

**Marked Melioration:
Mining the Murky Memories in the Select Novels of Amy Tan**

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Abstract

The Jamaican political analyst and social activist, Marcus Garvey stated that the people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots. But the most accepted concept is to let go of the past and so live in the present. The eminent American writer Amy Tan disregarded the later idea and employed Marcus Garvey's view in her novels. *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* are Tan's second and fourth notable novels in which the mother characters disclose their dark pasts to their daughters in order to put everything right before it is too late. The paper would focus more on the haunting memories of women from China and their American daughters with the spectacles of multiculturalism.

Keywords: Amy Tan, multiculturalism, family relationships and past life



Amy Tan

Courtesy: <https://www.amytan.net/>

Amy Tan

Amy Tan whose Chinese name ‘Anmei’ meant ‘blessing from America’. She was born in Oakland, California in 1952. Both of her parents were Chinese immigrants who finally settled in Santa Clara. Tan’s father John was an electrical engineer and also a Baptist minister and her mother Daisy. Daisy had terrible experiences in China and she left the past including her three daughters with her abusive first husband. Moreover, Daisy believed in the ghost of her mother who had killed herself when Daisy was nine. She divorced her first husband in China and had fled China just before the communist takeover in 1949. The trip on 1987 to China was a revelation for Tan. It gave her a new perspective on her often-difficult relationship with her mother. Daisy reunited with her daughters in China and Tan met her half-sisters. This memorable experience inspired her to complete the book of stories she had promised to Giles, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). She dedicated her fabulous work to her mother.

Tan’s other novels were *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001), *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) and *The Valley of Amazement* (2013). Tan was also the author of a memoir, *The Opposite Fate* (2004), two children’s books *The Moon Lady* (1995) and *Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat* (2001). She explored themes of family and memory, as well as the conflicts of culture that arose in so many American communities. She approached issues that were universally applicable to all groups of people. (In the present article citations, the primary works, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* have been mentioned as KGW and BD respectively.)

Multiculturalism

The term ‘multicultural’ was introduced in 1941, and widely used in the U.S education writers in 1980s. In 1965, the multiculturalism concept was developed and influenced literature. The ‘ethnic pluralism’ is the synonym of ‘multiculturalism,’ which is a term, derived to oppose another noted term ‘melting-pot’ in the United States. The melting-pot is about diverse cultures becoming one and the multiculturalism is about separate cultural groups, and the values of native culture is treated with care but also accommodate the adopted culture for the growth of the individuals.

The group of people who shared common ancestry, language, social, religion, traditional, cultural and national experiences were noted as ethnic group. The resettlement from one place to another place decided this ethnicity. The writings of those people were deemed as ethnic writing and it gave voice to the marginalized and in the beginning, they were noted as “immigrant novels”. The term ‘ethnic group’ was first recorded in 1935 and the written works of the groups were “ethnic literature” and then substituted by the term “Multi cultural representation”. The names had been changed but the central idea remained as one which was to preserve their native culture.

China – the Way of Living

The People’s Republic of China’s official policy was ‘China’s Peaceful rise’ which mentioned the harmony within nation as well as to gain the trust of other nations. The motto of China was to put society first; it was their traditional way of life. In modern times, there were

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018

Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Editor: Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching and Research in English Language and Literature

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changes in clothing, building, treatment towards women and education level but their living centered on the religious philosophies.

Chinese were active and hardworking; they made sure of the society-based families. Among traditional Chinese, joint families which consisted of three to four generations were common for them and the preference over son, grandson and great-grandson by early marriages was not uncommon. For each action, they had moral reasons. Their interests, functions at home and festivals were of their clear thinking, concern for hospitality and the respect for nature.

The influence of Western ideas on clothing, food, architecture, transport, medicines and education helped both women and city-living peasants. People became lenient in arranging marriages and the education standards allowed women to work as men, but equality was in question. In most of the countryside, people conducted life in the traditional ways. Even in cities, people were content with their society-based family institutions such as living with parents after getting jobs too and festival celebrations.

U.S - Way of Living

The United States of America believed in 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' which was considered as the national ethos. The famous phrase was in the United States Declaration of independence in 1776 which was drafted by Thomas Jefferson, third president and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. From then, Americans' way of life was not perturbed anyone in the world. Every Americans' dream was of pursuing happiness as an individual.

Americans favored individuality which meant the freedom of their thoughts, expressions and actions. To attain their individuality, they always drew a line in relationship which should pave way for success rather than a bond of binding. They were permitted to have children out of wedlock or to break the marriage relationship when they felt sure their individualism is in jeopardy. Every parent or parents were employed, and the children were supposed to leave their home after their high school graduation to find his/her own life in the society. Families met each other to celebrate their family occasions.

***The Kitchen God's Wife* and Multiculturalism**

Amy Tan chose the real-life experience of her mother, Daisy to pen down with fictitious ideas in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Difficult marriage life in pre-communist China was elaborated in the novel. In 1991, Tan published the novel and dedicated to her family members. The novel was not so different from her debut novel *The Joy Luck Club*'s theme, the way of narration and the vivid historical background of China was remarkable ideas in *The Kitchen God's Wife* and was acclaimed by critics. It was the New York Times' Notable book for thirty-eight weeks, American Library Association notable book, and also the Booklist of Editors' Choice.

"In a way, this is how it's been with my mother and me ever since. We both won and we both lost, and I'm still not sure what our battle was." (KGW 46), these words were of Pearl Louie Brandt, the daughter of the protagonist of the novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie

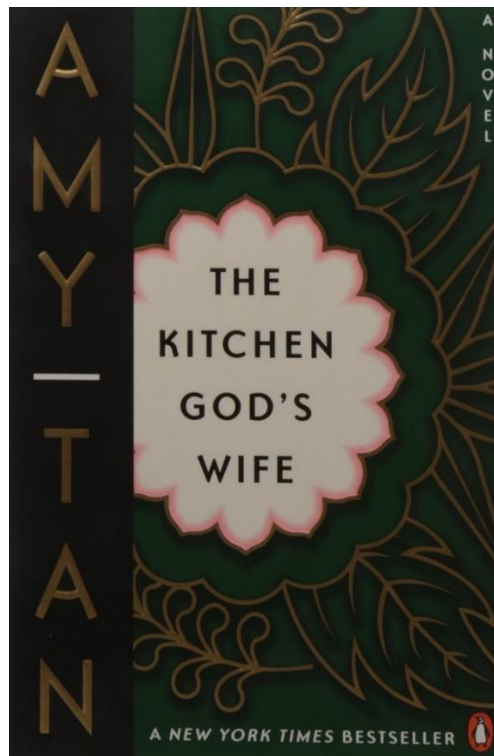
Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018

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Louie whose Chinese name was Weili. The novel has no sections as in previous one but divided into twenty-six chapters in which the first two were narrated by Pearl in America and she again narrated last two chapters; rest were with the spectacles of Winnie of her past in China.



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Kitchen-Gods-Wife-Amy-Tan/dp/0143038109>

The mentioned quote of Pearl was the basis of the novel, her detached relationship with her mother Winnie; in the name of cultural differences and language barrier. Pearl served as a speech and language clinician for children with disabilities and for seven years she was affected by multiple sclerosis. Pearl kept her problem as a secret from her mother because she was sure her mother would fuss and would try to understand what it was exactly; these were her reasons for not confiding with her, but she never felt at ease with her mother.

Mother-Daughter Relationship

The complex relationship of the mother and the daughter based on their different culture brought up was well explained in the beginning of the novel itself. The funeral rites of Grand Auntie and her will were the dominant discussion between Pearl and Winnie outwardly. There were also the views of both Pearl and Winnie about their hidden pasts which were known to Helen, Winnie's so-called sister-in-law. In the opening chapter, at the family dinner, Pearl thought of how Chinese mind works in different culture gathering, "Phil is the only non-Chinese tonight, although that wasn't the case at past family events. Bao-bao's two former wives were what Auntie Helen called "Americans", as if she were referring to a racial group" (KGW 31-32)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018

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The complexity was not in manner alone; the language faced more differences in its formation. Winnie was so happy to hear her grandchild calls her ‘Ha-Bu’ in Shanghainese and to explain her daughter’s job, she had her daughter wrote it down in a paper though she can speak in English.

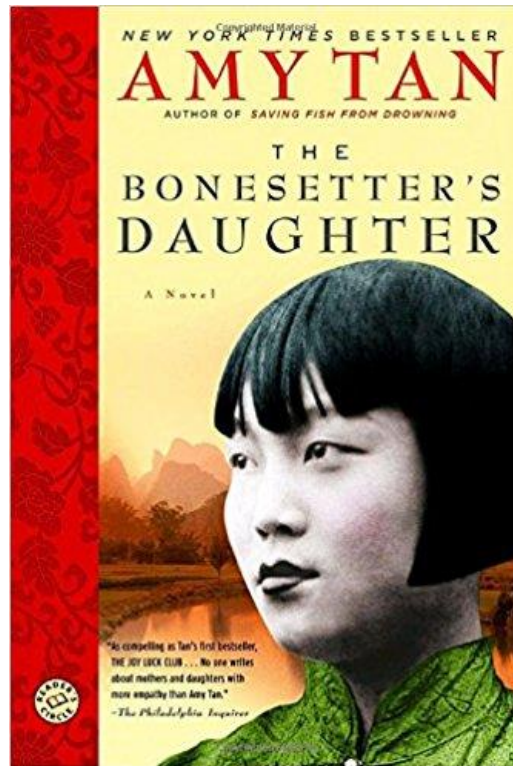
After years, Winnie got hold of Pearl’s childhood treasure box and shocked to see the things she warned her daughter not to use; they were all silly things to Pearl by then but to Winnie, they were the worst depiction of culture influence. Even when she narrated her pasts, Winnie addressed Pearl and said her most unforgettable cruelties she had undergone in words like, “Today you teach your daughters to say to a stranger, “My body is my body. Don’t touch me.” A little child can say this. I was a grown woman, and I could not say this.” (KGW 312). It showed her way of seeing her own culture’s faults with the spectacle of her adopted culture for survival.

The Bonesetter’s Daughter and Multiculturalism

The Bonesetter’s Daughter was nominated for the Orange Prize and IMPAC Dublin Award. After published in 2001 as Amy Tan’s fourth novel, it was in the list of New York Times bestseller as her other novels. It explored the superstition ideas, power of memory and complex family relationships. Apparently, Tan had her roots to construct the novel, her words of mother and grandmother for whom she dedicated the novel talked of the crux of the story.

The Bonesetter’s daughter was the yet another novel to mend the cultural and language differences of a mother and daughter. Through the disagreeable relationship of mother and daughter, Tan focused more on the reverence of one’s own past, voiceless women, power of love and forgiveness, identity, being truthful and understanding. Like other two novels mentioned above, the fourth novel pinned down the experiences both in China and America. The three sections of this novel dealt with two different lives of three generation women. The novel set in pre-communist China and California as in today.

The language barrier of different cultures was the start of the novel. Ruth and her mother faced this particular barrier since Ruth’s childhood. LuLing, her mother tried teaching her Chinese, and reluctantly Ruth studied but remembered nothing in her young age. Ruth found the stack of papers her mother gave her to read which was in Chinese. Ruth attempted long and translated three sentences to know that her mother passed information she was not aware of. But not even out of curiosity, she did not call her mother because the way of LuLing was not something suitable for Ruth because of her circumstances she was brought up with in America and in another instance; Ruth was forced to learn Chinese characters which she considered as punishment for correcting her mother’s English spelling. LuLing said to her while teaching, “Writing Chinese characters is entirely different from writing English words. You think differently. You feel differently.” (BD 58) The dialogues of LuLing suggested often that her English has no grammar but sense; symbolically it meant that after all those years, LuLing saw her as Chinese in the American land.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Bonesetters-Daughter-Ballantine-Readers-Circle/dp/0345457374/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_14_img_1?encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=EDTB2T XSDSA6ST6MCJ6B

Ruth had the habit of counting to remember details of her work which she learnt from her mother. Amy Tan offered a graceful definition of multiculturalism in her novel, “Ruth could still picture her mother counting in the Chinese style, pointing first to her baby finger down to her palm, a motion that Ruth took to mean that all other possibilities and escape routes were closed. Ruth kept her own fingers open and splayed, American style.” (BD 20)

As Ruth remembered her childhood, the novel focused on the American way of seeing family relationship and its fatal blow in the Chinese family. The family oriented Chinese culture often disturbed the individual lifestyle of Americans or vice versa. The suitable example of this was presented in the novel; Ruth was tired of her mother’s lectures on housework and discussed with her American friend who asked her of the payment Ruth received for her own housework; according to the American friend, the parents were supposed to give space for their children and if they required work from their kids, they paid. This method was not about the money but about the concept individuality the Americans believed in.

Past Directs Present

“By Chinese words, LuLing could put all kinds of wisdom in Ruth’s mind” (BD 76). It was true because the Chinese past of her mother taught her more in life, especially to know herself to do what and how she wanted. As always in Tan’s novels, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*

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too attained its balance in the end and taught more of the meaning of forgiveness and understanding one another to sustain soothing relationships.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie got the courage to reveal her past to Pearl after hearing the death of Wen Fu which helped the daughter to have more understanding of her mother's way of upbringing her child. Pearl told her mother of her physical problem which paved way for their strong union. The story of speaking and listening of past helped the mother and daughter to understand each other better than before and the love between them flows without the uneasiness of discrepancies in culture and language.

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