

## RECALLING AND RECONFIGURING THE PAST AND PRESENT IN AMY TAN'S *THE BONESETTER'S DAUGHTER*

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to understand the role of memory in Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001). Such a study is called for since Tan's novel deals with how memory and its recording are important in understanding colonization, women's struggles against patriarchy, and issues arising from migrant experience. Several layers of memory are present in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, including the memories of the author, the characters, and specific communities. These memories are either articulated consciously in the text or enter unconsciously. Several layers of memories in this novel act like reference points or guiding milestones for the characters in their march towards subjectivity. On reading this novel one comes to understand that there are gaps in memories as there are gaps in relationships particularly in the mother/daughter relationship. The mothers and daughters share a bond that is strengthened through sharing their experiences. The daughters, as it were, draw on their mothers' memories that are passed on to them in the form of memoirs written by their mothers. Memoirs act like a link between mothers and daughters in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. The daughters find these texts to be nurturing but also realize that there are gaps in them which they must fill.

Both memory and identity play a major role in affecting the colonized or oppressed psyche. The representation of memory is a long-standing approach in literary texts ever since the olden times when literary texts narrated stories that in particular focused on a biographical rendering. More recently, however, attention has shifted to collective memory structures. Texts have become multilateral because the emphasis is now on both individual and communal stories. Memory is linked to social processes, and the personal memories of a subject intersect with those of other subjects who exist in a similar milieu. It is worthwhile to discuss the term cultural memory in this context. Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as "a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity." (Assman 2006, 210). Cultural memory is an integral aspect of subjectivity. Also, it intersects with personal memory. Aledia Assmann writes:

On the social level, with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups which, of course, do not "have" a memory tend to "make" themselves one by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions. This is what we call cultural memory. (Assman 2006, 210)

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Thus cultural memory becomes the guiding principle in studies of subjectivity since it affects social groups in their totality. In a globalized postcolonial world, the focus of memory studies has shifted to collective memory. In case of marginalized groups, collective memories are counter memories too, and tend to strengthen struggles for agency. Vita Fortunati and Elena Lamberti assert in this regard:

Thus in “gender studies” and in postcolonial studies what becomes pivotal is the concept of “counter-memory”— where the term “counter” emphasizes the fact that these are *other* memories belonging to minority groups and thus marginalized by the dominant cultures. Memory becomes an “act of survival,” of consciousness and creativity, fundamental to the formation and rewriting of identity as both an individual and a political act. (eds. Erll and Nunning 2008, 129)

Memory in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* becomes not only an act of survival, but also an act of revival and a path towards healthy subjectivities. This novel traces the struggles of three generations of women, how they are connected as subjects through their struggle and how their struggles differ with regard to the different cultural and geographical spaces they occupy. Several characters in the novel struggle with their past. The study of this novel also brings into focus how the past is of relevance in the present, or how history—familial, social and national—impacts the individual in multiple ways. Also, the revelation of memory and the alteration of ways of relating to it, change the bond between mothers and daughters in this novel. The mothers become memoirists and influence their daughters through their narration of their own lives. The writing of memoirs by the mothers becomes not only an act of analepsis but also acts as a resource for the daughters to come to terms with their diasporic existence. Migration displaces the memories of various characters living in diaspora. It distances the characters from their past, which they must reclaim to establish authentic subjectivities.

Investigation into memory has found currency in postcolonial studies because the erasure of the past and alteration of the cultural space of the homeland are simultaneous processes. The colonizer devalues the native’s culture and relegates it to a marginal space, while making his own culture central. The imperial culture then becomes the norm and in the process leads to a deletion of whatever does not fit into its definitions of the appropriate. Thereby, national memory too is deleted, or altered versions of it are circulated. This furthers the colonizer’s agenda to attain a position of power. The colonization of the native distances her from her past as well as native culture.

Erasure of memories becomes a tool for colonization not only within the native land but also in the space of diaspora. Diaspora is a space that distorts memory. Forgetting happens in the diasporic space in the absence of physical cues to sustain memory. This can be substantiated by what Ian Chambers observes in his book

*Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (1994). According to Chambers, memory in diaspora is sustained through cultural performance and literary writing. Culture in order to be remembered must be performed and brought under a sort of metaphorical spotlight. It must be written about, otherwise it risks being devalued and forgotten. Chambers writes in this regard: "It is in the circumstances of cultural speech that our particular formation, inheritance, memory and language are re-membered, temporarily rendered whole and authorised. It is in that time that our identities are performed, and that the only authenticity available to us is realised." (Chambers 1994, 118) He also observes that memories exist through spaces and are sustained through them. Our memories of life experiences and historical events that we may not have experienced first-hand are embedded in the landscapes or cityscapes where they happen. Chambers asserts that, "...the city's denuded streets, buildings, bridges, monuments, squares and roads are also the contested sites of historical memory and provide the contexts, cultures, stories, languages, experiences, desires and hopes that course through the urban body." (Chambers 1994, 92) Diaspora spells out an estrangement from these memories because of the physical distance from the native land. The lives of the characters in Tan's novel chosen for the present project are loaded with loss of their native and original cultural memories. For instance, there is a contradiction between LuLing's two lives. They are displaced from one another; the life in China is displaced by the life in the U.S. but it nevertheless tries to come to the surface. No matter how evasive of the past the diasporic existence may be, her Chinese self does demand expression. It is the meaning of her life, which is partly lost, and left behind when she migrates. She reaccentuates this past which, though subverted by migration, nevertheless, exists in the margins of her consciousness.

Memory of oppression is often traumatic. Trauma fissures personality by distorting memory. Cathy Caruth's studies are important in understanding the workings of memory and trauma. Caruth lays stress on how the trauma that has receded into the unconscious remains a hidden source of turmoil in the lives of individuals who were traumatized in the past. In this light, Caruth observes the importance of reintegrating the traumatic event with one's memory for the development of a healthy subjectivity, which is otherwise difficult to achieve:

The trauma thus requires integration both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall. (Caruth 1995, 153)

The trauma of colonization fails to get assimilated into memory and its memory is repressed into the unconscious. To lead a psychologically healthy life, these traumatic memories must be brought into the consciousness. Traumatic memories

of the past become debilitating to the characters' development unless they can assimilate them within their consciousness. Their memories can only lead to authentic subjectivities once they are recognized and accepted as essential parts of the self. Naeimeh Tabatabaei Lofti writes in this regard: "Memory narratives could be considered the psychological solutions, to heal the victims of traumatic past incidents. Narrative therapy could be an inseparable part of memory narratives, in which recalling is the main narrative strategy to cure the past" (Lofti 2014, 1912). Several characters in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* engage in these narrative strategies. Both LuLing and Bao Bomu write memoirs for their daughters. These act as a strategy not only for redemption of the self but also as a guide for their daughters. Autobiography is both a record of failing memories as well as a veritable manual for living life. Both LuLing and Bao Bomu record their memories when they realize that they will not be around forever to tell their daughters the stories of their lives. Bao Bomu writes just before committing suicide and LuLing writes at the early stages of memory loss caused by Alzheimer's disease.

Bao Bomu, LuLing and Ruth have their share of traumatic past which, for a long time, they do not share with others. Their memories are too painful to be related to anyone. At the outset, one comes to understand that LuLing's mother, whom she also calls Precious Aunty, must distort her past because passing it on to her daughter would mean passing on her legacy of pain. She tells LuLing funny stories about her maimed face to protect her from her past:

I was a fire-eater, she said with her hands and eyes. Hundreds of people came to see me in the market square. Into the burning pot of my mouth I dropped a raw pork, added chillies and bean paste, stirred this up, then offered the morsels to people to taste. If they said, "delicious!" I opened my mouth as a purse to catch their copper coins. One day, however, I ate the fire, and the fire came back, and it ate me. After that, I decided not to be a cook-pot anymore, so I became a nursemaid instead. (Tan 2001, 3)

She is wise enough to know that a child will not be able to understand the politics of how her past was shaped by revenge, jealousy and patriarchy. At the same time she knows that a narration of the past is bound to carry a distorted version of it. Often in narrativizing a memory, some part of the experience gets lost in the process. Caruth's statement can help to substantiate this point. She says, "The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much. Speech seems to offer, as Kevin Newmark says, the attempt 'to move away from the experience of shock by reintegrating it into a stable understanding of it'" (Caruth 1995, 154). Caruth, nevertheless, asserts the importance of narrating memory as a way towards recuperating from trauma. Memories have to be narrativised and shared with the larger community by the traumatized subject. Bao Bomu finally passes on her

memory to LuLing through a memoir before committing suicide. Passing on her memory is vital to her subjectivity, which has hitherto remained hidden in the ink makers' household. She must not hush her life up and pass it under the covers as dictated by a controlling society.

LuLing, like her own mother, keeps the past at bay, all these years, to shield her psyche from the traumatic past and keep Ruth away from it. As a mother she keeps her daughter from experiencing the pain that keeps threatening to bypass the strict borders of hiding. However, Ruth exorcises the ghost of guilt and endeavours to drain the pain from her life. Lofti observes in this context:

Ruth discovers the answer to her philosophical questions about life. Interestingly, this insight belongs to a feminine sphere and its instructors are all women who share their memories with their daughters, to protect them from hazards of life... this story develops by the act of documenting past. However, the written word serves to perform as the saviour of ancestral memories and preserves the history of a family and in larger scale, a nation. (Lofti 2014, 1915)

There are several roadblocks in the lives of the characters in the novel where things are left unsaid or are forgotten. LuLing's life demands the telling of secrets that hide behind her anxious self. In fact she has been devaluing and escaping from her past so far. She has been living through spurts of emotions all her life, but her memoir flows smoothly as if it comes from another woman, who is more in control of her emotions. The reader learns via her memoir that LuLing's depression is directly related to her belief that she is responsible for her mother's death. Her subsequent life takes off from this one incident. It is as if she is born again with the memoir her mother leaves for her. But the death of her mother is also an ending. It gives her a dark passenger in the form of an imagined ghost. She wants to communicate with this ghost from the past and to ascertain that her future is not tragic. The past is never past for LuLing. It exists on the peripheries of her subconscious. When Ruth breaks her arm and LuLing instructs her to write on sand with a chopstick, Ruth writes the word 'Doggie', which coincidentally is also the name that Precious Aunty used to call LuLing by. This triggers off a conversation between LuLing and the ghost:

"Please let me know you are not mad at me," her mother went on. "Give me a sign. I have tried to tell you how sorry I am, but I don't know if you've heard. Can you hear me? ...Ruth felt something touch her shoulder, and she jumped. "Ask her if she understood everything I just said," LuLing ordered. "Ask her if my luck has changed. Is the curse over? Are we safe? Write down her answer." (Tan 2001, 79)

This conversation reveals that LuLing's ways of dealing with the past are fantastical. She suffers from guilt and is haunted by ghosts that are finally exorcised through the bonds of belonging and solidarity she shares with other Chinese people. The load of memory is felt individually. Individuals rely on connections to minimize this load. Bonds with family and community enable individual subjects to assimilate and accommodate the ghosts of past. Thus Ruth knows the importance of the past and family when she delivers a speech at her Chinese thanksgiving party and says, "As the years go on, I see how much family means. It reminds us of what's important. That connection to the past." (Tan 2001, 93). For her, family becomes, a generator of stories, and perceptions; her connection to the past, replete with imaginary ghosts (like Bao Bomu's ghost that LuLing thinks haunts her) must be encountered collectively through communal ties. For LuLing, the exorcists of some sort are Ruth and the Chinese man who translates her memoir to Ruth. Memory ceases to be something confined to the private space and enters the communal space.

Apart from other communal bonds, Tan deals with the mother/daughter bond and sees it as the most basic relationship. There is a perceptible generation gap between mothers and daughters in her novel. While the daughters cannot understand the past struggles of their mothers, the mothers can foresee what is to happen in the lives of the daughters and try to get them ready for it. The novel in this sense moves towards the daughters' acceptance of their mothers' wisdom. This acceptance engenders between them a belonging that can guide them both. Regarding Ruth's relationship with her mother, Tan observes, that, "In an odd way, she now thought, her mother was the one who had taught her to become a book doctor. Ruth had to make life better by revising it" (Tan 2001, 47). The relationship between Ruth and her mother was earlier marred by Ruth's matrophobia (fear of being like her mother), and a continued dissatisfaction with Ruth on LuLing's part. It is worthwhile to bring in Adrienne Rich's ideas on the mother/daughter bond here to enrich this study. Adrienne Rich was a poet and radical feminist. She examines the changing facets of the relationship between mother and daughter in her book *Of Woman Born* (1976). She writes about how the mother/daughter bond is dialectically empowering and transforming, as well as restraining and constricting to the development of healthy subjectivities. She observes how cultural forces and patriarchal structures strengthen, weaken or fracture the mother/daughter bond. What Rich writes in this regard, can throw light on how Ruth is motivated by, "the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free" (Rich 1976, 236).

Rich's observation, that the mother/daughter bond is characterized by dichotomies can help us in understanding LuLing and Ruth's relation. Dichotomies are fairly evident in the relationship of Ruth and LuLing. One initially comes to see that the mothers and daughters are involved in a complex matrix where multiple forces play their role in moulding their lives and consciousnesses. Their bond is not

only a personal relationship but is influenced by cultural forces, patriarchy, their diasporic experiences and the geographical spaces they inhabit. While discussing the mother/daughter relationship in Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Goh Vern Ann writes, "In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the daughters have to confront secrecy and cultural barriers in their quest to make peace with their mothers." (Rich 1976, 37) The mothers and daughters are torn apart by their cultural conditioning and are brought together by the revelation of a history of the mother's struggle. When the history of these struggles is revealed to Ruth, she finds not only respect for her mother, but also an acceptance of the Chinese culture which her migration to America had restrained her from accessing and comprehending. Ruth realizes that she must go back to the relics of the past if she is to understand her mother and through it, understand her own self.

Ruth's subjectivity has been problematized by her diasporic existence. There is a continuous tussle between her wish to be purely American and her mother's continuous efforts to make her imbibe her Chinese heritage. She has several traumatic experiences. These include getting physically hurt as a child, being sexually exploited by a neighbour, being continually nagged and scrutinized as an American teenager by her mother, and experiencing the murder of a room-mate. Thus, we see that her life has several loose strands which must be integrated for a subjectivity to emerge. She reacts to some of her painful memories by becoming numb to them and losing her voice. When she falls off the slide in her school, she shuts off her voice out of shock and pain. Every year following it, she loses her voice at the same time. It becomes a kind of ritual and she even makes it a trope to agency when she infuses it with willingness. Her reaction is psychosomatic and she gives it a special meaning, making it a ritual that does not just happen but is performed. What was a reaction is now a response:

The following August, rather than just wait for muteness to strike, Ruth explained to her clients and friends that she was taking a planned weeklong retreat into verbal silence. "It's a yearly ritual," she said, "to sharpen my consciousness about words and their necessity."... She made her voiceless state a decision, a matter of will, and not a disease or mystery. (Tan 2001, 10)

Ruth has several bouts of forgetting in the novel much like her bouts of losing her voice. She frequently has a gut feeling that she is forgetting something but cannot point out with certainty what it is. Ruth follows the simple routine of counting on her fingers but that does not seem to be enough to order her memory. Possibly, Tan hints here that memory is an integral part of everyday life. It is essential for organizing life. Individuals often undermine the importance of memory by taking it for granted. Ruth undervalues memory, not realizing the grip, her own memories, her mother's and grandmother's memories, and collective memories, have over her. Ruth's life also seems to be abnormal at first but gains normality only when



she starts understanding these sets of memories, mainly her mother's memories. Shelley Thompson observes:

While LuLing seemed to be so opposed to adaptation into American life, Ruth had forgotten all of her heritage. LuLing felt isolated from the American world, while Ruth was completely absorbed in it. After Ruth found pieces of her mother's lost history, she deciphered and learned from them. Ruth felt the knowledge of her family's past was very much a part of her, as Tan had. This parallelism is also interesting in that Ruth learns to help LuLing adapt into American life, but also learns to listen to her mother's past and advice. (Thompson 2007, 3)

LuLing's memories exist in the wild, unmarked and unarticulated space. When the curtain rises over her life we see the real LuLing, with her struggles and dreams. Ruth faces her legacy and has new realizations about LuLing when she uncovers the mysteries of her mother's past. Her mother's memoir is incidentally a self help book that Ruth has required all along to fulfil her destiny as a woman and Asian immigrant in USA. She has been a co-author all her life, a ghost writer who ironically never saw the ghosts hiding in her past. The novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* has ghosts—literal and metaphorical—but is also infused with certain other metaphors like bones, caves, ink etc. to understand the value that the past and traditional ways of behaving hold for the characters in particular and humanity in general.

An interesting metaphor for LuLing's failing memory is the place that is called the "End of the World", the ravine behind LuLing's childhood home in China. It is the place of the forgotten, unconscious, unspeakable and can only be imagined:

The moving cliff gave us the feeling we had to look behind us to know what lay ahead. We called it the End of the World... And his wife said, "Don't talk about this anymore. You're only inviting disaster". For what lay beyond and below was too unlucky to say out loud: unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts. Everyone knew this. (Tan 2001, 165)

Symbolically, the ravine can be understood as the unconscious, a repository of the repressed. LuLing, as a child, sometimes wanders off into this forbidden ravine out of curiosity. But her final visit there is after her mother—whom she had hitherto known as Precious Aunty—dies by jumping into it. After this incident, the ravine becomes a symbol of the guilt and anxiety that LuLing will forever feel as a daughter. It is as if the pit sucks out her life. She records these things which she cannot talk about, in her memoir. But these are also the things she cannot forget: "About a lot of things, a stack of pages this thick. It is like her life story, all the things she didn't want to forget. The things she couldn't talk about. Her mother, the orphanage, her first husband, yours." (Tan 2001, 342) The things she had been hiding come out when she feels that she is losing her memory. Even then, she does



not speak of them because they are too painful to be spoken about. Being quiet about her past is a survival strategy for her.

Another metaphor from LuLing's childhood is the cave where Peking Man was discovered. The bones of early men found in a cave in Peking make an interesting metaphor for memory. Tan, in an interview with Molly Giles, reveals her fascination with caves as a metaphor for memory:

I also have a fascination for caves, and while revising *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, I decided to include imagery about excavations as a way to talk about memory... This had me thinking about how incomplete and fragile our memories are. We find bits and pieces of our own past or those of our parents or ancestors, and we try to reconfigure these fragments in order to understand ourselves, how we came to be who we are. (Tan 2001, 372)

LuLing's memoir is a way to deal with memory loss due to Alzheimer's by recording it. It is an analepsis because it is a coming to the surface, a rising of the unsaid to her consciousness. Nevertheless, her telling is elucidatory but incomplete. No matter how connected she is to her daughter, there are always gaps between them. Gaps of memory, incidentally, also become the gaps that separate LuLing from her mother. She fails to connect with her mother because she dies before LuLing could ever know that she was her real mother. Even though she does not exist, LuLing believes that her mother exists as a special power that still moves her life.

Just as the bones in the cave have been discovered to be human and not dragon bones, the meanings that Ruth attaches to her life also undergo important changes. After the discovery of her mother's memoir, Ruth's self definitions become relatively stabilized. They provide a link between the mother and daughter. Ruth begins to admire her mother and considers her a guiding principle in directing her identity formation after reading her memoir.

One sees how the relics of the mother's past can be influential in rounding off the jagged corners of the daughters' complex lives. The missing thread in the daughter's story is apparently present in the mother's story. This thread, however thin, connects the daughters with their mothers in a significant way. On another level, it is a connection not only between generations of a family, but also a connection between cultures and at that level, the novel also becomes a space where cultures cohabit in an uneasy relationship. On the other hand, America, in the novel, becomes a space where memories fade and cultures metamorphose and lose their force. Recollection of memories and upholding of their cultural values are ways used by migrants to remain linked to their past:

For immigrants, recollection is an important strategy used to negotiate a marginal position in an alien society... Generally speaking, all recollection

entails one's conscious negotiation with and active reconstitution of the memory of the past. Put another way, all memories are socially and culturally reconstituted within a specific historical and cultural context and emerge in the form of narratives. (ed. Bloom 2002, 110)

In one sense, therefore, Tan herself engages in a kind of autobiographical writing. Tan draws on her own experiences and those of several generations of women before her. Through personal history, she tries to comprehend the lives of Chinese immigrants. She weaves meanings out of her experiences. In an interview with Gretchen Giles she says that the questions she is grappling with in her novels "became a filter for looking at all my experiences and seeing them from different angles. That's what I think that a storyteller does, and underneath the surface of the story is a question or a perspective or a nagging little emotion, and then it grows" (Tan 2001, 2).

Therefore it can be concluded that the memories of several characters in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* exist as a complex formation involving factors like biology, culture, language, oppression and experiences of migration etc. Memory is influenced by the larger cultural space and is not simply inscribed as a code on the tissues of the brain. Also, memories are shared among individuals, like those that LuLing and Ruth share as mother and daughter or even those that are shared among Tan and the characters since she utilizes her personal memory and life experiences in writing this novel. Connections are established between mothers and daughters through the memoirs which function as relics of the past. Memories must be narrated and shared for establishing relations among different generations of women who are estranged in space and time for various reasons. Sharing one's memory with others also becomes a way of dealing with one's past. It helps the individual to emerge out of the complications of the experience of oppression and thereby become an agent.

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