

## A MYTH REVISED: TRACING A FEMALE HERITAGE THROUGH THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER DYAD IN AMY TAN'S *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE*.

Lanurenla

Department of English, Fazl Ali College, Mokokchung – 798601, Nagaland.

Received: 15 March 2015

---

### Abstract

In the critical literature of mothers and daughters, the mother has always been portrayed as the “other woman” in relation to the “other child”. Even when there were stories of mothers and daughters, as far back as the beginning of history, critical literature has been occupied with patriarchy. It is only in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries that women writers have taken up the challenge of representing the “other woman” as “mother” and the “other child” as “daughter”. Amy Tan’s novels deal with mother-daughter relationships. This paper is an attempt to trace the historical devaluation of the female ancestor in literature from the position of a venerated ‘deity’ to a voiceless ‘woman’ without a story of her own.

**Keywords:** Myth, History, Female, Heritage, Patriarchy, Silence, Maternal, Ancestor, Mother-Daughter, Reconciliation, Healing

---

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California on February 19, 1952. She grew up in Fresno, Oakland, Berkeley, and the suburbs of the San Francisco Bay Area. Her father was educated in Beijing and immigrated to America in 1947 and became a Baptist minister, and her mother, forced to leave behind three children from a previous marriage, immigrated to the U.S. in 1949 shortly after the communists took control of China. Her father and older brother died from brain tumours when she was fourteen, and soon after this tragedy, Amy, her mother, and her younger brother moved to Europe, where Amy graduated from high school in Montreux, Switzerland, in 1969.

In 1985, Tan wrote the story “Rules of the Game” for a writing workshop, and the story was incorporated into *The Joy Luck Club* as part of Waverly Jong’s story. *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) was her first work of fiction, and it was in the *New York Times* bestseller list for longer than any other book in that year. It was a finalist for the National Reviewers’ Award for fiction and the Commonwealth Club Gold Award, and it won the L.A. Times Book Award in 1989. Her other books, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1996), *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001), and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) have also appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Her latest book, *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) won the Goodreads Choice Award for best historical fiction. She has also written essays compiled in *The Opposite*

of *Fate* (2003) and two children's books, *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994).

### Literature of Matrilineage

The tradition of matrilineal discourse as a part of the feminist movement has been gathering momentum in the last fifteen to twenty years. The characteristic features of the "literature of matrilineage" identified in Nan Bauer Maglin's schema are:

1. the recognition by the daughter that her voice is not entirely her own;
2. the importance of trying to really see one's mother in spite of or beyond the blindness and skewed vision that growing up together causes;
3. the amazement and humility about the strength of our mothers;
4. the need to recite one's matrilineage, to find a ritual to get back there and preserve it;
5. and still, the anger and despair about the pain and the silence borne and handed on from mother to daughter.

Many contemporary women writers are engaged in the literature of matrilineage and are exploring the lives of their historical mothers and grandmothers in order to establish a female heritage and a female future. While addressing a group of women in 1929, Virginia Woolf said, "We think back through our mothers if we are women." Adrienne Rich also talks about how the female writers make a journey into "the cratered night of female memory" in order to throw light into the darkness surrounding female history and to trace her beginnings so that what has been lost can be retrieved, regenerated and retold. This is true of many African American and Chinese American women writers. Maxine Hong Kingston ignited this literary fervour among Asian American women writers with her bestselling novel, *The Woman Warrior* (1976). While many questions about culture, identity, gender, 'oriental fantasy' arise in such writings, what can be identified as a universal issue is that of the female expression about herself and her memories. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, we find a mother who "attempts to speak for herself even while she knows that her story is unspeakable."<sup>1</sup> Here, the "other woman" is given a voice and a plot of her own. Susan Koppelman also observes that most women writers frame their narrative around the relationship between a mother and a daughter: "Women of every race, ethnicity...write stories about mothers and daughters, and the similarities among the stories are greater than the differences

---

<sup>1</sup> Hirsh, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1989, p.3

because what we share as women, at least in terms of this primary relationship, is more than whatever else divides us.”<sup>2</sup>

### Amy Tan and the Literature of Matrilineage

In an interview, Amy Tan talks about how she wanted to write about her mother and her grandmother and bring back those memories as a process of soul-searching. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Tan takes the reader on a historical journey to China and back to America through the stories of her two female characters- Winnie and Pearl. In a much larger scale, the mother, Winnie becomes a vehicle for recreating the ancient myth of the 'Kitchen God' so as to subvert the dominant patriarchal notion that only men deserve to be venerated as God. A recollection of the myth of the 'Kitchen God' is a symbolic journey to the past in order to search for a lost tradition- that of a maternal lineage and a powerful female heritage- which can be reclaimed through literature.

“In China long time ago,” I hear my mother say, “there was a rich farmer named Zhang, such a lucky man. Fish jumped in his river, pigs grazed his land, ducks flew around his yard as thick as clouds. And that was because he was blessed with a hardworking wife named Guo. She caught his fish and herded his pigs. She fattened his ducks, doubled all his riches, year after year. Zhang had everything he could ask for- from the water, the earth, and the heavens above.

“But Zhang was not satisfied. He wanted to play with a pretty, carefree woman named Lady Li. One day he brought this pretty woman home to his house, made his good wife cook for her. When Lady Li later chased his wife out of the house, Zhang did not run out and call to her, ‘Come back, my good wife, come back.’

“Now he and Lady Li were free to swim in each other's arms. They threw money away like dirty dirt water. They slaughtered ducks just to eat a plate of their tongues. And in two years' time, all of Zhang's land was empty, and so was his heart. His money was gone, and so was pretty Lady Li, run off with another man.

“Zhang became a beggar, so poor he wore more patches than whole cloth on his pants. He crawled from the gate of one household to another, crying, ‘Give me your moldy grain!’

“One day, he fell over and faced the sky, ready to die. He fainted, dreaming of eating the winter clouds blowing above him. When he opened his eyes again, he found the clouds had turned to

---

Koppelman, Susan. Intro to *Between Mothers and Daughters: Stories across a Generation*. The Feminist Press, The City University of New York, 1985 p. XV



smoke. At first he was afraid he had fallen down into a place far below the earth. But when he sat up, he saw he was in a kitchen, near a warm fireplace. The girl tending the fire explained that the lady of the house had taken pity on him-she always did this, with all kinds of people, poor or old, sick or in trouble.

“What a good lady!” cried Zhang. “Where is she, so I can thank her?” The girl pointed to the window, and the man saw a woman walking up the path. Ai-ya! That lady was none other than his good wife Guo!

“Zhang began leaping about the kitchen looking for some place to hide, then jumped into the Kitchen fireplace just as his wife walked in the room.

“Good wife Guo poured out many tears to try to put the fire out. No use! Zhang was burning with shame and, of course, because of the hot roaring fire below. She watched her husband’s ashes fly up to heaven in three puffs of smoke. Wah!

“In heaven, the Jade Emperor heard the whole story from his new arrival. ‘For having the courage to admit you were wrong,’ the Emperor declared, ‘I make you Kitchen God, watching over everyone’s behavior. Every year, you let me know who deserves good luck, who deserves bad.’

“From then on, people in China knew Kitchen God was watching them. From his corner in every house and every shop, he saw all kinds of good and bad habits spill out: generosity and greediness, a harmonious nature or a complaining one. And once a year, seven days before the new year, Kitchen God flew back up the fireplace to report whose fate deserved to be changed, better for worse, or worse for better.” (KGW pp. 59-61)

In this myth, the ironical position of the female Chinese ancestor is demonstrated by the fact that Zhang, for all his unfaithfulness and meanness is converted into a God, while Guo is not immortalized although she tried to put out the fire that burned Zhang with her own tears. This implies that the story of the self-sacrificing and hardworking woman is lost to history since she lives within the framework of a patriarchal society which will uphold only ‘his’ story and not ‘her’ story.

The popular Chinese myth of the ‘Kitchen God’ is a similar story. The Kitchen God was once a simple, poor and unsuccessful mason who failed to succeed in any of his ventures. There came a time when he had to sell his own wife to another man in order to keep himself alive. A woman’s value was not worth a man’s one-day meal. As chance would have it, he happened to work for his wife’s husband. He did not recognize his wife but his wife ‘had him much in mind’.



She decided to help him discreetly by baking him some sesame cakes with coins inside each of them. She gave him the cakes as he departed. On the way, the husband stopped at a wayside teahouse. He met another traveller who requested him to part with one of his cakes. The man bit into the cake and found the money. Without revealing what he had found he bought all the cakes from the husband for a modest amount. The husband gladly sold the cakes, thinking himself lucky to have got such a handsome amount for a few cakes, 'in accordance with his characteristic ill-fortune'. When he learnt later what his wife had tried to do for him, he killed himself, thinking that there was 'no point in his continued existence'. When he reached Heaven, he was rewarded by the Ruler for his honesty and goodness and was appointed the Kitchen God.<sup>3</sup>

Tan has revised this myth not only to inscribe the suffering and pain of Winnie, the Chinese female ancestor, and to look at the wife as 'subject' rather than 'object', but also to explore the possibilities of establishing a culture of positive relationship between mothers and daughters without ambivalence. In the ancient Chinese myth, the Kitchen God was once a simpleton who thought that he was justified in selling his wife to another man when he could no longer sustain his life. In Tan's revised myth, the Kitchen God is a man whose infidelity is justified because he is a man. In both the versions, the wife's value diminishes under patriarchal narratives though the wives in both the myths try to save the husbands- the former from being burnt alive and the latter from poverty. Both wives' attempts fail and the husbands die. In the source version, the husband is rewarded for his 'goodness' and 'honesty' and in Tan's version, he is made into a deity for his 'courage' in admitting his faults. In both versions, the wife's story is absent. Who knows what kind of feelings she carried in her when she was sold off? Who cares about her pain in watching her husband living with another woman leaving her to do all the household work? Why isn't she rewarded for her 'sacrifices' to provide for her family?; her 'courage' in trying to save her husband; her 'goodness' for returning good for evil? Why isn't she given the space to narrate what she went through either as a sold-off wife or as a betrayed wife?

The fate of the kitchen God's wife symbolizes the fate of the ancestral Chinese woman in particular and that of women in general. In China, according to Winnie, the fate of a woman ancestor was like that of "a chicken in a cage, mindless, never dreaming of freedom, but never worrying when your neck might be chopped off." (KGW, p. 399) Throughout history, the Chinese woman has been regarded as disposable property in spite of her crucial role in maintaining the

---

<sup>3</sup> Christie, Anthony. *Library of the World's Myths and Legends: Chinese Mythology*. 1968. Published by Newness Books. P. 104-105

family line through childbearing. Ironically, her childbearing ability would turn her into a liability for the husband and the entire family if she fails to bear a son, thereby branding her as a “detachable appendage”; to be easily replaced by another woman who could produce a male heir.

The narrative of the novel belongs to two characters- the mother, Winnie, and the daughter, Pearl, both talking alternately in the first person. Winnie is a Chinese immigrant who has lived a greater part of her life in China. Now, she lives in Chinatown, San Francisco. She co-owns a flower shop called Ding Ho Flower Shop on Rose Alley in Chinatown with “Auntie Helen”. Her late husband had served as a pastor in the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco. Pearl, the daughter, lives in San Jose, a hundred miles away from her mother with her Caucasian husband Phil Brandt, a doctor, and their two daughters Cleo and Tessa. She works as a speech and language clinician with the local school district.

The characters in the daughter’s narrative are confined to just two families, the Kwongs and the Louies. The Kwongs consist of Pearl’s Aunt Helen, Uncle Henry and three cousins - Mary, Frank and Bao-bao. The Louies are Pearl, her parents, and her brother Samuel. Two contrasting incidents- one of celebration (Bao-bao’s engagement party), and the other of mourning (Grand auntie Du’s funeral)-introduce us to their familial relations and affiliations on one hand, and their present situations in America on the other hand. These two families were considered the ‘whole family’ for as long as Pearl could remember but they are not blood relations. Winnie’s brother happens to be the first husband of Auntie Helen so they are related by marriage (this was what Pearl had been told and had believed since childhood).

As in most of her novels there are unprecedented twists and turns regarding certain incidents and relationships of one character to another. As the novel comes to a close we begin to realize that the relationships we had become familiar with are not true at all. For instance, Pearl realizes only later that Auntie Helen is not really her aunt and that her real name is Hulan. She is not even the first wife of her uncle. She is not related to her at all except for the fact that she and her mother shared the past. They had met in the spring of 1937 in Hangchow, where their husbands finished their training at an “American-style“ air force school. Pearl knows her mother as Winnie Louie and she does not realize until the middle of the novel that her mother is also Jiang Weili. Again Pearl finds out that she is not the daughter of Jimmy Louie but of Wen Fu.

Wen Fu, who at first appears to be a handsome gentleman, turns out to be a sexual sadist who uses his dead brother’s diploma to become an officer in the Nationalist air force. He delights

in humiliating Winnie. He refuses to take his sick daughter to a doctor because he does not want to disturb his card game. But when the child dies he puts the blame on Winnie. He even brings a concubine to the house and then discards her when she becomes pregnant. He misuses his wife's dowry money and forces her to turn over the remaining money to him. Winnie is stripped of her dignity by the time she finds a way to run away from him. When she finally manages to escape, Wen Fu remains a hero in the eyes of the world while his wife is believed to be seduced and corrupted by a lecherous American. Winnie is branded a prostitute who is "crazy for American sex". Underneath, she is a psychologically and physically abused woman who has lost her last shred of dignity.

Thus the *Kitchen God's Wife* can be studied as a postmodern novel because of its quality of disorientation. The pattern of multiple mistaken identities and sharp turn of events is a way of defamiliarizing what we seem to know at first. It is a pattern that is suggestive of the idea that things and people are not what they actually seem to be. There are multiple undercurrents underneath the literality of the narrative. This is also true of the relationship between the mother and the daughter. What, on the surface level, appears to be a broken-down relationship is actually connected by a strong bond that ties mother and daughter through generations.

Tan draws attention towards what lies underneath and attempts a fresh look at things. The narrative of the patriarchy distorts and misrepresents the actuality. What is actually the 'Kitchen God' is not a God at all. He is a man without honour and dignity. The actual God is the wife- Guo- who possesses the compassionate ability to forgive all injustices done to her. She is a magnanimous character worthy to be worshipped. At the concluding part of her story, Tan reverses the patriarchal notion that the 'honour' of men is more important than the 'dignity' of women. She also retrieves the ancient power of women thereby transforming her story into a metanarrative of the gendered 'other', whose representation had for ages been on the periphery and whose silence had made her almost invisible. It is when women like Guo and Winnie break their silence that their voices are validated. They are no longer branded as 'prostitutes' to save the 'honour of men; or will they be considered inferior beings who have to bear the abuse of men in order to remain in the good books of such Gods as the 'Kitchen God'.

Interestingly, many women scholars and women writers are finding other paths to their female ancestors. Books, novels, essays, articles, poems, plays, films and television, conferences and courses are dedicated to this search for 'her' story. Much of these works trace a mother-daughter relationship "minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy".<sup>4</sup> There is wave of



new courage and hope, and that is an “embracing of the maternal past.” This is a very brave attempt to retrace history, in order to make history; to identify a strength which requires the act of revision.

In “The Muse as Medusa,” Karen Elias-Button explains that even in contemporary literature the study of mother-daughter relationships is an examination of the past: “The process of reclaiming the mother involves, in part, an historical reaching-back to the lives women have lived before us, to find there the sense that our experience is rooted in a strength that has managed to survive the centuries.”<sup>5</sup> The effort of many women writers is to put their new-found energy towards erecting “new stones and inscribing them with the lost names.” Many voices are coming forward to fill the silence. The mother-daughter relationship has become central to feminist scholarship.

Women are now consciously exploring the previously unconscious bonds that have tied them to both their real as well as their historical mothers and grandmothers. In relation to this there is a growing body of literature of matrilineage; women are writing about their female heritage and their female future. While this is not a totally new subject for literature, it is a new passion for the women of this generation, a passion based on the feminist movement and new theory about women, history, and literature.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout history women’s story has been much neglected and there is the possibility that the ancestral mother’s story may be lost altogether if the daughters do not take pains to inscribe them in the memory of this patriarchal world as Davidson and Broner has done:

When we seek the literature of mothers and daughters, we are looking for a lineage not traced in any genealogy. We are tracing our roots back to ancient mothers whose origins are the earth itself but whose traces are as dust. They have no names throughout history, these mothers and daughters. Changelings, they are listed at birth and on tombstones without their conceiver’s name, born and buried as daughter/wife/mother.<sup>7</sup>

Tan is one among the many female writers who answers Marianne Hirsch’s questions-“... I am asking not only where the stories of women are in men’s plots, but where the stories of mothers are in the plots of sons and daughters. I am asking that we try to examine those stories.”

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> Elias-Button, Karen. “The Muse as Medusa” in Introduction to *The Lost Tradition, Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York. 1980. Eds., Cathy N. Davidson and E.M.Broner, p. 201

<sup>6</sup> Maglin, Nan Bauer. “Don’t never forget the bridge that you crossed over on”: The Literature of Matrilineage.

<sup>7</sup> Eds., Cathy N. Davidson and E.M.Broner, in Introduction to *The Lost Tradition, Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York. 1980.

In her discussion of the silence of Jocasta in the Oedipus story, Hirsch comments that the mother is represented by “silence, negation, damnation, suicide. The story of her desire, the account of her guilt, the rationale for her complicity with a brutal husband, the material of the body which gave birth to a child she could not keep and which then conceived with that child other children—*this* story cannot be filled in because we have no framework within which to do it *from her perspective*.”<sup>8</sup> Similar to this analogy, the mother in Tan’s novel remains, in a man’s world, that wife, that woman, that mother, or that daughter.

Tan’s work contributes to the attempt to reverse the absence and silence of the maternal story that has prevailed since Biblical times. By telling Pearl that she is not at all like her father Wen Fu, Winnie is discarding the male heritage and embracing the maternal one. The mother is armed with authority and legitimacy. Robb Forman Dew is right in saying that *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is an ambitious novel since here Tan attempts to show the mother’s role in retrieving the initial position from devalued woman to a powerful and venerated deity as in the myths of ancient literature. Her attempt recalls to memory that there was a time in ancient history and literature when women were bestowed the title of goddesses or “cultic celebrant” and “daughters were valued as much as sons.”

In her discussion of mother-daughter relationships in the ancient Near East Literature, Judith Ochshorn talks about the intensity of the divine mother-daughter bond which is devoid of conflicts. Ochshorn reveals that nowhere in Ancient Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian or Canaanite literature, do we find conflicts between divine mothers and daughters. There are instances in the legends where conflicts arise between fathers and sons or fathers and daughters in their struggle for power or divine authority. But there appears to be no such power-struggle between mothers and daughters. Accounts of unusually close mother-daughter relationships appear in some of the earliest literature of the Ancient Near East. At times, the divine mother-child relationship predominates, and where the child is female, the nature of the bond between mother and daughter is pictured as incomparably intense.<sup>9</sup> As Ochshorn further states:

---

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1989, p.3

Ochshorn, Judith. “Mothers and Daughters in Ancient Near Eastern Literature,” in *The Lost Tradition, Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, edited by Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York. 1980, p.5

By way of contrast, younger female divinities do not usurp the powers of their goddess-mothers in quite the same fashion.... On the contrary, the literary treatment of mothers and daughters in this early time most often describes their straightforward, unreserved, unambivalent love for each other.”<sup>10</sup>

Elaborating this point, she draws our attention to Mesopotamian literature where “one of the earliest and most passionate statements of female filial devotion” is to be found in *The Exaltation of Inanna* by Enheduanna (2300 B.C.). She was a poet, high priestess, theologian and hymnographer, who served in the temples of Akkad. This hymn, says Ochsorn, “extols the power of the Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna; narrates Inanna’s role among civilized people; establishes Enheduanna’s identification with her surrogate mother Inanna; and concludes with a splendid celebration of Inanna’s cultic primacy in the city-states of Ur and Uruk, the ancient centers of Sumerian religion.”<sup>11</sup>

The interesting depiction of Inanna in this hymn is that her “sexual aspect” is minimized and instead she is pictured as “autonomous and awesome in her power.” Rather than celebrating the divine mother as a source of stability and fertility, Enheduanna celebrates her “as the awful goddess of war, the personification and deification of the raging, destructive forces in nature which neither deities nor people can withstand, and the judge and punisher of people, dispensing to them their just deserts...”<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the intensity of the mother-daughter bond is revealed in the Demeter-Kore myth (though this time it is the mother who assumes the greater role) which is enacted and reenacted in one of the most enduring and widespread rituals in the ancient world, the ‘Eleusinian Mysteries’. Demeter’s daughter Kore was abducted and then raped by Hades who carried her off to the underworld to become his august queen, Persephone. Demeter was so bitterly angered that she refused to perform her duties as the goddess of agriculture. The earth becomes barren and humanity is threatened with starvation until her daughter is restored to her.

Later on, polytheistic belief was superseded by monotheistic belief. The “patriarchal” society was replaced by the Bible which preached worship of one God and men were ascribed a special and closer relation to God than women. Women were identified closely with their normal bodily functions and sexuality rather than to their spiritual powers:

---

10 Ibid

11 Ibid, p. 7.

12 Ibid, p. 8.



However, within the parameters of the moral and spiritual universe of monotheism, while women are shown as recipients of divine judgement and grace, they also are often described, in comparison to men, as less capable of moral judgement and more tied to the material than the moral or spiritual aspects of existence. At times, female sexuality symbolizes the community's idolatry or is shown as endangering the pursuit of righteousness by men.... This ambivalence toward women is carried over into views of their importance as mothers.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, Ochshorn tells us that even the misogyny of Biblical times did not destroy the bond of love between Ruth and Naomi:

Ruth provides for Naomi in her old age. Naomi, in turn, provides a husband for her daughter-in-law through the custom of her people, levirate marriage. And Ruth is rewarded for her love for Naomi with status explicitly comparable to that held by Leah and Rachel, "who together build the house of Israel" (Ruth, 4:11), for though she bears but one son, he is the grandfather of David (Ruth, 4:17). Interestingly, the action of the book of Ruth is initiated by women; the central result – the birth of David's ancestor – issues from the love of "mother" and "Daughter" for each other...<sup>14</sup>

Thus mother and daughter bring comfort to one another, as is implied by Naomi's Hebrew name, "Nechama," which means "consolation".

However, in subsequent literature, the Greeks repressed the "awe for the mother-goddess" and forcefully turned the once powerful goddesses "into molds." Professors Ida H. Washington and Carol E. W. Tobol suggest that the myth of rape and seduction of goddesses (such as Persephone, Leda, or Europa) was one of the "principal ways the Greek invaders dealt with their predecessors' goddesses, thereby bringing about their 'death' as protecting, powerful deities."<sup>15</sup> Since then women have been oppressed and suppressed by a patriarchal world. Bonds between mothers and their daughters have been severed to a certain extent. Women are made orphans like Winnie. They are abandoned by their mothers. They no longer grow under the protection and guidance of their wiser, older ancestors. Unlike Ruth, Winnie had no "Nechama" to guide her through the tough decisions of life: "So you see, I did not have a mother to tell me who to marry, who not to marry." In order to forget the disgrace that her mother had brought upon the family, Winnie was packed off by her own father to an island upriver from Shanghai, and brought up by an uncle and his two wives.

13 Ibid, p. 10-11

14 Ibid, p. 12.

Tan shows that, like Winnie, there is a little girl in the heart of every woman, young or old, waiting, hoping for the mother to come and lift her up “high” to celebrate the privilege of being a daughter, the beauty of being a woman and the uniqueness of being a mother. Once again Rich’s remark complements Tan’s message, “The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities.... *To refuse to be a victim....* As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours.”<sup>16</sup>

In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Winnie Louie replaces the Kitchen God with the goddess ‘Lady Sorrowfree’ because the Kitchen God is determined by her to be an unfit god for her daughter’s altar, as well as the altar of her heart. The Kitchen God is unfit because he became a god despite his mistreatment of his good wife. Looking at him smiling down at Winnie’s unhappiness reminded her of Wen Fu. She “took his picture out of the frame” and threw it over the stove. She watched the fire eating up his smug, smiling face and in her mind she could hear the Kitchen God’s Wife shouting, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” A porcelain figure is taken from a storeroom where she has been placed as a “mistake” and is made into a goddess for Pearl, Lady Sorrowfree. Now Winnie can celebrate Lady Sorrowfree:

I heard she once had many hardships in her life.... But her smile is genuine, wise, and innocent at the same time. And her hand, see how she just raised it? That means she is just about to speak, or maybe she is telling you to speak. She is ready to listen. She understands English. You could tell her everything.... But sometimes, when you are afraid, you can talk to her. She will listen. She will wash away everything sad with her tears. She will use her stick to chase away everything bad. See her name: Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world. (KGW, p. 532)

Together mother and daughter light three sticks of incense. As the smoke rises upwards, their hopes too rise “higher and higher” taking their wishes to heaven. The mother has become a strong woman who desires to give her daughter a goddess to replace the god which had undeservingly occupied the altar of the female ancestor. Life is like a rally where the mother hands the baton to the daughter. Winnie has run her course. She has crossed many difficult trials that are not of her making but simply a difficult terrain that the China of her time had laid down for her. Her daughter must know of every step of her treacherous trial but at the same time her daughter, if she can help it, must not undergo the same trial. She will bestow upon her the same courage and hope that has navigated and propelled her towards the finishing line so that her

---

16 Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976, p.244.

daughter will be able to battle through her own difficulties and hardships. She will be like Lady Sorrowfree, teaching her daughter to achieve happiness over bitterness, having no regrets. The mother's history must be told but not repeated. "This gift of lady Sorrowfree is symbolic of their bonding; this goddess has all the characteristics of the nurturing, caring, listening mother. Her imperfections lie in her creation; experiences make her. She has none of the characteristics of the Kitchen God."<sup>17</sup>

In this novel, Tan "aims to elevate the kitchen God's wife to her rightful place in history."<sup>18</sup> The woman has suffered enough. She has been ignored for too long like Winnie, "Nobody worshipped me for living with Wen Fu. I was like that wife of the Kitchen God. Nobody worshipped her either. He got all the excuses. He got all the credit. She was forgotten," (KGW, p. 322). Tan does not want us to forget our mothers and her legacy of love, forgiveness, comfort and consolation.

Tan wants to provide a fair hearing for the ancestor by compelling Winnie Louie to narrate her bitter past, "I will call Pearl long, long distance. Cost doesn't matter, I will say ... .And then I will start to tell her, not what happened, but why it happened, how it could not be any other way." (KGW, p. 100) The mother represents all women ancestors of China and disclosing her secret implies revealing her weaknesses as well as her strengths. Winnie's story is much more than it seems to the reader. It is a story that shows all daughters that mother is not altogether responsible for their ambivalent relationship; that though mother may appear full of dour aphorisms, prematurely cranky, and intrusive she is a product of things she could do nothing about. For this reason, her daughter must listen to her story.

Marie Booth Foster recognizes the importance of self-exploration, appreciation of cultures and knowledge of one's history. Each must come to grips with being her mother's daughter. Because of their different historical backgrounds, both mother and daughter, specially the daughter, feel that the mother stands outside the daughter's life. Ironically it is the revelation of the mother's long-hidden history that will bridge the gap between them and end that feeling of antagonism as it did for Winnie and Pearl after they had shared their secrets. Winnie had just told Pearl "the tragedy of her life," but they were laughing together like small children. Pearl too experiences a silent rush of peace after she tells her mother her own tragedy, that she is afflicted with multiple sclerosis. The questions her mother threw at her and the fuss she made over her ailment was no

17 Foster, M. Marie Booth. "Voice, Mind, Self: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*," in *Women of Colour: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century*.

18 *Literature*, edited by Elizabeth Brown- Guillory, University of Texas Press, 1996, pp. 208-27. Yglesias, Helen. "The Second Time Around," in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. VII, No. 12, September, 1991, pp. 1, 3.



longer irritating. Rather she began to like it because now she knew this was her mother's way of comforting her:

.... She glared at me."How can you say this? How can you think this way? What do you call this disease again? Write it down. Tomorrow I am going to Auntie Du's herb doctor. And after that, I will think of a way." She was rummaging through her junk drawer for a pencil, a piece of paper. I was going to protest, to tell her she was working herself up in a frenzy for nothing. But all of a sudden I realized: I didn't want her to stop. I was relieved in a strange way. Or perhaps relief was not the feeling. Because the pain was still there. She was tearing it away – my protective shell, my anger, my deepest fears, my despair. She was putting all these into her own heart, so that I could finally see what was left. Hope," (KGW p. 515)

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, while analyzing maternal absences in the nineteenth century literature see in "motherlessness" the sign of female powerlessness. They argue that maternal silence and absence rob the heroine of important role models for her development, of the matriarchal power, reminiscent of Demeter and Clytemnestra, which could facilitate her own growth into womanhood. Pearl, the metaphorically abandoned child finds her mother. Nonetheless, she does not assume the Chinese identity totally. Neither does she embrace the mother's beliefs. She is a second-generation Chinese American with her own views, principles and beliefs but she is a more complete person for having shared her mother's history. As Judith Caesar writes in her essay, "When, at the end, she [Pearl] accepts her mother's herbal cures and the offering to Lady Sorrowfree, she does so as an acceptance of her mother's solicitude, not her beliefs. She hasn't found a "Chinese identity"...instead she has found a closer relationship with her mother and an insight into the seemingly conflicting layers of reality in the world around her..."<sup>19</sup>

In this story of struggle and survival, both mother and daughter seek healing- the mother from her haunting past- abandoned by her mother under mysterious circumstances as a young girl of six, marriage to a sadistic man who abused her physically and psychologically, heartbreak over a stillborn child and two children dying young, a patriarchal society that allowed little room for escape from domestic violence, the ravages of war, her flight to America and the love of a good man- and the daughter from her pain upon the loss of her father, from the ambivalent relationship with her mother whose life is surrounded by secrets and the unpredictable disease, multiple sclerosis. After they have revealed their secrets, they prepare to visit China. For Winnie, it will be

---

19 Caesar, Judith. "Patriarchy, Imperialism, and Knowledge in *The Kitchen God's Wife*," in *North Dakota Quarterly* Vol. 4, No. 4, Fall, 1994-1995, pp. 164-74.

a journey of memory and forgetting. For Pearl, the journey promises a miraculous healing. But Penelope Fitzgerald warns us, we are not encouraged to think that Pearl will be cured of the "disease".<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, of one thing we are assured, revealing the truth has healed her heart as well as her mother's.

Bringing Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* side by side with the hymn of Enheduanna, we can draw parallels in the stories by focusing on the way Inanna is celebrated and the way Lady Sorrowfree is restored. The idea is to remove the undeserving Kitchen God from the historical and cultural altar and replace it with a goddess who has all the attributes of a mother; to give her due respect, love and honour; to understand her past secrets; to restore her to her original glory, because that is what she deserves. Only then will she be able to pass down that glory to her daughter. When mother and daughter are tied together by the same blood and heritage, the daughter will no longer suffer the pangs of the abandoned child and will respond positively to her legacy. Here, like Enheduanna, Tan is glorifying the Chinese ancestor by restoring her to her rightful place as goddess so that both mother and daughter can come to reconciliation and enjoy that "straightforward, unreserved, unambivalent love" that Ochshorn talks about.

Women writers before Tan have explored ancient myths of 'mother' and 'women' as a form of self-discovery. Elias Button refers to reaching out for myth as a "complex process in which the current difficulties are transcended through a recovery of the mythological past....involving not a relinquishment of ego development in the name of cyclicity and romantic unconsciousness but rather a reaching-back to the myths of the "mother" to find there the source of [their] own, specifically female, creative powers."<sup>i</sup> Thus, Tan's revised Chinese American mythology is a powerful tool for the Chinese American daughter to negotiate her ancestor's culture with her own and thereby find a space where both can stand together and look towards the future.

---

20 Fitzgerald, Penelope. "Luck Dispensers," in *London Review of Books*. vol. 13, No. 13, July 11, 1991, p.19.

i Elias-Button, Karen. "The Muse as Medusa" in *Introduction to The Lost Tradition, Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York. 1980. Eds., Cathy N. Davidson and E.M.Broner, p 193.

## Bibliography

### PRIMARY SOURCES

- Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. Vintage Contemporaries, Vintage Books. A Division of Random House, Inc. New York. 1989
- *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Ivy Books. New York. 1991
  - *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Flamingo. An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. 77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London. 1995
  - *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Ballantine Books. New York. 2001
  - *The Opposite of Fate*. Harper Perennial. An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers 77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London. 2003
  - *Saving Fish from Drowning*. Harper Perennial. An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers 77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London. 2005

### SECONDARY SOURCES

1. Angier, Carole. "Chinese Customs," in *New Statesman & Society*, Vol. 2, No. 56, June 30, 1989, p. 35.
2. Bell-Scott, Patricia, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Janet Sims-Wood, Miriam DeCosta-Willis, and Lucie Fultz, eds. *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters*. Beacon Press. Boston, 1991.
3. Caesar, Judith. "Patriarchy, Imperialism, and Knowledge in *The Kitchen God's Wife*," in *North Dakota Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 4, Fall, 1994-1995, pp. 164-74.
4. Cheng, Scarlet. "Your Mother is in Your Bones," in *Belles Lettres*, Vol. 4, No.4, Summer, 1989, p. 12.
5. Chen, Xiaomei. "Reading Mother's Tale- Reconstructing Women's Space in Amy Tan and Zhang Jie," in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol. 16 (Dec., 1994), pp. 111-132. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/495309>.
6. Chin, Frank, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, eds. *iiiiiiiiii An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*. Washington D.C. Howard University Press, 1974.
7. Chong, Denise. "Emotional Journeys Through East and West," in *Quill and Quire*, Vol. 55, No. 5, May 1889. P. 23.
8. Christie, Anthony. *Library of the World's Myths and Legends: Chinese Mythology*. 1968. Published by Newness Books.



9. Davidson, Cathy N., E.M. Broner, eds. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. New York, 1980.
10. Davis, Thadious M. "Alice Walker's Celebration of Self in Southern Generations," in *Women Writers of the Contemporary South*, edited by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, University Press of Mississippi, 1984, pp. 39-53.
11. Dew, Rob Forman. "Pangs of an Abandoned Child," in *New York Times Book Review*, June 16, 1991, p.9.
12. Dorris, Michael. "Mothers and Daughters," in *Chicago Tribune- Books*, March 12, 1989, pp.1,11.
13. Dunick, Lisa M.S. "The Silencing Effect of Canonicity.Authorship and the Written Word in Amy Tan's Novels," in *MELUS*, Thursday, June 22, 2006.
14. Foster, Marie Booth. "Voice, Mind, Self: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*," in *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Literature*, edited by Elizabeth Brown- Guillory, University of Texas Press, 1996, pp. 208-27.
15. Ghymn, Esther Mikyung. "Mothers and Daughters," in *Images of Asian American Women by Asian American Women Writers*, Peter Lang, 1995, pp. 11-36.
16. Gillespie, Elgy. "Amy, Angst, and the Second Novel," in *San Francisco Review of Books*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Summer, 1991, pp. 33-4.
17. Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
18. "Mothers and Daughters," in *SIGNS:Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Autumn 1981, 201-221.
19. Hume, Kathryn. "Amy Tan." *MELUS*. Thursday, December 22, 2005
20. Interview. © Copyright 1996-2005, <http://Bookreporter.com>.
21. Interview. June 28, 1996, Sun Valley Idaho.
22. Interview. November 2005, © Copyright 2005, Penguin Putnam.
23. Interview by Jami Edwards.© Copyright 1996-2009, <http://bookreporter.com>
24. Koppelman, Susan, ed. *Between Mothers & Daughters: Stories Across a Generation*, The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1985.
25. Painter, Charlotte. "In Search of a Voice," in *San Francisco Review of Books*, Summer, 1989, pp. 15-17.
26. "The Spirit Within. The Salon Interview: Amy Tan" <<http://www.salon1999.com/12nov1995/feature/Tan.html>. 15 April 1997>.

27. Wagner, Tamara S. "A Barrage of Ethnic Comparisons": Occidental Stereotypes in Amy Tan's Novels. *Critique*. Washington. Summer 2004. Vol. 45, Iss.4, p 435, 11 pp. <http://proquest.umi.com>
28. Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, San Diego, New York, London, 1983.
29. Yglesias, Helen. "The Second Time Around," in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. VIII, No. 12, September, 1991, pp. 1, 3.
30. Yvonne, Zipp. "A Life Recalled from China." *Christian Science Monitor*, 2/15/2001, vol. 93. Issue 57, p 20. <http://web.ebscohost.com>
31. Xu, Ben. "Memory and the ethnic self: Reading Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," in *MELUS*. Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring, 1994, pp. 3-18.