

Unveiling the True Identity in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

Vidhyavathi and Anbazhagan

A significant switch in emphasis has...occurred in Asian American literary studies. In identity politics-with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity-governed earlier theoretical and critical formations, the stress is now on heterogeneity and Diaspora. The shift has been from seeking to "claim America" to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centring on race and on masculinity revolving around the multiple axis of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality, from being concerned primarily with social history and communal responsibility to being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of Postmodernism and multiculturalism. (Kong Cheung 1)

As a result Asian American literature initially emerged as a literature of protest and exile, a literature about place and displacement, a literature concerned with psychic and physical "home"-or longing for a final "homecoming." But later many writers who attempted to ease the pain of displacement and heal the exile, deconstructed these homogenizing approach and made attempts to reduce Asian American experiences to developmental narratives about the movement from "primitive", "Eastern", and foreign immigrant to "civilized", western, and "Americanized" loyal citizen.

Until the late twentieth century, the study of English Literature was limited to the study of authors like Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Virginia Wolf, Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath. These writers were taught as part of the mainstream English literature. Only recently, a great change has come over the academia and the awareness about women's writing and the specific problems related to such writings have brought forth a new reading of their language and themes. With Amy Tan's literary output, the trend of women's writing has become a distinct area of study. She became a published author at the age of eight when her essay on the Public library was published in a local news paper. Her journey of writing grew from then onwards with many of her other publications, starting from *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), for which she won the L.A Book Award. *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Moon Lady* (1992), *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2000), were other works which gave her an acclamation as one of the best Asian-American writers.

As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* registered a strong protest against male chauvinism, which perhaps marks a significant milestone in feminist thought. This

reconstruction of thought has been a central concern of contemporary feminism. Literature written by women has been reread and analyzed in order to understand it from the perspective of the women writer. Amy Tan, like Mary Wollstonecraft, portrays the life of Chinese immigrants from a women's perspective.

As Virginia Woolf pointed out in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Amy Tan has created a female canon of writing. Women writers until recently have no female models to follow and there by had no chance of affirming and confirming their own experiences and had no way of modeling themselves as writers. They had to adopt the images, myths and symbols of male writers. It is only after the 1970s, women writers spoke about their private experiences and also used languages and rhetorical device. Women writers all over the world have empowered themselves to identify clearly and definitely. Along with them Amy Tan stands as a towering world's literary personality.

Amy Tan locates the trajectory of her identity in the course of crossing and re-crossing the multiple borders of language, history, race time and culture. Disrupting the constraints and absolutisms of nationalist boundaries, her novels reveal her as a writer who herself elucidates her aesthetic stand on the identity reformulations which only became possible due to the cultures of China and America and not by holding only to her Chinese identity or exclusively with her American identity. As Bharati Mukerjee pointed out in an interview:

The reformulation in terms of unhousement to rehousement, a process that entails breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which ones place in society is assured and re-rooting oneself in a new culture becomes possible. (Hancock 39)

In the age of Diaspora, Mukherjee has argued, "ones biological identity may not be ones only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration" (Mukherjee 1-6).

Migrating from one's country to another presents a metaphor of dislocation which evokes images of loneliness and cultural conflicts. Amy Tan depicts the clash of cultures and the ensuing dilemmas and success with unique understanding and startling sensitivity. Her writings have held up a mirror to Chinese community in America, and are truly representing the work of a cross-cultural writer.

Amy Tan's literary discourse on nationalism and multiculturalism engages the complexities of national narratives to offer a negotiation that moves beyond a simple acceptance of dominant definitions of national and cultural identity. Homi Bhaba and other cultural theorists view the new forms and configurations of identification of diaspora communities as provoking a dismantling of exclusionary narratives of the nation and of national policies such as multiculturalism. In his influential essay,

DisseniNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation, Bhaba contends that:

The nation margins, to which diaspora and other minority communities relegates highly complex and flexible recesses of cultural production from where various oppositional practices and analytic capacities can emerge. The space of betwixt and between the margins constitute that intestinal space of overlapping of cultures and histories, the very site from which new narratives of national and cultural identity can be written and imagined (299-322).

Thus in *The Kitchen God's Wife* Amy Tan had constructed a new identity. Amy Tan might probably have taken the title for her second best novel, from the original Chinese story, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, in which Zhang an evil man denounces his good-hearted and hard-working wife Guo, to lead a carefree life with the other pretty woman, Lady Li. This lady empowers Guo's position and chases her out of the house. When Lady Li has done so Zhang does not run out to call her, "come back, my good wife, come back" (KGW 54). Instead they both enjoyed, wasting money like dirty water, until Zhang drains out all his money to become a beggar. Lady Li now denounces Zhang and runs away with another man. When Zhang is almost dying, it is Guo who comes to his rescue. He has been saved from the street by Guo. When he opens his eye he finds himself in a kitchen, near a warm fire place, to know that the good lady who has saved his life is his own wife. Unable to hide his face, out of shame, he jumps into the kitchen fire place. Good wife Guo pours out many tears to put the fire down. But it is no use. Zhang is burning with the hot roaring fire and of course with shame. Guo watches her husband's ashes flying up to heaven in front of her own eyes.

In heaven, the Jade Emperor heard the whole story from new arrival. 'For having the courage to admit you were wrong', the Emperor declared, 'I make you Kitchen God, watching over everyone's behaviour. Every year, you let me know who deserves good luck, who deserves bad'. (KGW 55)

That is how "The Kitchen God" came into existence.

The power of literature over sociology lies in particularization, and it is in its details *The Kitchen God's Wife* excels. The virtuous wife who had saved the weak, selfish and thoughtless man never becomes a god herself. The thrust of the novel is made plain, perhaps too obviously. The novel hardly needs the legend to sustain its clear intent to elevate the Kitchen God's wife to her rightful place in history. But, nothing lost; it enhances the book with a striking title; *The Kitchen God's Wife*.

Amy Tan implies the character of Zhang to Wen Fu, and the good wife Guo to Jiang Weili in her novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*, but with

little difference. Zhang finally has admitted his mistakes and is made to be the Kitchen God. Whereas Wen Fu has not changed even in the end and therefore considered like Judas, the traitor. Weili thinks about the biased conclusion of the Chinese version of the story.

When Jesus was born, he was already the son of God. I was the daughter of someone who ran away, a big disgrace. And when Jesus suffered, every one worshiped him. Nobody worshipped me for living with Wen Fu. I was like that wife of Kitchen God. Nobody worshipped her either. He got all the excuses. He got all the credit. She was forgotten. (KGW 255)

According to the Chinese custom, "A woman always had to feel pain, suffer and cry, before she could feel love" (KGW 168). It is always the man who takes all the credit. That is why irrespective of Zhang's cruelty he is made to be the God and everyone keeps worshipping him. But the good lady Guo is left unrecognized for her loyalty and humanity. Amy Tan deconstructs this theory through her protagonist, who creates, The Mrs. Kitchen God's Wife. A clear reading of the novel will show that this is possible only through unveiling identity. Because Jiang Weilie has not created The Mrs Kitchen God's Wife, but Winnie has created it. Thus as she sheds her Chinese identity she is able to create The Mrs. Kitchen God's Wife through her American identity.

When reconciliation and understanding is made possible between Winnie Louie and her daughter Pearl, on sharing their secrets, a true bondage of love begins with the mother and the daughter. It is when Winnie decides to choose a peculiar gift for Pearl that she buys a lady statue in Mrs. Hong's shop and fixes it inside the red altar which is presented to Pearl by Grand Auntie Du. Winnie wants to push away Mr. Kitchen God from the altar to the margin and place Mrs. Kitchen God's Wife in the centre, thinking that it is the 'Mrs.' who deserves to be worshipped as the Goddess. But later she changes her mind: "She would live there, but no one should call her Mrs. Kitchen God. Why would she want to be called that, now that she and her husband are divorced"? (KGW 414).

Therefore she renames the lady's statue as Lady Sorrowfree. "Lady Sorrowfree, happiness, winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world"(KGW 415). Winnie gets this courage of breaking the old custom to suit her own convenience from the strength which is gained by having assimilated into a new identity; "Chinese American." She has imbibed the Chinese myth and American miraculous freedom to invent Lady Sorrow free.

Willie's Chinese identity has given her only bad memories whereas American identity has given her the best memories. She cannot stop the tears rolling down her cheeks even after forty years when she thinks

Louie's waiting for her in the bookshop. She is unable to continue her conversation with her daughter as the words are struck with happiness. "And now I have to stop. Because every time I remember this, I have to cry a little by myself. I don't know why something that made so happy then feels so sad now. May be that is the way it is with the best memories" (KGW 346).

Despite her happiness in her new life she has to face the problem of duality. She is now imbibed with Chinese roots as well as with the newly acquired American identity. She is caught at the crossroads of her Chinese and American identities. This criss-cross of two identities torments her. She has to face the problems of inter-culture, inter-language, inter-belief, and inter-thought conflicts.

However Winnie who has lost three of her children and killed many foetus in China is successful in America in bringing up her daughter. Though she has lost Samuel, her American son, and Louie, her American husband, she is delighted at least at the success of her daughter Pearl's life. Pearl has a very loving husband and is also blessed with two daughters. Although Winnie cannot speak proper English, she has raised her daughter to empower English. "I took a position as a speech and language clinician with the local school district" (KGW 15). If she had endorsed with her Chinese identity she would not have elevated her daughter to the best position. She would not have enjoyed autonomy but would have submerged in the pools of Wen Fu's cruelty. Since she is assimilated into a newer identity she is able to cope with her life.

When the question of assimilation rises the immigrant's first choice is always America. Because they think America is their land of future because assimilation is still the most powerful force in the United States. To quote Crèvecoeur's "Letters from an American Farmer of 1782:

What then is the American, this new nation? He is either a European or the descendant of a European, hence strange mixture of blood, which will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have four wives of four different nations. He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudiced and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. (J. Hector St. John 33)

The United States proves this point with vast diversity of its origins, perhaps the most multicultural in the world. This made assimilation a matter of necessity, a matter of national survival, and helps expressing the extremes of American nationalism as a means to that end. Immigrants poured across the Atlantic from all countries and

cultures in tidal waves and are evident to these human hordes. In the single century from 1815 to 1914 over thirty five million came across largely as individuals, and in the twenty-five years of greatest intensity in this century seventeen million crossed over. The great majority of the immigrant came to America to better their lot or to escape worse in their country.

Each of the immigrants possess a firm identity and often are in a state of continuous confusion about their original identity and their adopted identity. Let the unveiling of identity take place and the true concept of Multiculturalism be brought into force. The essential multiculturalists point is articulated concisely by Steven C. Rockefeller: "Our Universal identity as human beings is our primary identity and is more fundamental than any particular identity, whether it be a matter of citizenship, gender, race, or ethnic origin" (Comment 88).

Taking pleasure in one's "particular identity" is perfectly all right so long as when the pinch comes, and a question of basic allegiance arises, it is one's universal identity that is affirmed, for as "important as respect for diversity is in multicultural democratic societies, ethnic identity is not the foundation of recognition of equal value and the related idea of equal rights" (ibid). That is to say, we have rights not as men or women or Jews or Christians or blacks or Asians, but as human beings, and what make a human being is not the particular choices he or she makes, but the capacity for choice itself; and it is this capacity rather than any of its actualizations that must be protected.

REFERENCES

Primary Source

1. Tan, Amy. *The Kitchen God's Wife*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Secondary Source

1. Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color, Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
2. Mary Sondgrass, Ellen. *A Literary Amy Tan Companion*. North California: Mc Farald, 2004.
3. Sucheta Mazumdar. *Asian American Studies and Asian Studies: Rethinking roots in Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*. ed. Shirley Hune, Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1991.
4. Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*. G. P. Putnam's, 2003.
5. Yin, Xiao-Huang. *Chinese American literature since the 1850s*. Urban: U of Illinois Press, 2000.

WORKS CITED

1. Bhabha, Homi. *DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the margins of the Modern Nation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
2. Cheug, King-Kong, ed. *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000.
3. Hancock, Geoffrey. "An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee". *Canadian Fiction Magazine*. 59 (1987): 39. Print.
4. J. Hector St. John (Michel – Guillaume – Jeane de) Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, as quoted in Philip Gleason, "American Identity and Americanization," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980.
5. Mukherjee, Bharati. "American Dreamer". *Mother Jones Magazine* (1997): 1-6. Print.
6. Steven C. Rockefeller, "Comment," in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition": An Essay by Charles Taylor, with commentary by Amy Guttmann, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer, and Susan Wolf*, ed. Amy Guttmann Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
7. *ibid.*

V.Vidhyavathi

Lecturer in English

SRR Engineering College

Padur 603103

Dr. K. Anbazhagan

Professor and Head/EFL

SRM University

Kattankulathur 603203