

## **Intersection of Race, Patriarchy and Imperialism in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen***

### ***God's Wife***

*This thesis “Intersection of Race, Patriarchy and Imperialism in Amy Tan's The Kitchen God's Wife” is an study and interpretation of the novel from the perspective of feminism. In doing so, the thesis also touches upon how both imperialism and patriarchy are inimical to the freedom and expression of the female. Daughter accommodates to American values and life style as a revolt against patriarchy. In another words it comes as a revolt against the masculinist ideology of patriarchy represented by mother in particular and against Chinese patriarchy in general.*

*In the novel, there are two parallel lines of story. One line of the story tells about the Japanese invasion of China, and the another line tells about how a Chinese woman is brutalized by her husband, a Chinese military person. The oppressor in both cases are the male ones, and the females are doubly oppressed. They are oppressed by the Chinese patriarchy at home, and also by the invading Japanese imperialism from outside. Thus the policy of imperialism and patriarchy are both unjust and inhuman institutions. Winne's revolt against her mother and cultural system she represented shows a women power which comes from the movements prepared by feminism in Europe and America.*

Amy Tan's novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife* demonstrates a story of a woman who accepts American values and life in order to run away from Chinese patriarchal system. The daughter and her conflict with her mother in America is critical to understand a women's struggle to break the shackle of patriarchy. The daughter represents new woman while mother represents traditional Chinese patriarchy. The

daughter's personal history becomes a creative source of expression. A woman and her struggle for independence through accommodation of American values and life styles is a revolt against her mother in particular and against patriarchy in general. This research understands Amy Tan's personal history as a background of her literary oeuvres while drawing strong association between personal history and cultural condition of being a migrated woman.

Amy Tan's father John Tan worked for the U.S. Information Service during World War II, much like it is rumored that the character of Jimmy Louie in the novel was an American spy. And the list of affinity goes on between historical and fictional characters. The clearest autobiographical element in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, however, is the character and story of Winnie Louie, which is very much modeled after Tan's own mother, Daisy Tan. Daisy, by the time she moved to the United States in 1949, had already been through a great deal, just as Winnie had suffered before reaching to America. Both Daisy and Winnie were motherless children, both were involved in intensely abusive traditional marriages, and both lost children of their own. Furthermore, there are the facts of Tan's own life, growing up as an American in a Chinese home, that provide an important background for the novel.

This predicament causes too many Asian-Americans and other people who have more than one nationality; a sense of being caught in between two worlds. Tan grew up feeling as if she were an outsider at school, someone who looked different from everyone in every way from the peers. And yet, she also felt, occasionally, like an outsider within her own home—a homewhere a mixture of Mandarin and English were spoken. The life of Amy Tan's mother, for instance, would remain somewhat of a secret to her, until Tan was much older. It was also not until Tan was much older that she realized that having grown up between two worlds—being both Asian and

American—gave her a double vision that would enrich her gift of writing. She realized that she had grown up in a world where Asian fairy tales were commingled with the American stories she learned at school, and she was able to combine these two storytelling traditions in her own work.

In her article “Representing History in Ami Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife*” Bella Adams draws a binary relation between present and the past in terms of an individual and its relation to the past and the present. She further comments:

[The novel] negotiates between these two extremes in terms compatible with deconstruction by generating a debate about the difficulty of referencing past experiences *a la* phenomenism. This difficulty urgently needs addressing in the holocaust denial if the historical record is to be set straight about what happened during the Sino-Japanese War. It is important to note that "difficulty" does not mean the end of history; rather, it necessitates a theoretical inquiry into the concept of history. (9-10)

The history and historical facts are given to the formation of an individual’s identity. To deny these facts becomes difficult to diffuse and forget.

Michelle Nealy argues that the novel is about the secret relationship of mother and daughter. It is about a “family and two big secrets shared between a mother and daughter,” and the experiences of “growing up in China against the backdrop of World War II the American born daughter Pearl must reflect on her own line and behavior” (22).

Cultural distance creates a sense of fear in the mind of people who share different geography but a similar culture. 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). This fear is a symptomatic to all the migrants and their off springs growing up in different culture.

Sonia Shah argues that the novel shows the racial as well as cultural difference of both the mother and the daughter .It is about 'a family and their difference in culture they brought in.' Similarly in her article *In Dragon's Ladies : Asian American Feminist Breathe Fire* , prominent Asian American women writers, artists, and activists seize the power of their unique political perspective and cultural background to articulate an Asian American Feminist political and to transform the landscape of race, class, and gender in the United States. In sixteen critical essays , these writers draw on a wealth of personal experience and persuasive analysis of Asian women's relationships to immigration ,work, health, domestic violence, spirituality, cultural production, and the media. From the global trade in Asian women workers to the elitism of the white feminist movement, no ground is scared .The women warriors don't convince words but speak fierce conviction and surprising insight.

The critical reading on Amy Tan, her interpretation and cross cultural bearings on the characters reveals the difficulty of being a woman in different culture. However, the present study seeks to study Winnie’s revolt 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 husband.

Feminism is social theory and a political movement primarily informed and fuelled by the experience of women. Inaugurated by such critical minds as Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine Nicole de Sainte Beauve, this movement was later strengthened by Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir in the twentieth century.

Simply put, feminism can be understood as a doctrine which advocates equal rights and dignity for women. Feminism acquired a more or less concrete set of beliefs in the nineteenth century articulating the thesis that women are inherently equal to men.

Feminist criticism became a dominant force in Western literary studies in the late 1970s, when feminist theory was applied to linguistic and literary matters. Since the early 1980s, feminist literary criticism has developed and diversified in a number of ways and is now characterized by a global perspective. French feminist criticism garnered much of its inspiration from Simone de Beauvoir's concepts detailed in her book *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir argued that associating men with humanity more generally (as many cultures do) relegates women to an inferior position in society. Subsequent French feminist critics writing during the 1970s acknowledged Beauvoir's critique but focused on language as a tool of male domination, analyzing the ways in which it represents the world from the male point of view and arguing for the development of a feminine language and writing.

Although interested in the subject of feminine language and writing, North American feminist critics of the 1970s and early 1980s began by analyzing literary texts—not by abstractly discussing language—via close textual reading and historical scholarship. One group practiced feminist critique, examining how women characters are portrayed, exposing the patriarchal ideology implicit in the so-called classics, and demonstrating that attitudes and traditions reinforcing systematic masculine dominance are inscribed in the literary canon. Another group practiced what came to be called gynocriticism, studying writings by women and examining the female literary tradition to find out how women writers across the ages have perceived themselves and imagined reality.

While it gradually became customary to refer to an Anglo-American tradition of feminist criticism, British feminist critics of the 1970s and early 1980s objected to the tendency of some North American critics to find universal or essential feminine attributes, arguing that differences of race, class, and culture gave rise to crucial differences among women across space and time. British feminist critics regarded their own critical practice as more political than that of North American feminists, emphasizing an engagement with historical process in order to promote social change.

By the early 1990s, the French, American, and British approaches had so thoroughly critiqued, influenced, and assimilated one another that nationality no longer automatically signaled a practitioner's approach. Today's critics seldom focus on woman as a relatively distinct category; rather, they view women as members of different societies with different concerns. Feminists of color, Third World (preferably called postcolonial) feminists, and lesbian feminists have stressed that women are not defined solely by the fact that they are female; other attributes—such as religion, class, and sexual orientation etc—are also important.

Many commentators have argued that

feminist criticism is by definition gender criticism because of its focus on the feminine gender. But the relationship between feminist and gender criticism is, in fact, complex; the two approaches are certainly not polar opposites but, rather, exist along a continuum of attitudes toward sex, sexuality, gender, and language.

As a concerted social and political movement that became wide-reaching, feminism got momentum in the twentieth century. The aim of this movement can be designed as spiritual as it seeks to establish a human society based on the mutual understanding and respect between the two sexes. Encyclopedia Britannica defines feminism in two important senses:

Feminism is (a) arrange of contemporary theoretical perspectives (political, sociological, legal, psychoanalytic, literary, philosophical) in which women's experiences are examined in relation to actual or perceived differences between the power and status of men and women; (b) a social justice movement in which issues of particular importance for women are analyzed, understood, and addressed from feminist perspectives. (201)

Today, the multiplicity of definitions of this movement makes it difficult to provide an all-inclusive definition. But a shared endeavor all feminist theories and theorists make is to question why women have been consigned to a subservient status in relation to men. They explain the social system controlled and constructed by men, is the cause behind women's subordination. Feminism has concern with the changes that took place in the life of women in different historical times. All human [cultures](#) seem to encourage the development of gender roles, through [literature](#), costume and [song](#). Position of women in literary representation as well as in culture rests at the center of feminist scholarship

The question of literary value of a subject matter is not infrequent in canonical literary criticism. The question here is about whether or not the story and experience

of women are appropriate for literary treatment. Moreover, can a good piece of literature be produced on the female saga, in which most of the incidents and stories revolve around the female characters? To make female characters the central characters is in itself a bold step toward affirming the worth and significance of female experience. A worthy piece of literature, novel in this case, at least in line with the expectation of the convention, should be about some really worthy characters, not about women who mostly misunderstand each other; and who have failed in their choice of first husband. But the novel violates this expectation, and takes to recounting the story of women. It is itself a feminist gesture on the part of the novel and the novelist.

The narrator's objective to write a political novel turns out to be an admixture of political and cultural politics. She might have begun to write a political novel about the effect of Japanese imperialism over China but ultimately the personal and familial dimension of the novel, related to the women, becomes more engaging than the political concern in the novel Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*. The novel focuses on the issue of race, imperialism and patriarchy in effects they inflict upon countries and woman respectively.

This reminds one of the shift modern literature took in replacing the practice of recounting the story and history of the so-called nobility comprising the royalty, knight, and supernatural powers by the story of the common, downtrodden people. The only problem was that even with this shift, by which the common people got coverage in literature, half of the human race—the female race—was left unaccounted for. The stories and histories of the female people were neither seriously told nor heard with interest. So much so that, even the few successful female writers of the nineteenth century had to assume pseudonyms for the fear that they might be

relegated to a lower status for the mere fact that the books were written by women.

As Lois Tyson writes in her book *Critical Theory Today*, “traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (83). Thus traditional gender roles have created demarcation lines between genders.

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 narrates story to her daughter and this strengthens the bond between them. Thus, the first feminist character of the novel and the novelist lies in 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 strategically significant issue whether a story or any piece of literature by women should have a universal significance to be counted as a good piece of literature or not. Surely, any piece of literature that talks about women's experience and feelings can also be significant. To some feminists, such as Adrienne Rich, Kate Millet, Sheila Ruth 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 experiences, 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 and daughter relationship often



strained 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 in 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. The tradition in the family, the subservient position of the mother passed on to the daughter, forms a psyche in the daughter which tells her that she has only subordinate position in her family. It is the circumstances that make women weak as Sheila Ruth observes:

Many factors in the environment conspire to impede women's competence and accomplishments in many areas—hostile or deprecating attitudes of incumbent men, lack of support and assistance from all quarters, dual and/or incompatible professional and nonprofessional functions, pervasiveness of the male (alien, inhospitable) ambience, and socialization that erodes confidence and self-assertion. (160)

Thus, many factors give the impression to the daughter that her position is a secondary one. The mother in the novel says the same thing when admits how she was influenced by her mother's situation. One can have glimpse of the family narrative from the quote 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)

Here the mother is confessing how her mother transmitted the inhibitions that kept her from speaking thing on time. The mother practiced the same thing regarding her relationship with her daughter, and kept many things secret from the daughter. She feared if her daughter learns that her grandmother had left her mother to marry another man which could have affected her daughter negatively. But despite this fact, the daughter is only unhappy but not disappointed with the hidden truth of her mother.

The western civilization has modeled the daughters in the mould conceptualized in the epics like *Odyssey and Iliad*. 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 a great bulk of literature in any culture in the world. For example, the well-known epics *Odyssey and Iliad* in the west and *Ramayana* in the east are centered upon the troubles caused by beauty of women. When it comes to say women are beautiful, a plethora of epithets and symbols and images and similes are used. This is not the case regarding the male beauty, which is reflected in terms of their character, strength, intellectual prowess, and moral nobility. Since female 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 is 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 is the accepted underlying meaning that if a woman is beautiful, she would be lucky enough to get married with a person of rank and status. If not, her other

qualities may not be able to secure her a good and rich family. If a woman had physical beauty, she would be lucky enough to get a good husband. The property of a woman, in this regard, is her beauty. It was the same case in China in the times of Pearl's grandmother. Pearl's mother, Winnie is telling the story about her mother, that is Pearl's grandmother back in China:

Maybe 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 directed at making them mute and crippled by imbibing the false ideas of gentility and mannerism. The instructions of this school are that a woman should not open her mouth to ask question or to tell stories to others. She is supposed to appreciate the patriarchal norms and values.

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 straightforward only. Women are well trained from their childhood so that they would make better servants, play mates and caretakers of the household activities. This is the traditional concept of the patriarchal society in order to marginalize and exploit females intellectually

The life and skills of a girl are all preparations for a happy home of her in-laws and husband. The girls are taught to cook, dress, speak, and learn other manners and skills so that they can manage their homes after their marriage. This attitude is practiced 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 she will get to after her marriage. 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 lesson of patriarchy to women everywhere 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 masculist mode of thought process and behavior toward female personality.

The dominant discourses in imperialism has been taking subject nation as their property; equally runs the parallel in patriarchal conceptualization of women—

possession and property of men. Chapter seven of the novel is entitled “Dowry Counting”, which is the central issue for a feminist investigation in the novel. The section is related to the marriage of the main character 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. 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 more dowry and connection with 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 a 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 system is widely spread in the world, not least in Asia where dowry system is notorious as a social stigma.

The father thinks that it is his duty to educate his daughter and socialize her to accept that his will be higher in priority to her will. The training of a female child is

how to become a good wife and mother later on which goes with the patriarchal idea of femininity. A woman is a good woman if she is able to serve her husband's family well. One is well reminded of what Mary Wollstonecraft wrote about this very issue back in the eighteenth century: "The mighty business of female life is to please" (398). Pearl's mother too was told the same by her father:

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)

It is the reality of any male-dominated society. The ideas, opinions and desires and aspirations of a female are not counted in a patriarchal society. The women have to be subsumed under the patronizing will, plan and opinions of her husband. This is a point that needs a 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 a control over it herself. 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 relationship with her monster-like husband Wen Fu who used to inflict various harassments upon her. The

behaviour of Wen Fu is representative of the male view about wife in a patriarchal society which is further supported by the text itself:

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. The husband is never expected to be a 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. This code of ethics has its roots in the distinctly masculinist philosophy which holds the view that a wife's success is measured in terms of her sacrifice for her husband and family disregarding herself.

The personal story of Winnie, as it is evident from what has been explained up to 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 which describe women as having voice as pretty-sounding as lutes 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 as

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). The Chinese women are compared to peach. Peach are eaten and relished. Likewise, the Japanese literally ate up the Chinese women. The Chinese women here become inflicted in two ways. On the one hand, they are tortured and exploited by the Chinese males. And, on the other hand, they are victimized by the Japanese invaders.

The traditional role assigned to women is that of a server and follower, not of an independent thinker and decision maker. Women should not think and speak independently; rather they should comply with the desire and opinion of their husbands. If they fail to agree with this notion, the women are looked down upon as unnatural breed. Winnie also experienced this set of patriarchal treatment from her first husband.

Winnie thinks it would please her husband if she agrees to the divorce proposal. He had once had talked about the divorce. So, she prepares the document for the divorce, and presents it to him. To her surprise and consternation, he does not at all take it any positively. It is not that he is sorry to have his wife made so dissatisfied with him as to compel her to draft a divorce paper. He is dissatisfied that she has taken the initiative this in proposing the divorce. By doing that she has proved that she dared to be independent, that she has the guts to challenge, and that she is in the powerful position 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 which is clear in the text itself:



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

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 the husband is dissatisfied that the wife has dared to propose 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. He cannot accept his wife proposing the divorce. If it had been proposed by him, she would have to accept without any demure. This just shows how the men think themselves as decision makers concerned with their family, but the women can never take any initiative in decision making themselves.

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 of the examples 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 had 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.

Winne's personal experiences are the testimony of historical fact of the empire and cultural exploitation from the male. Winne 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 it another way, in addition to discussing Japan's onslaught on China, Winnie narrates her personal bad dream like experience with a husband in China. The Chinese male domination upon the Chinese woman, and the Japanese occupation of China as nation are similar in the sense that the oppressors are males in both instances. Only difference is, one is domestic male oppressor, the other is from outside.

It is commonly accepted among the critics of imperial discourse and imperialism that without fail, 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 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 brought by the Japanese soldiers 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 to be a torturer of 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. 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. 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). In both cases, it is the female who at the receiving end.

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 recompensates 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 Fu's version of things stands" (21). The discourse that imperialism, by extension male, creates is taken to be true ones.

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 court accepts 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 is patriarchal even in its justice system which can accuse the victimized wife and mother further.

The Nanking Massacre, also known as "The Rape of Nanking," is a rare example of genocide against women. It is generally remembered for the invading forces' barbaric treatment of Chinese women. Many thousands of them were killed after gang rape, and tens of thousands of others brutally injured and traumatized. Meanwhile, approximately a quarter of a million defenseless Chinese men were rounded up as prisoners-of-war and murdered *en masse*, used for bayonet practice, or burned and buried alive.

Japanese forces invaded and occupied Manchuria in northeast China in 1931, setting up the puppet state of Manchukuo. After the manufactured "Marco Polo Bridge Incident" of July 1937, the Japanese launched a full scale invasion of China, capturing Shanghai on 12 November and the imperial capital, Nanking, on 13

December. Numerous atrocities were committed en route to Nanking, but they could not compare with the epic carnage and destruction the Japanese unleashed on the defenseless city after Chinese forces abandoned it to the enemy.

Women were killed in indiscriminate acts of terror and execution, but the large majority died after extended and excruciating gang-rape. "Surviving Japanese veterans claim that the army had officially outlawed the rape of enemy women," writes Iris Chang in her book *The Rape of Nanking*. But "the military policy forbidding rape only encouraged soldiers to kill their victims afterwards." She cites one soldier's recollection that "It would be all right if we only raped them. I shouldn't say all right. But we always stabbed and killed them. Because dead bodies don't talk ... Perhaps when we were raping her, we looked at her as a woman, but when we killed her, we just thought of her as something like a pig" (Chang 49-50). The Japanese soldiers raped and then killed the women.

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 elder relatives. Once it 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 they fail to notice the terrible humiliation she suffered. 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)

The recollection of personal life sheds light on experiences of growing up which becomes formative of psychology emotional disposition.

Her beaten up and tortured body, and her humiliated psyche do not rouse any response and appropriate action from those present there at the party. They might have thought; she is his wife any way; 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 also stops the doctor from going to treat the child.

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 contradicted 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) He now pretends that he was not informed in time about the seriousness of the illness of the child. Thus he easily blames the wife for 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 to interpret and give meanings to the experience and feelings of women in a patriarchal. 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 for 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 hand. By doing so, it combines the penetrating insights of postcolonialism and feminism effectively. Both of these theoretical tools can be best utilized to show the changing status of the oppressor/oppressed at personal and societal level. After reading the novel, one is compelled 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. In both case, it is the male that exercises brutal physical force to control and devastate the other. At the individual level, a man controls, marries, rapes, and divorces a woman and at the



national level the imperial power controls and exploits a nation. In both instances, the act of oppression is exercised by the male. This is the link between patriarchy and imperialism. Men are agents of both systems of oppression. In this way we can conclude that patriarchal and imperialistic values run together to dominate women and men.

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

The many instances in the novel wherein the central character Winnie Louie, her prematurely dead daughter Yiku, her servant girl, another girl who stayed with her as Wen Fu's concubine, are treated by the males as insignificant individuals. Such treatments 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. The women in China were not given due human respect and recognition. The will and desire of their husbands became their destiny.

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 rear the children, feed the family and propagate the dynasty of their

husbands but in return they get only humiliation, abuse and torture. They lose their identity for the sake of their husband's family where they were not born in. And, for this sacrifice, they are paid back with derision and untold suffering. They empty their life to fill the family of a man, but get torture and stigma for even slightly failing to comply with the demands of the family.

The very plight 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 *The Kitchen God's 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 China along with all the inhuman suppression of women by men in China back in the early twentieth century. The title of the novel is suggestive in both ways: the woman is recognized only as somebody's wife, not as herself and the husband is tantamount to or similar to god. The wife is the possession, the devotee the servant. The husband is the lord, the god, the master. This set of belief is the product of a patriarchal bent of mind that always sees women as non-human beings, or as secondary human beings at best. The novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* rejects this traditional notion of gender which regards the husband as the ruler and the wife as the ruled one, and it appeals for women liberation and dignity. Therefore, it is a feminist novel calling for gender equity and dignity.

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