



RESEARCH PAPER

Healing the Haunted Memories and Wounded Past: An Analysis of
The Kitchen God's Wife by Amy Tan in the Light of Trauma
Literary Theory

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ABSTRACT

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This article interprets The Kitchen God's Wife by Amy Tan as a reproduction of the traumatic experiences of a Chinese American woman, Winnie who lives in a diasporic condition in United States. Drawing insight from the notions of trauma derived from the writings of Michell Balaev, the study unveils that the revealing of traumatic memories by Winnie to her daughter Pearl in connection with her troubled married life in China with her ex-husband Wen Fu and witnessing the violence during the Sino-Japanese war and WWII is a source of bringing the compatibility in their mutual relationship. The findings of this article also show that Winnie seeks to step out of the oppression paradigm and social injustice with a positive vision and her organized efforts for immigration to US and re-marriage with Louie is a healing process from her traumatic past life and the claim of her own power in the world.

Introduction

Chinese American writers hold a great importance among Asian American writers due to their notable literary works. They reflect the immigrant experiences and thoughts about the diasporic life as well as the Chinese cultural symbols, mythology and folklore in their works which bring considerable enlightenment in the description of cultural integration. The majority of these diaspora writers are the descendants of the first generation of immigrants. Among these writers, the literary work of Amy Tan has become famous in the recent times due to its depiction of traumatic past life as well as the immigrant and bicultural experiences. It is important to note that Tan was born in Oakland, California to Daisy Du Ching and John Yuehan Tan, the immigrants from China. As a prolific diaspora writer, Tan has extensively written on the lives of Chinese -Americans as well as the generational and cultural differences among the immigrants with a particular focus on the experiences of women. While, tracing the background of Chinese diaspora in US, it is evident that due to economic problems and effects of war, the mass immigration has happened after 1949 from China to America with a purpose to earn better livelihood. The Chinese American literature is usually discussed under the terms of Asian American literature. While, Amy Tan narrates the challenges of assimilation for the immigrants,

the differences of custom and traditions of homeland and host land as well as intergenerational struggles in her literary works. Similarly, Tan also exhibits the search for identity, sense of belongingness, struggle of the women in the patriarchal society and problematic family ties in the Asian American society. While, this research article is aimed at the exploration of the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan published in 1991 in terms of the dynamics of a Chinese American family with a Chinese mother Winnie and her American born daughter Pearl. It is important to highlight that the Chinese name of the mother of Pearl was Jiang Weili and her American name is Winnie. The particular focus of this research is on the investigation of traumatic experiences of Winnie in China which compelled her for immigration to US. In this regard, the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan has been analyzed in the light of concepts of trauma derived from the writings of and Michell Balaev.

Literature Review

While reviewing the related literature about the research already conducted on *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan, it is important to mention that Hsiao (2000) has highlighted that "Tan creates several kitchen scenes in which the older generation and the younger generation can share secrets, let out feelings, or argue with each other" (p.215). This is evident in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, when Auntie Helen shares her secrets with Pearl twice in that way which raises the curiosity of the readers. While, Caesar(2009) points out that Winnie "endures the most horrifying abuse from her brutal husband, Wen Fu, while traditional Chinese society not only fails to intervene but colludes in her victimization" (p.38). It is evident that Wen Fu was never satisfied with her and Jimmy Louie, a Chinese-American soldier appeared to rescue her. This implies to the fact that the novel depicts the misery of the women in the traditional Chinese society as compared to the enlightened American society. Similarly, Johnson (2013) is of the view that Amy Tan illustrates the common theme of mother-daughter antagonism and rectification. Her novel is a depiction of Chinese customs and tells the truths about the relationship that is not restricted to a single culture. The message of her work is not implied in the analysis of single detail but in the wide ranging narrative. In this way, quite similar to the mothers depicted in the works of Tan, her stories are intriguing for us through which she shares her interpersonal wisdom with the readers.

Correspondingly, Ramaswamy (2014) is of the view that in China, Winnie was helpless and unable to protect any of her children from the cruelties of her ex-husband Wen Fu. While, in America, "as a mother, she had the freedom and the capacity to save her daughter Pearl from the fate of her children born in China. As a typical Chinese housewife, she had no right to any choice" (Ramaswamy, 2014, p.6). The considerable mental and physical torture during her life with Wen Fu paves the way for her new life in America. But "feeling the need for recognition and empowerment, Winnie identifies herself with Guo and elevates the lady to the status of a deity, Lady Sorrow free. She gives the goddess an altar, making her quite independent of her husband" (Ramaswamy, 2014, p.6). In this way, from a frailed lady in China, she becomes a formidable matriarch in America filled with wisdom and foresight. Her adversity has considerably changed into a good fortune. Resultantly, the research studies conducted on *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan are mostly related to the social and cultural aspects while this research is aimed at the exploration of traumatic experiences of Winnie Louie in connection with her married life with her ex-husband Wen Fu and witnessing the horrors of war. The

sharing of her painful experiences with her daughter is helpful to mend the rift in their relationship as well as a new consciousness about her mother.

Theoretical Framework

It is interesting to note that the 20th century is characterized by wars, conflicts, revolutions and confusions. In this regard, the term, "Trauma" has attracted a great deal of attention and interest in the literary studies. It represents a critical approach of interpretation that enables new modes of reading and analysis. The term trauma was first emerged in the Cathy Caruth's book *Unexplained Experience: Trauma Narrative and history* published in 1996. As she opines that

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature--the way it was precisely not known in the first instance--returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth, 1996, p. 4).

Conversely, these notions are considered as an old model to approach trauma in literary field in the recent times. While, Michelle Balaev (2008) in her manuscript *Trends in Literary Trauma Theory* points out that the representation of trauma in a "novel indicates that traumatic experience disrupts the previous framework of reality and the protagonist must reorganize the self in relation to this view of reality" (p.162). Similarly, she also concentrates on the fact that "the trauma novel demonstrates that the reorganized self is relational and relative to a specific place that produces a specific articulation of a transformed identity" (p.163).

While, later on, Balaev has extended the ideas about trauma in her work *The Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* published in 2014 in which she points out that "trauma in literature must be read through a theoretical pluralism that allows for an understanding of trauma's variable representations that include yet move beyond the concept of trauma as pathological and unspeakable" (Balaev, 2014, p. iv). While, Balaev broadens the parameters of literary trauma theory and suggests that "extreme experience cultivates multiple responses and values. Trauma causes a disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time" (p. 4). Similarly, Balaev (2014) is of the view that "the mechanisms of trauma, how it is caused and perpetuated, and the possibilities for healing often depend upon social interconnections, through acts of witnessing or sympathy". (p.137). In the same way, she points out that the trauma fiction "usually explores trauma as the crucible of human survival and growth (p.148). Similarly, she is of the view that the "social networks can cause trauma, limit expression, or offer resources that provide avenues toward healing" (p.148). Thus, the three aspects of trauma are derived from the works of Michelle Balaev as the disruption and reorientation of consciousness and reorganized view of reality, the emergence of a specific articulation of a transformed identity and the avenues of healing of trauma. These aspects of trauma will be utilized to analyze *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan by focusing on the protagonist, Winnie in terms of her facing the domestic violence and witnessing the brutalities of war.

Material and Methods

The aim of this research article is to investigate the dynamics of trauma of domestic violence and war as represented in the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan, with a particular focus on Winnie, the protagonist and the main narrating voice of this novel. The study is qualitative and inductive in its approach and the research design employed is hermeneutic and interpretive for this purpose. Similarly, textual analysis has been employed as a research method.

Analysis

Starting from the analysis of the *Kitchen God's wife* by Amy Tan, it is pertinent to point out that Winnie moved to USA after getting rid of an abusive marriage with a Chinese man Wen Fu and to re-marry with an American man. She lives in America with her daughter Pearl and two grandchildren. The mother and daughter have a complex relationship but they have hidden certain secrets from each other. The daughter Pearl has hidden the secret of her malignant brain tumor while Winnie has not revealed her traumatic past to her daughter Pearl. At the request of her friend Helen, Winnie reveals her traumatic past life in China before her daughter Pearl. She mentions that she was raised by her uncle and his two wives due to the mysterious disappearance of her mother. Then, she was traditionally married to Wen Fu and her father gave her a large dowry as he was an educated and well established man. Winnie tells about the mother of Wen Fu, "She was the one who taught me how to be a good wife to her youngest son. This mother who spoiled him – she was the one who taught me how to be dutiful to a terrible person" (Tan, 1991, p. 106). From the stand point of the notions of trauma, it is evident that the reorientation of her consciousness and the reorganized view of reality lead her to point out the real basis of a patriarchal society where a wife is totally dependent on her husband and the real agents of her oppressions are evident in her traumatic memory. While, about the miseries of women in her society she says, "A woman always had to feel pain, suffer and cry, before she could feel love" (Tan, 1991, p. 106). Now the Winnie is empowered enough to display her inner world which was wounded and traumatized to the people around her. In this regard, her memories, flashbacks and introspection are colored by pain. In other words, it is a "state of mind which results from an injury. It is a fantasy which can be read as an articulation of trauma. It is a devastating and damaging experience. It is an experience lived belatedly at the level of its unspeakable truth" (Heidarizadeh, 2015, p.789). Winnie was trying her best to come up to the expectation of her husband Wen Fu but he was severely abusive in the relationship. She further says about Wen Fu; "My head and body would hurt as he told me about this woman and that woman, how good she was, how willing, how beautiful" (108). She was deeply hurt and distress as a result of physical and psychological torture as well as infidelity of her husband.

Similarly, Wen Fu as an army person was engaged in Sino-Japanese war as well. In this way, apart from trauma of domestic violence, the first-generation Chinese-American women were also facing the trauma of war as well. While Lim (2013) has pointed out that the Sino- Japanese War brings focus to a historical past directly experienced by first- generation Chinese American immigrants who impart the traumatic memories to their American born Children. For the second generation of Chinese American immigrants, the Sino-Japanese war is mere an incident in a foggy past story and experience of their parents before coming to America. In fact,

trauma resulted from war, poor living condition and cultural constraints in the pre-communist China forced the people to migrate to America with a wish to pursue an independent life free from upheavals.

While, He (2019) points out that, "healing trauma requires the transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory, which allows the sufferer to improvise around the fixed memory of the experience, and to integrate the traumatic memory into individual's own chronology of the past" (p. 133). It is important to point out that the second Sino-Japanese war continued from 1937 to 1945 which left a trauma for both the sides. While, Tan provides the autobiographical elements through the character of Winnie. As she says about the war, "Raped old women, married women, and little girls, taking turns with them, over and over again. Sliced them open with a sword when they were all used up. Cut off their fingers to take their rings" (Tan, 1991, p.152).It was the brutality which she witnessed along with the domestic troubles. In this regard Hunt (2010) is of the view "that people who are traumatised are more likely to pay more attention to, and be more perceptually aware of, environmental stimuli that remind them of the traumatic event than people who are not traumatized" (p.61).Winnie reveals these horrendous events which she kept in wrap for a long time. While, she remembers a Japanese air attack and says, "We were still running when the Japanese planes arrived, bombers and fighters, both kinds. From the ground, we could see them coming (Tan 368). In this way, Tan describes the certain part of the history of China through the character of Winnie during 1930s and 1940s.

As Adams (2003) points out that "along with advancing historical knowledge about the Sino Japanese War, *The Kitchen God's Wife* is valuable on an ethico-political front. Indeed, the representation of the Rape of Nanking in literature potentially represents the 300,000 dead Chinese civilians"(p.12).The novel mentions the movement of Japanese Army from Shanghai to Nanking as well as the bombing raids bringing catastrophe for the Chinese people. On the other hand, her traumatic domestic life with Wen Fu is still the same as she remembers a terrible night and says, "That night he was angry because I had danced with an American. Another pilot had joked to Wen Fu that perhaps the Yankee volunteers had conquered the women, as well as the Japanese"(p.392).In fact, Wen Fu and Winnie attend an American dance party along with the other Chinese pilots and their families. In the dance party, she is named as Winnie by Jimmy Louis who assigns English names to the other Chinese participants as well. She dances with Jimmiy Louie which makes Wen Fu angry. Resultantly, she is severely beaten and tortured by her husband Wen Fu. But there starts the crucial transformation in her life and she decides to leave the house of Wen Fu. Then her love with Jimmy Louie also emerges as a silver lining in her miserable life. It is a sort of rescue and solution to all of her problems and to get rid of an arrogant husband. As she tells, "We loved each other from the moment we met, that's why our two wills joined together to find each other."(Tan, 1991, p. 435).It is articulation of specific transformed identity after a traumatic period of domestic violence with Wen Fu. Now she understands the joyful experience of a right man for herself and says, "We said no words. He took my hands and held them firmly. And we both stood in the road, our eyes wet with happiness, knowing without speaking that we both felt the same way"(p. 442). This is the avenue of healing of her past traumatic life. In Jimmy Louie, she finds the tender affection and passionate love which was really missing in her life with Wen Fu.

As Manjula, Govindaraj and Manivannan (2019) point out that the characters of Amy Tan struggle in the construction of identity and over family relations as well as probing the connection between past and present. Tan in her novels highlights the individual and family aspects in connection with their ethnic heritage and cultural memory. The mother-daughter relationship portrayed in her novels are basically inspired by her own relationships with her mother in America. She reveals the complex familial bonds, generational as well as cultural differences. She is nurtured by the various elements of history, biography, imaginations and folk tales as well. Similarly, Winnie describes the great change in her life with the love of Jimmy Louie as she says, "Every morning when I woke up, he was already awake, looking at me, telling me that. There was a song he sang to me. "You Are My Sunshine." He sang it many times, every morning (Tan, 1991, p. 466). In her early life in China, Winnie had an identity which was marginalized by her culture. Although she was the daughter of a business tycoon, but she was less cared and loved in her house. After her marriage, she becomes the wife of a pilot and the mother Yiku and Danru. In fact, her roles are identified through her relationships defined by the society. But during the intensive troubling period of married life with Wen Fu, she starts questioning the status quo in her mind. Resultantly, her marriage collapses and she finds the true love of Jimmy Louie. On the other hand, her resistance is truly shown in the legal battle which she fights against Wen Fu in the court. As she says, "I told the judge, "My husband divorced me a long time ago, during the war, when he put a gun to my head and forced me to sign a divorce paper." (Tan, 1991, p. 477). It is interesting to note that Wen Fu appears as a villainous character with the passage of time and Winnie is becoming stronger and stronger. In a society where women were totally dependent on the males of their society, she creates an urge in herself to fight for a better future.

Correspondingly, with the arrival of Jimmy Louie, Winnie was courageous enough to respond strongly to the fraudulent persecution of Wen Fu. She valiantly fights a legal battle and tells that, "I said, how I could be accused of deserting my husband for another man, when my husband had divorced me and was now living with another woman?" (Tan, 1991, p.475). Throughout the narration of the traumatic episodes of her life, she reflects a gradual transformation from an uncomplaining and silent lady to a potential resistant women who fights for her better future and peaceful life. In the court proceedings, she is sentenced to two years of imprisonment but she faces all these hardships with strong determination. After releasing from the court, she prepares to go to America to meet her lover and new husband Jimmy Louie.

While, He (2019) is of the view that "female bodies, regarded as the object of discipline, are subjected to physical punishment, mental restrictions as well as sexual abuse, which indicate that women are inescapably susceptible to trauma" (p. 132). All this happens with Winnie in China in her domestic life. The most unexpected revelation of secret for her daughter Pearl is that Winnie was raped by Wen Fu on the last dreadful day in China. When, Pearl reaches America she gives birth to Pearl. Hence, the biological father of Pearl is Wen Fu. This is an unpleasant surprise for Pearl but she is able to understand her mother effectively in an effort to bridge the gap between the two. In this way, Tan as a whole presents the transition of Winnie from a girl to a woman in the background of cultural and geographical aspects of her life. The scenes of the domestic life of a mother in the Asian American society to the horrific incidents with Winnie in China during 1930s and 1940s hint at the importance

of the physical, emotional and psychological journey of Winnie. Tan allows Winnie to recount all those events which drove her from China to America.

Similarly, the psychological and emotional strength enables her to conceal her terrible past from her daughter for decades but her encroaching age combined with her present circumstances lead her to break the silence and unfold her past trauma before Pearl. She describes all those traumatic events from her childhood to adolescent and particularly her abusive married life with Wen Fu in China. Similarly, the arrival of Jimmy Louie brings the ultimate change in her life. She proves herself as a strong opinionated woman who can withstand the challenges boldly. She emerges as a survival of the trauma of an abusive marriage. She unfolds all those overwhelming obstacles which were threatening to her existence but she defeated them by virtue of her determination and strong will. Unlike the traditional stories, Tan elevates the character of wife instead of a husband. The character of Winnie is portrayed in such a way that she oscillates between weak and strong as she says, "That was my life, everything always in between-without hope, yet without despair; without resistance, but without acceptance. So you see, weak and strong". (Tan, 1991, p. 313). But in the end she proves herself strong by breaking all the manacles of her subjugation. The wife endures the abuse and philandering of a cruel husband and she is rewarded with another chance to find happiness in her life. Resultantly, she appears as a beloved wife and a gifted mother of a daughter as well as the grandmother of two children.

Conclusion

The study significantly shows that the memories of Winnie regarding the domestic violence of her ex-husband Wen Fu and the environment of brutalities of second Sino-Japanese war and WWII during late 1930s and early 1940s are extremely traumatic. But the emergence of a real lover and future husband Jimmy Louie, a Chinese American employed in US army causes her immigration to US. In this way, the immigration considerably helped her in alleviating the miseries of her past traumatic life. While, in connection with the immigration of Winnie to US, the trauma of domestic violence in her married life with her ex-husband Wen Fu and witnessing the brutalities of the war can be described as the push factors while the love of Jimmy Louie is regarded as a pull factor. These pull and push factors paved the way for her happy life in US. The findings of this research article also reveal that Winnie was overpowered by abuse and trauma but instead of becoming an epitome of sacrifice she is able to translate her traumatic life into a positive sense with the possibilities of a better life in future.

Recommendations

This research article gives rise to many other issues that need to be investigated. In this regard, further extension can be made in a sense to probe the effects of social factors in connection with the post marriage depression of Winnie. Similarly, how the arranged marriage with Wen Fu in China as patriarchal institution is involved in the exploitation of Winnie that leads her to offer strong resistance and immigration to US and how she is able to express her rage nonviolently and humanely. Moreover, this study encourages the women to realize their true worth in their married lives. A woman must not succumb to the traumatic experiences of

domestic violence and social upheavals but she must organize herself for a sound social action as a tool for a healing process. Similarly, this research also provides a sense of realization to men to understand the need of positive behavior on the part of a husband with a wife to inspire mutual love and compassion in a married life. Now-a-days many people ignore this fact which is resulted in the disruption of their married lives.

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