



Literary Analysis Of “The Kitchen God’s Wife” By Amy Tan

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ABSTRACT

Amy Tan’s “The Kitchen God’s Wife” is a readily recognizable successor to her first book, the 1989 bestseller “The Joy Luck Club”. It is cast in the same thematic, substantive, and stylistic mold. Unlike “The Joy Luck Club”, however, which assumed the form of a cycle of related short stories revolving around four mothers and their four daughters, “The Kitchen God’s Wife” is a full-fledged novel. Like its predecessor, “The Kitchen God’s Wife” is Chinese American and generational in subject and feminist in perspective: Its point of departure is the lack of communication between mother and daughter, a mother who is a Chinese American immigrant and a daughter who is American born, but its scene quickly shifts from California to China, and the orbit of its pathos broadens to include the ugly husband-wife relationship that the mother had with her first husband.

Keywords:

Individuality, humor, irony, mother and daughter.

Both mother and daughter are first person narrators of the novel, with mother clearly dominating in length as well as in interest; both narratives, addressed directly to the reader, have a performative quality to them, especially that of the mother, who is telling the reader what she has told the daughter. The mother’s narrative is also couched in a tangy patois of Tan’s concoction that manages to capture vividly and credibly the rhythms and turns of immigrant Chinese speech and allows the narrator to tell her tale with a winning individuality, humor, and irony. As the narratives unfold, the novel takes on elements of confession, Bildungsroman, and even epic.

The confessions come as catharsis and solution to the mother-daughter problem of communication. This problem exists on several levels. On the fairly simple level of linguistic miscommunication, it highlights the generational difference between the immigrant and the native-born and is tragicomic in effect: When the

daughter, Pearl, says “beach,” the mother, Weili, hears “bitch”; when Weili says that she has chosen the clothes and casket at a funeral, Pearl understands her to say that it will be a closed casket ceremony.

During their lifetime (Weili is seventy, Pearl forty), such miscommunications have condensed around major paranoid secrets that mother and daughter are hiding from each other and that gnaw at their relationship like tumors or cancers (images of such potentially malignant growths appear noticeably in the book). Pearl’s secret, about which everybody knows but her mother doesn’t, is that she suffers from multiple sclerosis. Weili’s secret is her fear that Pearl is not the child of her loving second husband Jimmy Louie but of her heinous first husband Wen Fu, who had raped her the week before she left China to marry Jimmy. The overarching form of the novel is the mutual confession of these fearful secrets, which leads to the reconciliation of mother and daughter.

Beneath this formal canopy of confession, one finds a vital and fully fleshed-out Bildungsroman; although Pearl's confession is brief, Weili's is in fact a gripping three-hundred-page account of her life, the pain of which she has kept hidden from her daughter. It is this life story that may be read as the Bildungsroman of a girl with a very fragile sense of self-worth who grows into a woman capable of asserting her choice of a husband at gunpoint—a heartwarming variant of the shotgun wedding. For this purpose, Tan places her protagonist Weili in a bourgeois family in the male-dominated society of China from the 1920's to 1949.

The traumatic childhood event that sends Weili's self-esteem plummeting is the (to her) inexplicable way in which she is abandoned by her mother, a replacement secondary wife of a wealthy Shanghai merchant with a ménage of five concubines. Instead of being the apple of her mother's eye, Weili grows up fostered and tolerated by unloving aunts, marginalized in an island village away from her father's hearth in the city. Weili never sees her mother again; for them, there is no chance to break the silence that stifles their mother-daughter relationship.

As a tolerated relative, Weili is brought up with no great expectations for herself. She plays second fiddle to her girl cousin Peanut; and, as is common in a Confucian society both girls are treated as inferior to Peanut's brother. Weili thus gratefully accepts Wen Fu as husband, though he had initially come to court Peanut but had been rejected by her family as too déclassé.

Weili's unhappy childhood is only the prologue to the tragedy of her marriage. She quickly discovers that she has married an entirely selfish man and an abusive sexual pervert. From the other women of the family, however, Weili can expect no solidarity. On the contrary, Weili's mother-in-law believes that it is necessary "to be dutiful to a terrible person," and that "a woman always had to feel pain . . . before she could feel love." Wen Fu is a cheat who passes himself off as his deceased brother so that he can qualify academically for the air force (General Claire Chennault's "Flying Tigers") and who carelessly squanders away

Weili's dowry. He gambles recklessly, rapes a servant who later dies in a botched abortion, beds a mistress in Weili's room, and beats his infant daughter into retardation and death. A cowardly pilot who turns tail at the glimpse of an enemy fighter, he is a swaggerer and bully, good only for molesting nurses and shooting a poor farmer's pig that is blocking his road. In crashing a jeep (bought with Weili's money), Wen Fu loses an eye and metaphorically takes on his true aspect, a cannibalistic Cyclops. In the character of Wen Fu, Amy Tan successfully epitomizes all the heinous traits of the male. Almost as vile as Fyodor Dostoevsky's father Karamazov, Wen Fu is more hateful than Alice Walker's Mr. Albert because he is irredeemable. During her marriage to this brute, Weili endures the sufferings of a Griselda, but Weili is no unquestioning saint and consequently grows in awareness, independent judgment, and, finally, rebelliousness. When Wen Fu humiliates her...

"*The Kitchen God's Wife*" focuses on Weili "Winnie" Jiang's attempt to narrate her life in China in a culture that denigrates females to her forty-year-old American-born daughter Pearl so that her daughter will understand and appreciate how her mother's experiences have forget her identity. For example, the Chinese culture taught Winnie that a married woman is expected to defer to her husband's opinions and preferences even to the point of submitting to depraved sexual abuse. Chinese law even supported her husband's unilateral right to control his wife's actions and to retain custody of his son, to the point of imprisoning Winnie because she ran away from her brutal husband and sent her son north, where he...

Like Tan's previous novel, "*The Joy Luck Club*", "*The Kitchen God's Wife*" presents the life of a woman in China as one without legal rights or human dignity.

Whether poor, like Winnie's mother, or the daughter of a rich man, like Winnie, women are treated as little more than possessions. Without legal protection and opportunities for financial independence, a life of starvation and destitution was the fate of a woman in China prior to the communist takeover. In "*The Kitchen God's Wife*", the narratives of several characters depict harrowing choices.

Winnie's mother, a "replacement" of a second wife, a doubly ignominious situation in the polygamous household of a rich merchant, preferred to abandon her child and join a revolutionary group. Similarly, Winnie's cousin Peanut, married by her parents to a hermaphrodite, prefers to jeopardize her life by joining the communist underground. The most tragic story is that of Little Yu, who preferred suicide to being the wife of a wealthy, mentally deficient man.

Finally, Winnie Louie, the protagonist, announces at her trial for being a disobedient wife that she prefers sleeping on a concrete floor in a prison cell to returning to a husband who enjoyed humiliating her. Throughout these narratives, Tan is dramatizing the need to change religious, social, political, and economic structures that strip women of the right to participate in the decisions that govern their lives.

One of the main concerns of the women's movement has been to discover whether women can communicate their needs in male-dominated literary forms or whether they need alternate ones. Out of such studies as "Women's Ways of Knowing" (1986), by Mary Field Belenky and "Revising the Word" and "The World" (1993), edited by Vèvè A. Clark, psychologists and feminist literary critics have identified the narrative as the form females prefer for learning and expression because it presents the voice and the issues important to women. The effective use of narrative in "The Kitchen God's Wife" to express the voice and the feelings of Winnie Louie and her daughter Pearl and to present issues significant to women attests the validity of the research done in this field.

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