother-in-law would exclaim if I shouted in pain "That kind of sacrifice for a husband never hurts." (168)

The notion of punishment is always associated with female reticence and female obedience, which is seen in every lesson taught to a girl. As such, woman in Amy Tan's stories is taught, advised, and warned to evaluate, take care of, and listen to

everyone except herself. She is also put in an anxiety of being punished for failing- all these lessons. Cultivated with such a repressive womanhood, she is inevitably compelled to take the role of the listener rather than the speaker, good at listening to admonishments and orders from others rather than her own heart. Learning to swallow her sorrows and those of others, she is often caught in a state of inactivity, dependence, and depression.

Amy Tan's stories about Chinese mothers and American daughters always highlight the importance of the breaking of silence as a way for women to assert their identity and preserve their integrity. At the beginning of the story because of the mother's reluctance to break silence- to speak up about her miserable past conflicts, misunderstandings, and ambivalence all emerge in the confrontation of the mother and the daughter. It is not until the mother decides to tell the daughter about her ordeals in the past that the gap is bridged and the daughter is empowered and saved.

In Amy Tan's stories about mothers and daughters, the breaking silence of the mother always exerts a positive influence on the daughter's self-development. Instead of concerning the daughter into "marital enslavement,"¹ it unfailingly empowers the daughter to quest for self-knowledge and selfhood. As Marie Booth Foster asserts:

[r] regardless of how much the daughters try to deny it, it is through their mothers that they find their voice, their mind, their selfhood. Voice finds its form in the process of interaction, even if that interaction is conflict (55).

It is evident that traditional Chinese womanhood, which has been passed down grandmothers, to mothers, and to daughters, needs to be mended so as to fit into the

new cultural and social contexts for the generation of American-born daughters. In the same vein, the role of a woman plays also needs to be redefined according to new social and cultural contexts. Female obedience and reticence cannot be regarded as virtues for women any more. Women have to speak their minds, desires, and needs in order to preserve and integrate their selfhood. Only by breaking silence can they bridge the gap between themselves and their beloved ones. The act of breaking silence benefits both generations and sexes. Chinese mothers who used to be weak-willed see their own weakness, resignation and reticence reflected in their daughters. They come to understand the urgency of breaking their silence in order to save their silence in order to save their daughters. By telling their ordeals and secrets in the past, Chinese mother ultimately empower their beloved daughters and themselves as well, Audre Lorde comments storytelling heals past experiences of loss and separation; it is also a medium for rewriting stories of oppression and victimization into parables of self-affirmation and individual empowerment.

In her representation of breaking female silence, Amy Tan indeed demonstrates the power of telling to erase the friction, to heal the wounds, and to bridge the gap between the mother and the daughter, the old and the new, the present and the past, and the East and the West.

Female Selves Sustained and Redeemed in Sisterhood

Sisterhood in Amy Tan's fictions encompasses not only the biological bonds between women, but also the emotional and spiritual ones between women related by friendship. The sibling bonds are presented by the portraits of two cousins, Winnie and Peanut in *The Kitchen God's Wife* and that of two half-sisters, Kwan and Olivia in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Female friendships are found among four Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* and in the triad of Winnie, Helen and Anti Du

in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. For the most of part, Amy Tan celebrates, in Braunbeck's phrase, the "traditionally positive concepts of sisterliness," such as trust, loyalty, reciprocity, mutual care and solidarity in female bonding. For Amy Tan, however, sisterhood is by no means an absolutely ideal relationship. She also reveals certain negative aspects of capitalist American society.

The nature of sisterhood in Amy Tan's fiction is not fixed but mutable; it changes with social and institutional structures and develops into variable versions. In Amy Tan's representations of female selves, women in the patriarchal society of feudal China often competed for men's love and thus tended to exploit their fellow sisters in order to secure their own familial and social positions. Amy Tan suggests that when China was undergoing the transformation from feudalism to modernism and this form of patriarchy was on its way of declination, women, within this context of cultural and social transition, were found to fight arms in arms for survival and dignity and to nurture each other with emotional support in adversity. By contrast, as Amy Tan observes, relationships among women of the younger generation in Chinese American communities are full of tension, competitiveness, hostility, rivalry, and even hatred. They often internalize the ideas of commercialism, materialism, and individualism of American culture so that they are liable to compete for material achievement and place greater value upon man-woman relationships than other personal relationships, such as female friendships.

In Amy Tan's fictions, traditional Chinese culture and society were essentially dominated by Confucian ethics, replete with male-biased norms for women. Within these cultural and social contexts, Chinese women were often designated the passive, obedient, silent, submissive or subservient role, and deprived of the right of being as well as the free will of becoming. Therefore, many of Amy Tan's stories

about women of the old China appear as accounts protesting against women's being devastated by sexual inequalities in Chinese patriarchal society. In this category of stories, Amy Tan aims to show that the patriarchal authority is often embodied in arranged marriages without love, in socially accepted concubinage, and in the doublestandard concept of virginity. All of these social and cultural evils conspire to constitute the tragic fate of Chinese women in the past.

To Amy Tan, women in the Old China, named or anonymous, from upper or lower classes, wealthy or poor, intellectual or illiterate, all suffer from a terrible fate regardless of their birth, upbringing, material status, or education. They are victims of the customs of arranged marriage, concubinage, and concept of female virginity. Winnie's mother in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, for instance, has access to Western education and becomes a New Woman at the turn of century. And yet, she cannot escape the fate of being an old man's concubine after her father is dead and her family declines, financially and socially. Moreover, the young peasant girl who is found in the tale told by the lover of Winnie's mother Hang[s] herself with the rope of her own hair, tied to the [wedding] sedan slates on top (107) to protest against her being forced to marry "an old man she [does] not even know (106).

Sometimes, a woman avoids suffering from arranged marriage but not other cultural and social evils, such as socially accepted concubinage and the concept of female virginity. Although Chinese women are haunted by the tragic fate, they are still able to break the spell and have the tables turned. If they can be self-reliant and also help each other, they always manage to transform their victimization into the source of strength and power. Stories about Winnie, Peanut, and Little Yu in childhood, is deceived into marrying a "simple minded" husband. After learning

about that her husband is actually mentally retarded, Little Yu comes to her mother for the permission to leave him. Instead of showing her sympathy and giving her permission, "[h]er mother (says) her life could be worse. At least the family[is] good to her, [gives] her plenty to eat And even though the husband [is] simple-minded, she ha[s] heard he could still father children. He ha[s] done this with a girl in the village." (354)

Before Little Yu leaves, her mother even emphatically urges her: "Be good, try harder"(354). In depression and disappointment, Little Yu kills herself by hanging later. After her death, Little Yu's mother devotes herself to helping women escape from their unhappy marriages so as to relieve her repentance and commemorate Little Yu. With the help of Little Yu's mother, Peanut later is able to leave her homosexual husband, who in turn has the annulment announced in all newspapers of Shanghai. Like Little Yu, Peanut doesn't get support from her family, either. As a matter of fact, her father is so ashamed of her that he refuses to recognize her existence. Even the hearing of her name mentioned can repel him extremely. Winnie witnesses his repulsive reaction when she goes to visit him hearing Peanut's name, Uncle seem[s] to wake up. He huff[s] in a disgusted tone, then [stands] up and walk[s] away, back toward the house. `Peanut is already dead!' He shout[s] back to us (337).

Before long, Peanut joins Little Yu's mother to take charge of the shelter for those women who are escaping from marital disasters. Later, Winnie pays a visit to them and figures out that the shelter is a Communist version of sisterhood. Although she is repelled by its political implications, she is excited about its existence anyhow. She doesn't know then her destiny will be completely changed because of its existence. Winnie describes what she sees about the shelter:

So that's how I found out that whole house was an underground hiding place, filled with women and children. Can you imagine? I was scared and excited at the same time. I'm not saying I wanted to become a Communist, no such thing. I was excited because I was in a house with nine women who had once had awful marriages, nine women who no longer had to obey their husbands and mothers-in-law. (355)

Winnie, the heroine of *The Kitchen God's Wife*, is the archetypal figure of woman who suffers, struggles, and thrives in Chinese patriarchy. She embodies female victimization by familial indifference, social hostility, and sexual abuse. Early in her childhood, Winnie is denied and spiritually abandoned by her father, who sends her away to live with his brother after Winnie's mother escapes from her marriage and no one knows her whereabouts since then. His decision has been imprinted in Winnie's heart so deeply that she always can remember his indifference. Before the eve of her wedding, she has a chance to visit her father, but the joy of reunion gives way to the sense of ambivalence and even resentment, as Winnie admits:

Imagine with your heart how I felt. I had not seen my father for almost twelve years, ever since he sent me to the island. My aunties had never taken me to see him all those times we visited Shanghai. He had never written to me, had never come to see me on the island or at my boarding school. So I did not know whether he would be mad or happy to see me. I did not know whether I should be fearful or happy to see him. (139)

Winnie is materially gratified but emotionally impoverished under her uncle's

roof, for her host family devotes all its attentions and love to her uncle's daughter, Peanut, and often neglects her emotional needs. Winnie therefore is unhappy and dissatisfied with reality. She always hopes to have a chance to leave her uncle's house. Therefore, when Wen Fu, the first man of her life, shows up and even offers her a marriage, she accepts him and projects all her dreams and expectations of the future on him:

I imagined Wen fu driving up in the automobile to take me away, and I would be so glad to leave my old life, I dreamt of living in a happy household where nobody ever complained. I was thinking of a mother-in-law who was too good to be true, who praised me, never scolded me. I could already see servants filling my teacup before I ever knew I had a thirst. And running through my mind were many children, all the same size, chasing my skirt, one after the other, making me laugh. (137-38)

It never occurs to Winnie that Wen Fu might be a villain, bully and sadist husband, who thereafter will abuse her, physically and psychologically, for eight years. Winnie finally decides to leave her marriage and marries her suitor, Jimmy Louie, a Chinese American whom she had first met in a ball during the war many years ago. She had a dance with him on that very first day, for which she received severe abuse from Wen Fu. Winnie recalls:

That night, with a gun to my head, he raped me, telling me I had lost the privileges of a wife and now had only the duties of a whore. He made me do one terrible thing after another. He made me murmur thanks to him. He made me beg for more of his punishment. I did all

these things until I was senseless, laughing and crying, all feeling in my body gone. (309)

After the war, Winnie unexpectedly meets Jimmy once again. She now accepts his hand because she gives up any love and hope for Wen Fu. She decides to escape from her marriage, but Wen Fu happens to learn about her plan. As a result, Wen Fu sues Winnie for killing their son, stealing valuables from his family, and deserting her own husband to run off with her lover. All of Wen Fu's accusations are false if applied to Winnie but true, to himself. Their son, Danru, who is the apple of Winnie's *eyes* but the vent of Wen Fu's anger, died of epidemic in a trip to the North. Even their daughter, Yiku, is dead because of Wen Fu's irresponsibility: he refused to leave a card game to get a doctor for her. Winnie supported the family with her dowry money during the war. After the war, Wen Fu moved into the house of Winnie's father and disposed its valuables piece by piece. Wen Fu has had numerous affairs and he even takes a woman home to live with him.

From a feminist perspective, the case of Winnie demonstrates that Chinese women in the old society were truly vulnerable and doomed. They were situated in a society in which women were often protected by no legislation, whereas men tended to enjoy all kinds of social and political privileges. It also shows that women were victimized by the media that catered to the male-centered public at the expense of the truth behind the verdict and women's rights.

Entangled in an inextricable web of familial indifference and social hostility, Winnie can turn to no authority or institution but communities of women for help. As she sustains herself with the spiritual and emotional

supports of Helen and Auntie Du, the experience of being victimized enables her to cultivate a female spirit of comrade-in arms and to develop a more sympathetic insight to other women in trouble. For example, she reaches her helping hand to the girl who is pregnant and discarded by Wen Fu. Besides, when she goes to the jail, she teaches other women prisoners to read, write, and learn the lesson of decorum. Like Little Yu, An-mei's mother, and the young peasant girl hangs herself in *The Joy Luck Club*, Winnie suffers from the evils of patriarchy. And yet, unlike them, who commit suicide in order to end their sufferings, Winnie survives her ordeals, eventually transforms herself from being submissive into being assertive, and turns into the symbol of Lady Sorrowfree that empowers her daughter, Pearl, to walk out of the cloud of life. What enables Winnie to escape from a tragic death is that she finds spiritual support in sisterhood to sustain her to fight back for herself. Her case justified by critic Toni:

The relationship between sisters, like that between mothers and daughters, comes to us shrouded in silence and ignorance. Like mothers and daughters, sisters are by definition a woman-to-woman dyad and, as such, may well constitute a threat within patriarchy (5).

In order to pinpoint the time-enduring nature of sisterhood in Chinese immigrant mothers and its positive qualities, such as solidarity, reciprocity, loyalty, sharing, and redemption, Amy Tan is apt to combine incidents of the past with that of the present in every story in her works of fiction. With such a writing strategy, Amy Tan manages to highlight the continuity of sisterhood among communities of women in different social, geographical, and even temporal circumstances.

Female Selves in the Mother-Daughter Bond and Sisterhood

Female relationships are extraordinarily emphasized in Amy Tan's fiction, especially the mother-daughter bond and sisterhood among connected by blood or friendship. She Tan-elaborates to portray how female selves are defined by familial and cultural bonds and formed in communities of women. Moreover, while other Chinese writers focus on female sexuality that frustrates or facilitates the development of female selfhood, Amy Tan stresses female cultural heritage to highlight the importance of female bonding in the context of female identity formation. Li Ang and Wang Anyi write about female sexuality to restore female individuality, which is an important element of the construction of female selfhood but which is often neglected by the traditional Chinese culture. In contrast, Amy Tan writes about female quest for cultural identity to criticize the disadvantage of individualism in American culture and to *affirm* those ideals about community in traditional Chinese culture, such as solidarity, reciprocity, responsibility, and loyalty. Considering the relation between female selves and the traditional Chinese culture, one thus comes to find that Li Ang and Wang Anyi seem to suggest a centrifugal mode, whereas Amy Tan suggests a centripetal pattern.

The focus of Amy Tan's creative concern is on the problematic mother-daughter and sisterly relationship. The mothers in Amy Tan's novels are Chinese sojourners in America whose ways of thinking and doings are thoroughly Chinese in spite of their many years of American residency. To the daughters, who have their roots in America and who have been cultivated with ideals of freedom, democracy, "individualism and instrumental reason, the Chinese mothers/ surrogate mothers stand for the past, the old, the outdated, the mysterious, and sometimes the superstitious. Thus, conflicts always exist between the mother and the daughter. In addition to cultural conflicts, secrets also serve as barriers to the understanding

between mothers and daughters in Amy Tan's novels. There always exist secrets in the relationship between a Chinese immigrant mother and her American-bond daughter, who keep their own secrets from each other for fear that the plain fact would deteriorate_ their relationship or bring harm to their significant others. But the secrets must be revealed so that the conflicts can be reconciled. As a result, at the end of the story, all the conflicts will be transformed into reconciliation by the interaction and the revelation of secrets between two generations. In terms of the exploration of sisterhood, Amy Tan for the most part asserts the positive aspects of female friendship, such as its function to empower, sustain, nurture, and redeem female selves. However competitiveness and hostility between women are still under her investigation.

IV: Conclusion

The novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* makes a profitable reading for any one interested in the impact inflicted by Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and the 1940s as well as the Rape of Nanking 1937, in the life of Chinese people as individuals and as a nation. The novel is a tale of the various hardships, dishonor and torments women have to face in such a traditional society as China. The novel is worth pondering for its immediacy and appeal, for it touches upon some of the most compelling issues such as the predicament of women in an anti-female society, the representation, misrepresentation of women as a object to be possessed and taken care of by men, as well as a broader pondering upon the political reality of a country defeated by imperial power because of the inefficiency of the government at the national level.

In the novel, the central character Winnie Louie's personal experiences are represented, experiences that are spoken in domestic setting to her American born daughter, Pearl Louie Brandt. It shows her prematurely dead daughter Yiku, her servant girl, another girl who stayed with her as Wen Fu's concubine-these all indicate that the female in the society of the early and mid twentieth century didn't have much of identity and value of life as individuals and members of the society.

As the title of the novel refers to a Chinese folk, tale in which the wife of a kitchen god had to suffer much, so is the plight of women and wife in a patriarchal society. They must take care of the children, feed the family and propagate her prematurely dead daughter Yiku, her servant girl, another girl who stayed with her as Wen Fu's concubine these all indicate that the female in the Chinese society of the early and mid twentieth century did not have much of identity and value of life as individuals and members of the society. They have to make dynasty of their husbands.

In return, they get only humiliation, abuse and torture. They had to hide their voices and desires under the giant footsteps of dominant society. They lose their identity to give identity to a family they were not born in, and they are paid back with derision and untold suffering. Winnie as a woman is both marginalized and misrepresented in the traditional Chinese patriarchal society.

It is at this point that the novel deals with the quest for identity of a suppressed woman Winnie through the narrative voices to her own daughter Pearl. Before she reached the United States, Winnie experienced much turmoil, strife and suffering. She was abandoned by her mother as a young child and left her compelly being a victimized of this male dominated society. She is forced to live with her uncle and his two wives. She never feels as loved as her uncle's true daughter. They organized a traditional marriage. The marriage to a man named Wen Fu, turns out to be a terrible one. He is horribly abusive-physically, mentally and emotionally. She loses many children along the way, some to early deaths.

The very position of being recognized only as somebody's wife and not by their own name or on their own distinct designation is an issue worth contending for the feminist writers and theorists. It seems at first as if Amy Tan also seems to be accepting the tradition of making the women lose their identity by naming her novel *Kitchen's Gods' Wife*. But at the deeper level, she sides with the oppressed female race and in fact raises a strong condemnation against the Japanese invasion of the China in Nanking along with tell the inhuman suppression of women by men in China back in the early twentieth century.

The Japanese imperialism is another crucial element in the novel. During the invasion in China, it had seriously affected the lives of Chinese people. Japanese attacks had devastated them leaving them with no homes and no food. It gives the

horrible picture of Japanese brutal attack on China. In a way Japanese brutality to china and Wen Fu's brutality to Winnie go along with the same level of intensity, it shows the parallelism between the Chinese patriarchy and the Japanese imperialism.

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