

# [ Women’s Silence and ‘Avoiding Land Mines’ in Amy Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife* ]

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**[Abstract]** *This paper discusses Amy Tan’s novel The Kitchen God’s Wife (1991). Its aim is to interpret the theme of women’s silence between mother and daughter, including intercultural impacts of raising Chinese American girls by Chinese mothers. The intergenerational and intercultural splits between Chinese mother and her “more-American” daughter, when juxtaposed with each other, are deepened by the unbearable silence and secrets kept by the women. Both women’s attitudes seem to be more apparent due to a brief outline of Confucius teachings that continuously dominated twentieth-century China.*

**[Keywords]** *women’s silence; feminism; ethnicity; Chinese American; identity; The Kitchen God’s Wife; mother-daughter relationship; Confucianism*

## [1] Introduction

In her novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Amy Tan introduces diverse female protagonists with particular focus on their family roles of being daughters, mothers, and wives. Furthermore, she sheds a light on complex relations between sisters, aunts, grandmothers and cousins. Apart from women's relations with each other, Tan also involves international and inter-generational influences that frequently complicate talking and understanding each other as if they had to spend the whole time "avoiding land mines" (Tan 5), even in ordinary situations. The aim of this article is to interpret the theme of silence between mother and daughter in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Moreover, this paper explores the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship, and how the past affects the present. Another significant aspect of the previously mentioned relationship is the importance of national and cultural belonging; Tan's main female protagonists seem to struggle with determining their own identities between pre-communist China and rapidly-growing America.

Undeniably, the women's relationship is marked by silence. In his *Critical Analysis of Amy Tan's The Kitchen God's Wife*, Nasrullah Mambrol points out that for the mother "the act of storytelling affords a strategy for mediating her past." Moreover, the mother tells her stories "hoping that somehow [her daughter] will hear, will understand, and will finally absolve her mother of the emotional crime of concealing the truth [about her past]." There are several kinds of silences noted by the feminist critics, both self-imposed and externally sanctioned (Mambrol). However, when discussing *The Kitchen's God Wife*, it seems reasonable to briefly outline basic assumptions of Confucianism<sup>1</sup> that silenced women, and its impact on the role of women in society.

It is also important to note that in her works, Tan tends to separate the stories of mothers and daughters, and therefore, she creates and emphasises the generational contrast (Davis 90). *The Kitchen God's Wife* involves two plots: a frame story set in the United States and involving primarily Pearl and her mother Winnie, and a central, focal narrative about Winnie's life in China before World War II, during the war, and immediately before the protagonist's emigration to the United States (Mambrol). Initially, the story is narrated by Pearl, the middle-aged Chinese American daughter, however, Tan interlaces the plots with the recollections of Winnie's childhood in China, her first marriage during World War II to an incredibly vicious man, and her romantic rendezvous with her second husband – Jimmy Louie (Oh). The fact that the narrative lens shifts to another time and place, seems to strengthen and enrich the unique bond between mother and daughter for both Winnie's and Pearl's insights are contributed. The reader has an opportunity to see both perspectives, and therefore, to become acquainted with the complexity of this type of relationship.

## [2] Silence in *The Kitchen's God Wife*

In the last few decades, many Asian Americans have increased awareness of their racial and cultural identity built on their need to establish their uniquely American identi-

ty. Therefore, the key themes of Chinese American writers include the search for self-definition, the process of assimilation, and individual acceptance in American society (Davis 90). As a representative of the second generation of Chinese immigrants to America, Amy Tan (born in 1952) frequently refers to the themes of immigration and mixed-race identity. In her novels she involves numerous Chinese symbols, customs, and beliefs, however, these elements are exposed to a whole different Western culture.

*The Kitchen God's Wife* is a novel that addresses a very complex relationship – and the conflicts – between a Chinese immigrant mother named Winnie Louie, and her American-born daughter, Pearl Louie Brandt. Although the conflict between mother and daughter is not clearly identified or understood, their relationship seems to be “strained, uneasy, characterized by a rift that slowly is widening in a process that neither woman seems able to halt” (Mambrol). The mother, who has been very secretive about her past, gradually reveals the truth about her childhood in China, and thereafter about her marriages and other negative or painful experiences. This confessional story explores the reasons behind the “protective, demanding and sometimes onerous motherly love” (Oh).

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, *The Kitchen God's Wife* explores cultural differences between Chinese and American women. Winnie, as an immigrant, seems to be culturally confused; although she lives in the United States, still, she lives the life of a traditional Chinese woman. Her social life is mainly concentrated on the Chinatown, moreover, she is surrounded by Chinese American community, she still believes in Chinese spirituality, and she follows Chinese traditions. What is more, Winnie constantly attempts to impress her customs and beliefs upon her descendants, especially upon her daughter. On the contrary to her mother, Pearl rather feels obligated than encouraged to celebrate her mother's heritage. However, recognition and appreciation of their own history and culture seems to be essential in achieving life balance and finding voice. M. Marie Booth Foster points out that when the mother comes to the United States, she does not only try to adapt to the new culture, but also redefines her voice and self. Before the daughter can find her own voice and redefine her self, she must acknowledge her mother's history. This “quest for voice” becomes a feminine and very personal journey and a rite of passage that the daughter experiences while learning her mother's myth. Additionally, each daughter “must come to grips with being her mother's daughter” (96).

It may seem that these two characters are completely different, however, there is one particular similarity between them – both women are very secretive. Pearl hides the fact that she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, whereas her mother never mentioned the real reason behind her decision to move to the United States. In fact, their secrets play an important role in this story. When encouraged by Aunt Helen – who plays the role of a bridge between the two women, or “the catalyst that sends [them] on the journey toward reclaiming their voices” (Mambrol) – both Pearl and Winnie decide to reveal their secrets, and afterwards they “are closer, mother and daughter” (Tan 363).

The story starts with the narrative of Pearl, and from the very beginning the daughter admits that “whenever [her] mother talks to [her], she begins the conversation as if [they] were already in the middle of an argument” (Tan 1). Foster notices that although

the daughters try to deny it, mothers play an important role in their quest for voice, their mind, and their selfhood. "Voice finds its form in the process of interaction, even if that interaction is conflict" (97). Although Pearl is an adult woman, she is under the influence of various requests from her mother; she is not sure why she "still give[s] in to her family obligations," especially since she has come "to resent the duty" (Tan 5). She seeks for "a smoother life" (Tan 5), therefore it seems easier to meet her demands than to start a conflict. During her initial monologue, Pearl compares the relationship with her mother to a dangerous path where every step has its consequences: "And whenever I'm with my mother, I feel as though I have to spend the whole time avoiding land mines" (Tan 5).

It seems that the women's paths drifted apart; the superficiality of their conversations is best displayed by the fact that Pearl's own mother does not know about a serious illness that Pearl suffers from, not to mention less important events in her life. Mambrol notices that the silence that cloaks Pearl may not be as profound or multifaceted as her mother's is, however, "Pearl's speechlessness is as debilitating as the illness that she conceals from her mother." On the other hand, Pearl seeks for understanding, yet her silence deprives her of the emotional support (Mambrol). It seems that both women want to be heard, but none of them listens to be heard. They struggle to understand that "a voice is not a voice unless there is someone there to hear it" (Foster 99).

Although the distance between Winnie and Pearl is discernible, it seems difficult to determine the actual reason behind the issue. Pearl admits that there is an unbearable distance between them, however, she is not entirely sure how to improve this relationship:

Mostly I see my mother sitting one table away, and I feel as lonely as I imagine her to be. I think of the enormous distance that separates us and makes us unable to share the most important matters of our life. How did this happen? And suddenly everything [...] feels like a sham, and also sad and true. All these meaningless gestures, old misunderstandings, and painful secrets, why do we keep them up? I feel as if I were suffocating, and want to run away. (Tan 22)

According to Mambrol, Pearl clearly states that she has a problematic relationship with her mother whom "she finds irritating and from whom she keeps her distance, both emotionally and geographically." However, he points out that Winnie is "perfectly aware that the separation between herself and her daughter is not an accident of distance." Mambrol mentions one particular moment when "the rift dividing them widened irreversibly," and that is the day of Jimmy Louie's – Winnie's American husband – funeral, when Winnie slapped her daughter for she could not weep (Mambrol). Winnie blamed Pearl for being indifferent to Jimmy's death, but in fact Pearl did cry, secretly, for she preferred to keep her own private memories of him. This experience changed their relationship for a very long time: "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" (Tan 33). Since the mother attempts to control both actions and thoughts of her daughter, it may seem that sometimes "the mother's voice drowns the voice of the daughter" (Foster 108).

In fact, it seems that Winnie and Pearl are separated by misunderstandings and insufficient communication. Pearl wrongly assumes that Winnie loved her brother more, whereas “Winnie is convinced that Pearl thinks that she was a bad mother” (Mambrol). The fact of the matter is that their relationship is very complicated, but full of love. Winnie reminds her daughter that she used to call her *Syin ke* aiming to express her love-filled devotion, whereas Pearl argues that she has never even thought that Winnie was a bad mother (Tan 354).

Winnie decided to leave China as a relatively young – though very experienced – woman, however, the influence of Chinese society and culture – especially the role of women in twentieth-century China, left an imprint on her and her parenting methods. Winnie grew up in China dominated by Confucianism that significantly limited women's role in society. Guided by Confucius' philosophy, a woman should follow four virtues, one of which is to “guard her words, and not to speak too much or bore others” (Sun 47). Winnie is not sure “why everyone always thought Confucius was so good, so wise [for he] made everyone look down on someone else, [and] women were the lowest” (Tan 85). However, aware of the defects of Confucius' teachings, in her darkest moments she has unconsciously followed the philosopher's views and has blamed other women for her – caused by men – misery:

And perhaps this was wrong of me, to blame another woman for my own miseries. But that was how I was raised—never to criticize men or the society they ruled, or Confucius, that awful man who made that society. I could blame only other women who were more afraid than I. (Tan 225)

In her novel Amy Tan, as well as many other Chinese American authors, deals with the topic of women's silence in patriarchal culture. In order to illustrate the issue of patriarchal oppression towards women, Tan introduces Winnie's (formerly known as Jiang Weili) past, for she experienced abandonment, domestic violence, sexual abuse and more. However, she decides not to share her painful experience with her daughter and carry the secrets for years, for she was afraid that Pearl “would know how weak [she] was [and she] would think [Winnie] was a bad mother” (Tan 354). According to Mambrol, Winnie is “the product of a culture that privileges the Confucian ideal, raising women to be passive and silent in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers.” Another point which should be mentioned, is that Winnie's closest women friends also stand silently, even though they witness Winnie's misery. It may be disturbing to Western readers; however, Tan seems to be implying that “much cultural conditioning can be so thorough and its effects so ingrained that even the members of victimized classes accept their oppression and abuse as a fact of their lives” (Mambrol). Therefore, it seems that the victims' passivity is also shared by their friends and family members.

Considering her personality, Winnie undergoes a transformation; influenced by Jimmy and his American mindedness, she decides to leave China and she disconnects herself from her old life. She rejects her identity of “a woman in Confucian China” and she steps into the role of “an immigrant woman in America” (Mambrol). Although Winnie

gives the impression of being a new, reborn woman in a whole new culture, her former, memorized habits and vices seem to drive a wedge between her and her “more-Western” daughter.

The major part of the story is narrated by Winnie, for she attempts to confess the causes of her migration, and therefore, to demonstrate what has shaped her life and personality. Winnie's life resembles a popular Chinese folktale of The Kitchen God and his wife; the reference is so strong that the title of this folktale was also used as the title of Tan's novel. Probably in order to set the ground for her confession, Winnie retells the story of the Kitchen God and his wife:

In China long time ago [...] 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. [...] Zhang had everything he could ask for. [...] But [he] was not satisfied. He wanted to play with a pretty, carefree woman named Lady Li. [...] When Lady Li later chased his wife of the house, Zhang did not run out and call to her, 'Come back, my good wife, come back.' [...] He and Lady Li were free to swim in each other's arms. They threw money away like dirty water. [...] 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 [...]. One day, he [...] fainted [...] [and when] he opened his eyes again, he [...] saw he was in the kitchen, near a warm fireplace. [...] [T]he lady of the house had taken pity on him [...]. That lady was none other than his good wife Guo! [...] [Zhang was] looking for some place to hide, then jumped into the kitchen fireplace [...] Zhang was burning with shame and [...] because of the hot roaring fire below. In Heaven, the Jade Emperor<sup>2</sup> [declared]: 'For having the courage to admit you were wrong [...] 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. (Tan 40–41)

It seems that Winnie is put in the position of the good, silent wife, who takes care of her husband, however, her love and commitment are one-sided. Guided by Chinese patriarchal tradition, a woman should “know her position and behave according to the natural law of things,” whereas “a man is free to do what he wants,” and so “he can marry as many concubines as he likes” (Sun 47). Both Guo and Winnie fell into the trap of Confucian society, likewise, because of men, since a woman “must obey her father before marriage, her husband after marrying, then sons after her husband's death” (Sun 47). Winnie remains silent in many moments when men attempt to ruin her life: when her father approves her marriage with an abusive little-known man, when her husband rapes her, when he invites his mistress to their house, and when her children die due to domestic violence. Nevertheless, similarly to Guo, Winnie seems to justify the men's actions despite her anger and sorrow. Regardless of all Zhang's faults, his good wife Guo “poured out many tears to try to put the fire [that burnt him] out” (Tan 41). Similarly, Winnie sympathizes with her father even when he seems to be “as broken as the house he lived in” (Tan 286). With her husband it is rather the sense of duty, however, she “tried so hard to keep [her]

sympathy for him” when “nobody wanted to take care of him” (Tan 17). Both women are brave enough to leave the men and seek their fortune somewhere else. Additionally, in a burst of courage, Winnie finally dares to tell her daughter the truth about her last day in China – about how her former husband raped her, and how she gave birth to Pearl in America after nine months (Mambrol).

Moreover, Judith Caesar examines yet another disturbing implication – her former abusive husband is never punished. He humiliates his wife; however, he meets understanding, and eventually dies as “an old man, surrounded by his family and respected by his community – the very definition of a righteous man’s proper death in Chinese tradition” (Caesar 41). It seems to emphasise the resemblance to the Kitchen God and his wife, but also that “some people’s suffering is more significant than other peoples’ sufferings” (Caesar 42).

The altar to the Kitchen God that Pearl inherits from Aunt Du causes mixed feelings among the family; it is treated like an ugly toy rather than a meaningful symbol. However, Winnie approaches the altar with a distance and reluctance, and therefore, she decides to replace the Kitchen God’s with a new character – Lady Sorrowfree. It seems that the new statue should give Pearl what she has missed in her life:

...[N]o worries. Although maybe she used to worry. I heard she once had many hardships in her life. [...] She is ready to listen. She understands English. You should 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. (Tan 369)

This symbolic gesture may be interpreted as a prelude to the improvement of Winnie and Pearl’s relationship. Foster notices that “[t]he daughters’ journeys to voice are completed only after they come to the altars of their Chinese mothers” (110). On the contrary to the Kitchen God, Lady Sorrowfree is understanding and supportive; she does not want to control and limit believers, but help them when they need it. Lady Sorrowfree combines the characteristics of the nurturing, caring, listening mother. She is created by her experiences, moreover, she has none of the characteristics of the Kitchen God (Foster 109).

Mambrol states that Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is a retelling of the Kitchen God story, however, it includes a contemporary feminist point of view. According to feminist critics, there are several kinds of silences for silence can be either self-imposed or externally sanctioned. Winnie’s silence seems to be caused by her upbringing, failed marriage, but also her inner sense of shame. In fact, Winnie is not an isolated case, since many traditionally raised Chinese women of her generation have been socialized into silence by their culture (Mambrol). Regardless of the reason for silence, Mambrol emphasises the importance of its effects on women:

The effects of silence on a woman are many and varied: misunderstanding, loneliness and isolation, erasure and invisibility, depression, madness, even death. Silence between women negates the possibility of companionship, friendship, and trust. Silence

between mother and daughter deprives both a shared story and a common emotional language, rendering them virtual strangers. A woman without a voice cannot claim herself or her life; moreover, by not speaking her own story, she allows that story to be constructed by someone else. (Mambrol)

Furthermore, he explains that Winnie's narrative can be seen as "the record of a woman's journey from silence to full voice through the vehicle of storytelling, a performance that is widely considered to be a female act" (Mambrol). Winnie has kept her secrets for years, however, the moment she speaks out is an act of courage, especially since her personality is marked by Chinese culture.

The unique and fundamental bond that the main protagonists experience, is very complex. In *The Kitchen God's Wife* the mother does not only struggle with her own national and cultural identity, but also tries not to instil her insecurity and fears in her children. Despite all the difficulties that both women meet, the unbearable silence that narrows communication between them, and the fact that Pearl is a rapist's child, Winnie never stopped loving her daughter. Their relationship is demanding; however, Winnie admits that she would never blame Pearl for that. Although Pearl does not resemble her father, Winnie "fought to make Pearl [hers], just in case." Clearly, Winnie's son was raised differently for "daughters are different, of course" (Tan 366–367).

### [3] Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to interpret the theme of women's silence between mother and daughter in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*, taking into consideration intergenerational as well as intercultural differences. In her book, Tan introduces the stories and secrets of two women, and how their experiences influenced their relationship. It seems that both Winnie and Pearl have neglected their bond, however, breaking the unbearable silence helped them overcome misunderstandings and become closer as mother and daughter. The stories of both women are separated; thanks to the shift of perspective the reader has a chance to observe the relationship through the lens of both mother and daughter.

Since the women's relationship is significantly marked by silence, this paper provides a brief outline of conservative Confucian teachings that has laid foundations for women's silence in men-dominated patriarchal society in China. It appears that women's role has been limited to handle domestic duties, take care of their family, and give birth to sons. When juxtaposed with Western culture, it seems degrading that women cannot decide their own destiny. A big concern, especially for Western readers, is the lack of reaction or support from other women, even when they witness domestic violence, humiliation, and oppression.

In her novel, Tan includes a reference to a popular Chinese story about the Kitchen God and his good wife in order to sketch Winnie's life path – the life of a kind woman, an abused wife, and a brave individual, who wants to change her life for the better. Winnie has lived in the United States for many years, nevertheless, she observes Chinese cus-



toms and believes in Chinese folktales. Therefore, she decides to dispose of the statue of the Kitchen God, especially considering her painful experience of living in patriarchal China. This symbolic gesture seems to be the definitive reconciliation for both women – Winnie obviously tries to protect and support her daughter, even at the cost of neglecting her own convictions and beliefs, whereas Pearl finally sees and understands the causes of their conflicts. The unfortunate Kitchen God statue is replaced by Lady Sorrowfree that may symbolize the common ground between mother and daughter, moreover, the new statue reminds the women how important it is to break silence, and to support and understand each other.

## [Notes]

- 1 “Confucianism is a term used to refer to a guide to life compiled by Kong Qiu who lived in 551–479 BC. [...] His teachings emphasized the importance of being morally pure, seeking an education, practicing rites, and filial piety. [...] During the time of Confucius, women were expected to tend to duties at home. They had little to no involvement in the public sphere regarding education, business, and economy” (Orozco 7–10).
- 2 “The Jade Emperor, also known as the Lord of Heaven [...], is the chief deity of the pantheon of the Cheng I sect of Taoism. [...] He was worshipped China-wide as the supreme ruler of the Heavens, and even of some of the Underworld. In folk religion, he is worshipped as the protector of all mankind [...] (Stevens 18).

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