

Cultural Oppression, Gender Discrimination And Misogyny: A Study Of Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

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Abstract

The research paper entitled “Cultural Oppression, Gender Discrimination and Misogyny: A Study of Amy Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife*” deals with the cultural oppression, violence, gender discrimination and misogyny that the characters such as Winnie’s mother, Winnie, Old Aunt and Auntie Miao have witnessed in Chinese society from their husbands, families and in-laws. These women have been sexually torn by their husbands. Their identities have been destroyed by their families. Nobody has protected them from injustice and inequality from their husbands, families and in-laws. They have confronted heinous crimes from their husbands. Men of the Chinese society have enjoyed cultural and social liberty. They have belittled and sexually molested their wives. They have treated their wives as concubines. No court or law has brought these evil and cruel men for prosecution. This aspect is discussed by Amy Tan in her fictional novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. The paper will study the marginalization and oppression on women by socio-cultural norms in Chinese society and this will be analyzed from the feministic perspective.

Keywords: Cultural oppression, misogyny, injustice, marginalization.

Introduction

Amy Tan, in her second novel, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* reflects the plight and degradation of women who have been dehumanized, traumatized and demoralized by the customs of Chinese society. This has she has discussed through the characters of Winnie Luie’s mother and Winnie in Chinese society. These women have been mistreated by their husbands. They have suffered from tyranny of their husbands. Winnie Luie’s mother has been treated with disrespect by her

husband. Her husband has kept so many women for his sexual gratification. He does not bother about Winnie Luie's mother. She wants respect from her husband. But her husband requires her only when he has to fulfill his sexual thirst. She has felt marginalized by receiving bad treatment from her husband. This bad treatment has forced her to leave her husband. Simone de Beauvoir writes that woman is "defined and differentiated with reference to man not he with reference to her" as a result she is ridiculed and abused by her family members by leaving her husband (qtd. by Arun 110). Her husband has made her voiceless so to get rid of it she has left the family. Her husband has tortured her. She has been regarded as inferior and less valuable than the honour of the family. Winnie Luie's mother has left her family as she has confronted dehumanization and objectification from her husband. Winnie's mother has felt isolated and traumatized because her husband has treated her very meanly as compared to other wives. Even her daughter has been separated from her. Her family considers it a treacherous act and shame for their family. To them, she has betrayed her husband and broken traditional norms of Chinese society. Nobody talks about her in the family. Winnie and her mother have been separated from each other. Her family believes that to talk about her is to bring disgrace to the family ancestors.

Nobody has been allowed to discuss about Winnie Luie's mother in the family. She is regarded by them an evil and stigma for the family's honour. Winnie narrates her mother's sufferings as "what my mother did was a big disgrace. That's why they said she died, to bury her scandal. That's why no one would ever talk about her to my father. That's why they sent me away, so I would not remind him of her" (100). Her family has charged her that she has broken the norms of the family. Her husband has kept many wives it is not treachery but Winnie's mother demands her rights and liberty is a crime. This has been the double standards of the Chinese traditional society that has provided men powers and authority over women. Her freedom of choice has been tagged as scandal for the family. Her husband has sexually enjoyed various women but no one has raised question about it. But, Winnie's mother has left her husband is a disgrace for family. It is the hypocrisy of traditional customs of Chinese society. Nancy Berns affirms that "cultural and structural system of gender discrimination-a patriarchal system that includes other forms of violence and discrimination against women ("DegenderingThe Problem and Gendering the Blame Political Discourse on Women and Violence" 263). Winnie Louie's mother has been tortured by her own family under the cultural and social norms. No one has recognized the

position of Winnie Louie's mother in her family rather she has suffered taunts and vulgarity from her family members. She demands love from her husband but her husband has treated her as a sexual object.

Traditional and feudal patriarchal Chinese society has marginalized Winnie Louie's mother and Old Aunt of Winnie as they have been deprived from their educational rights. Winnie Louie's husband is provided open freedom and choice by Chinese society to subjugate any women. He has kept many concubines but that is not a problem rather to educate these women it has become a problem for Chinese patriarchal society. For Winnie Louie's husband, there are no rules, restrictions and laws. These have been made for her wives only. He has enjoyed her wives for his sexual pleasure. He has kept so many wives it is not an issue for Chinese society. In this way, he has enjoyed their beauty and has felt prestige by owning them. This has been the custom in Chinese society to marry more than one woman. Men exaggerate and brag about their superiority with one another in the society and feel honorable to have more beautiful wives. Winnie Louie's husband has deprived her wives from human rights. Winnie's mother has been kept uneducated. She simply has to accept orders of her husband and family. He has treated her wives as sexual objects. On another side, Old Aunt of Winnie has become victim of Chinese feudal and traditional society. Zillah Eisentein presents this that "traditional patriarchy, as it is defined by misogynist fundamentalists of all genres, does not respect women's freedom or equality" (*Against Empire- Feminisms, Racism, and the West* 175). Old Aunt has confronted disparity and inequality from her family. She has not been treated equal to men rather she has confronted male fundamentalism. Hence, she has been kept illiterate by her family. She has not been allowed to join school. Amy tan presents this injustice with women in China as:

He was an important man. He could have had all kinds of wives-he did. Back then there was no other reason to marry a second, third, or fourth wife, except to use a woman's prettiness to add to a man's prestige. Old Aunt, she was raised in a feudal family, the traditional way: the girl's eyes should never be used for reading, only for sewing. The girl's ears should never be used for listening to ideas, only to orders. The girl's lips should be small, rarely used, except to express appreciation or ask for approval. (101-102)

Old Aunt of Winnie has been oppressed by traditional rules. She has been neglected from every opportunity and right. Therefore, she has been crippled by false myths in Chinese society. She has been prohibited from schooling. Her independence has been crushed. She has been asked not to speak but to follow the orders of the family. Old Aunt has to remain loyal for the family but she cannot question about anything. Women have been told in Chinese society in their childhood that education is not for them so they have to look and serve their families. Beauvoir writes that this is the “myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state” (qtd. by Arun 110). Old Aunt and Winnie Louie have been marginalized by their families. This has been the norm of the Chinese society to “educate son, educate daughters a little to prove you were not too feudal-thinking” (102). Cruel treatment have confronted by Old Aunt and Winnie’s mother from their families. Girls like Old Aunt have been neglected from their education and human values in China. Susan Moller Okin states that “women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men, and that they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and as freely chosen lives as men can” (10). But Winnie’s mother and Old Aunt have received inhuman treatment from their families. They have received backlash from the society as they have been considered as ‘Other’ sex. Their recognition have been demolished by their traditional society. Family of Old Aunt has sabotaged and suffocated her. She has been subordinated under the customs of Chinese society. Her condition has become submissive. She has been treated like a servant in her family. E. D. Huntley states that “*The Kitchen God’s Wife* deals with the position of women in severely patriarchal cultures” (100). Winnie’s mother and Old Aunt of Winnie are made silent and submissive in Chinese society. They are not allowed to speak but to remain obedient to their elders.

Winnie Louie’s mother and another girl have suffered from forced marriage in their families. Their individualities have been crushed by Chinese misogynist society. Winnie Louie’s mother is in love with Lu, a revolutionary who believes on Marxist ideology. She wants to marry this man but her parents do not allow her. Her parents have married her to Jiang who has already married to many women. Her condition has become so “miserable” that she has to run from the Jiang’s family (107). Her family and customs of Chinese society have subjugated her into chains. Her independence and choices are valueless and insignificant before the “old marriage customs” (106). As a result, she has been forcefully married to Jiang so she has become his second wife.

Winnie Louie's mother has been deprived from her freedom and rights by Chinese customs and "Confucius thinking" of her family (103). Her life has become full of sorrows. She has been treated as "double second" because she has taken the place of her husband's second wife who has died (107). Her image has become worthless in Jiang's family. Questions have been raised against her identity by family members of Jiang. She has been taunted by everyone in the family. No one has objected and stood for Winnie Louie's mother. Jiang has not been questioned by anyone for marrying so many women. He has been supported by customs and traditions of Chinese society. Simone de Beauvoir affirms that "woman is doomed to immorality, because for her to be moral would mean that she must incarnate a being of superhuman qualities: the 'virtuous woman' of proverbs, the 'perfect mother', the 'honest woman', and so on. But think, dream, sleep, desire, breathe without permission and she betrays the masculine ideal" (458). Winnie Louie's mother and the other girl have not been allowed to desire and think independently. They can't love anyone from their own choice. Both of them have been doomed to death by their families. Their families expect them to be loyal and virtuous for their cultural norms. They have suffered from psychological disorders due to the violence they confront from their families. Another girl whose name is not mentioned has strangled herself because she has been suppressed and subjugated by her father. Her merciless and cruel father has caged her in the pig shed. This inhuman treatment is confronted by her from her father. She wants to live her own life. She does not want to marry an old man whom she does not know. Her father has decimated her freedom of life. He has traumatized her in the pig shed. This cruelty is experienced by the girl who demands her marriage rights from her family.

She told Jian about my mother, how bad she had become, how she threatened to kill herself-over love for a revolutionary! Ha-bu and Jiang Sao-yen made a contract. . . Had been told she had to marry an old man she did not even know, "said to her family, "I want to choose my own husband, or I refuse to marry." Her father was so angry he locked her up in a pig shed. Every day she shouted she would not marry the old man. She shouted until the day of her wedding. . . . She hanged herself with the rope of her own hair, tied to the sedan slats on top. (106-107)

Her father's Confucian ideology has forced this girl to kill herself. She has hanged herself with sedan on the wedding day. She has cried when her father caged her in a pig shed. She does not want to marry the old man whom she has never met. This girl demands liberty from old customs of Chinese society. But, she has been put to death by her misogynist father. She has borne the tyranny of her father. It is her own father who has demolished her life. Her father has no mercy and empathy with her daughter. The life of this girl whose story is narrated by Winnie Luie's mother has become full of wounds. She has suffered from psychological torture of her father. Nobody has understood her pain and story of her life. Okin confirms that "cultures have as one of their principal aims the control of women by men. Many of the world's traditions and cultures, including those practiced within formerly conquered or colonized nation-states. . . are quite distinctly patriarchal" (13-14). In patriarchal Chinese society, Winnie's mother and another girl have been marginalized by their families. They want to live their independent lives but their families have crushed their independence.

Even physical violence and sexual harassment have confronted by Winnie from her husband Wen Fu. He uses vulgar language against her body parts. Wen Fu forces Winnie to say bad names about her private parts. Her vagina is torn by her monstrous husband Wen Fu. She has suffered from sexual objectification from her husband. Wen Fu has forcefully torn the clothes of her wife. He has exposed her body before everyone. Winnie has confronted psychological torture from her husband. He has used bad words for her private parts. Wen Fu has naked her and thrown her out of the room. She has felt traumatized by this attitude of her husband. Wen Fu wants to maintain her power and superiority over her wife. He has undressed her and has touched the private parts of Winnie and then starts "laughing" on her (170). Wen Fu tortures her wife by asking her to "touch" the private parts of her body (170). This slavery treatment is received by Winnie from her husband. Wen Fu has received pleasure by torturing her wife. Winnie has become helpless with her husband. She has been physically and psychologically shattered by her husband. She has lived a life full of turmoil with her husband. Jean Chapman states that "physical violence takes the form of wife-battering, and female genital mutilation. Women are sold, trafficked as brides, kept as slaves, raped by their husbands, and shared among brothers" ("Violence against Women" 51). Winnie has been raped and terrorized by her husband Wen Fu.

She has confronted genital mutilation from Wen Fu. He has enjoyed by given pain to Winnie. Winnie presents this viciousness and barbarism with her as:

A woman always had to feel pain, suffer, and cry. And now that I was living with Wen Fu in a little monastery room in Hangchow, I suffered a lot. He whispered to me to say dirty words, words for a woman's body parts-not any woman's parts, a saltwater whore's, the kind who could give her body to foreign sailors. . . He lifted my nightgown off, and when I was naked. . . He pulled me back up, dragged me toward the door like a bag of rice. Then pushed me outside into the corridor of the monastery, where anyone passing by could have seen me, naked like that. (168-169)

Terrorism of Wen Fu is experienced by Winnie so she has become a “rooster” like figure (166). She has cried in this pain as Wen Fu forcefully has removed her gown. She has been battered and haunted by the fear of Wen Fu. He does not treat her as her wife but consider her a whore. Wen Fu is a typical patriarchal character who has used her venom and devilish acts against her wife. He has beaten her wife mercilessly. Nobody has protected Winnie from the wrath of Wen Fu. He has acted as a coward by beating her wife. Winnie has become hopeless in her marriage with Wen Fu. Wolestone Craft acknowledges that women is “annexed by her husband's group; he buys her as one buys a farm animal or a slave; he imposes his domestic divinities upon her; and the children born to her belong to the husband's family” (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 180). Winnie is not treated as a wife by Wen Fu. Winnie begs before her husband to stop torturing her. She has received worse treatment than an animal. She has to remain loyal and “good wife” of her devilish husband rather to question about him (170). No justice has received by Winnie. She has suffered from this pain throughout her life. Her psyche and self is damaged by Wen Fu.

Moreover, Winnie has been subjugated by her in-laws. Her dowry has been grabbed from her by her in-laws. Winnie has been given good dowry by her father. Her in-laws have taken this from her. They have used this dowry in their import and export busy. She has experienced domestic violence from her in-laws. Her in-laws do not require Winnie they need her property that she has been provided in dowry. Dowry is a way for her to save from the brutality of her in-laws. It has

remained custom in Chinese society that to bring more dowry is to receive less torture. Despite this, she has been tortured by her husband to bring more property. Winnie is exploited by Wen Fu's family. They have plundered all her dowry forcefully from her. She has no right over this property because as per the customs of Chinese misogynist traditional society, this property belongs to her in-laws. In this way, she has confronted injustice from her in-laws. Everything has been snatched from her. Her gifts from friends and family have been taken from her. Her rogue husband has beaten and snatched all the money from her that she has received from her father. She has suffered from physical and psychological violence from Wen Fu's family. Her mother-in-law has taunted her for bringing less property. Wen Fu has taken this dowry and has invested in his American business. This hypocrisy and treachery from Wen Fu's family has shattered her down. Winnie has not been respected in Wen Fu's family. She has been treated by them as their servant. Wen Fu and his family have shattered the dreams of Winnie. She regrets on her destiny by marrying in Wu Fu's family. Jean Chapman highlights that "dowry is associated with violence against brides by husbands and the bride's in-laws either as punishment for not providing sufficient dowry at the time of marriage or failing to meet continued demands for dowry after marriage" ("Violence against Women" 51). Winnie is lashed by her husband. She has denied to provide her money to her husband. Wen Fu has forcefully taken it from his wife. Winnie has been demeaned and belittled by her husband. She has a great respect for her husband. But her husband has treated her as his property. Winnie narrates this wretchedness of her life as:

All that dowry furniture I had chosen over those seven days? –Wen Fu's family took it all, shipped everything to America and England as part of their overseas export business. The quilts and their silk covers? Wen Fu's sisters and his brothers' wives took it all. And the wedding gifts from other family and friends, fancy silver picture frames, the heavy silver hair-brush and mirror, pretty English basins and painted pitchers? Wen Fu's mother put those on top of tables in her room. (150)

Winnie has dreamt that she should enjoy her life after marriage. She has given "best part" of anything to her husband (150). She does not know that she should suffer with her in-laws. Winnie has been subjected to viciousness in the family of Wen Fu. Wen Fu's family needs

money and dowry from her daughter-in-law. Wen Fu's family has married their son with Winnie because she can bring a good dowry with her. Winnie is devoid of every asset of her life that she has brought in dowry. She is simply looked as a domestic worker. Her in-laws have developed indelible wounds in her life. Okin believes that "women are not human beings of equal worth but rather subordinates whose primary (if not only) function is to serve men sexually and domestically" (18). Winnie has received unequal treatment from Wen Fu's family and her husband. They don't show any empathy and love with her. She has been meant for cooking food and to serve them. Wickedness is shown by Wen Fu and his family when they have taken her personal property. It reflects treacherous nature of Wen Fu and his family. Huntley writes that "*The Kitchen God's Wife* is about women's silences, and about the ways through which women can empower themselves to break those silences. Winnie is afflicted with a profound voicelessness" (106). Winnie has been strangled to death. She becomes helpless before her cruel husband and her in-laws. Her position has become marginalized in Wen Fu's family. Her mother-in-law has taken her personal things from her room and has kept them in her own room. This bad treatment has traumatized Winnie throughout her life.

Further, Auntie Miao is denigrated by misogyny of Chinese society. She is raped by son of Lin Family. He has left her and has married to another girl from Shanghai. This betrayal has damaged the identity of Auntie Miao. The son of Lin family has sexually enjoyed Auntie Miao. Later on, he escapes from his family and has married to another girl. It is not disgrace for the Lin family that their son has turned against the family customs. But Auntie Miao has remained unmarried for three years. Nobody has acknowledged her in the society. Everyone has questioned about her character. Son of Lin family is culpable for destroying the life of Auntie Miao. But no law and custom have lashed the son of Lin family. He has freely enjoyed his life. But Auntie Miao's life is damaged by it. Male chauvinism in Chinese society has forced Auntie Miao to become concubine of the son of Lin family. It has developed psychological trauma in Auntie Miao as her life is ruined by this incident. She has suffered the despotism and taunts of everyone in the society. Her condition has become traumatized. Chinese society has isolated and ostracized her. She has got the stigma when she has lost her virginity. This alienation from the society has killed her body and soul. Son of Lin family has shattered her life. She dwells in this pain throughout her life as no one has recognized her in the society and has supported her.

Simone de Beauvoir acknowledges that “it is the duplicity of the husband that dooms the wife to a misfortune of which he complains later that he is himself the victim. She is betrayed from the day he marries her. The traditional form of marriage . . . still involves oppression” (*The Second Sex* 462-463). Auntie Miao has been brutalized by son of Lin family. She is dying in this pain and guilt. Her life has been crushed. On another side, son of Lin Family is responsible for the marginalization of Auntie Miao but he enjoys his life. He is supported by Chinese customs and laws. Amy Tan presents this message as:

The Lin son ran off and married a girl from Shanghai instead-married for love, just like that! Of course, the family could have forced the Shanghai girl to become the concubine. But how would that look? A man who dislikes his future wife so much he takes on a concubine first to spite her. That local girl from a long time ago was Auntie Miao. So embarrassed, so mad-she had to wait another three years before anybody would consider her for a daughter-in-law. (135)

Son of Lin family has enjoyed unlimited privilege in Chinese society. He has utilized these powers and has exploited Auntie Miao. He has dragged her to the position of a concubine. Son of Lin Family has physically as well as psychologically destroyed the life of Auntie Miao. She has remained of nowhere. He dislikes her after he has fulfilled his sexual thirst. He has no concern about the life of Auntie Miao. But this incident has become a stigma for Auntie Miao. It has become a blot for her in rest of her life. In Chinese society, female privilege has been destroyed by misogynist society. No one has objected to son of Lin family in the society. Son of Lin Family is the real culprit but society has punished to Auntie Miao. Okin connotes that “rape is not seen in these cultures primarily as a violent assault on the girl or woman herself but rather as a serious injury to her family and its honor. The rapist can help restore the family’s honor and relieve it of a daughter who, as “damaged goods,” has become unmarriageable” (15). No one worries and bothers about the life of Auntie Mao. She has been treated as sexual doll by the misogynist society. Even her family is more concerned about their prestige and honour rather about her life. She is dehumanized by this incident in her life.

Conclusion

Winnie's mother, Winnie, Old Aunt and Auntie Miao have suffered from cultural oppression and violence in Chinese society from their husbands, families and in-laws. These women have been sexually torn by their husbands. Their identities have been destroyed by their families. Nobody has protected them from injustice and inequality from their husbands, families and in-laws. They have confronted heinous crimes from their husbands. Wen Fu, Jiang, Ted and other men have enjoyed cultural and social liberty of Chinese society. They have belittled and sexually molested their wives. They have treated their wives as concubines. No court or law has brought these evil and cruel men for prosecution. Winnie, Auntie Miao and other women have been raped by these men in Chinese society. Winnie's mother and Winnie have confronted marginalization of socio-cultural norms in Chinese society. But Wen Fu, Jiang and son of Lin family have been honoured with power and privilege in Chinese society. Under domestic violence, feudal and Confucian ideology Winnie's mother, Winnie and Old Aunt are traumatized in Chinese society.

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