

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN AMY TAN'S *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE***

Nomita Loktongbam and S. P. Dhanavel

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Amy Tan is one of the celebrated Chinese-American writers who have been highly recognized as a feminist writer highlighting a world where women are strained to live a life of rules and conventions exercised and implemented by men. Tan in *The Kitchen God's Wife* portrays the predicament of an exceptionally aspiring woman who suffers domestic violence in the hands of her husband but yearns tirelessly to come out of this cramping role in society and contends with her male counterpart on a foothold of equality. Tan has beautifully brought out the inhuman treatment a woman is subjected to in the form of rights of a husband. In this world crimes against women and children happen every single day with forensic meticulousness. This paper throws light on how Tan deals with the suffering, the physical and emotional torture, the humiliation and injustice her women characters face not only in the society but also within the four walls of a house. In short, Tan brings out the domestic violence against women.

**Keywords:** American fiction, Chinese-American literature, Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Domestic violence, Patriarchy.

Domestic violence is a form of oppression that occurs within a social context that makes violence against an oppressed group possible and even acceptable. Women are considered an oppressed group (McCue 2008). As the women's movement gained momentum during the 1960s and 1970s, an augmented awareness of domestic violence issues emerged within the United States. Among all the theories, feminist theory is influential in raising the public consciousness about gender role conditioning and bringing about the egalitarianism between man and woman in the society. The horrors of domestic violence are now all too well known and are regularly addressed and criticized in the mass media. It is a grave and far-reaching social crisis which is deep rooted in the society, across all economic and age groups, difficult to uproot it completely. Any culture or custom that considered and places women in subordinate positions within society or in the family has the potential to turn violent and aggressive. Women are devalued, subordinated, and harassed daily. Buzawa (2003) states, "Many writers have used different expressions to describe violence between intimates. For some, it is a problem of women in marital relationships being assaulted, and the terms 'wife abuse' and 'wife battering' are most appropriate. Others note that the real problem is the tacit societal acceptance of violence against women." Some have considered domestic violence as fate, some fight for justice but some remain as silent receivers of pain and injustice till the last breath of life.

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From the bygone days onwards even women have been glorified as goddesses, but simultaneously tainted as, objects of sexual gratification for husbands. In the present situation, themes relating to domestic violence, wife beating, sexual harassment, violence towards women, pornography and rape are among the burning topics very often surfacing in mass media. The identity of how a woman is recognized and acknowledged also depends on the interpersonal relationships on domestic and familial relationships. The distinctiveness of a woman is also and recognized by the society. Beginning from the dawn of the civilization, there has been an ongoing tug of war between man and woman to come to the wrapping up of equality between the opposite sexes. Even though women have raised their voices and demand for equality, there are still boundaries exercised on them politically, economically or socially on the basic rights and freedom of women. One of the main themes often discussed and explored in the contemporary literature is the plight of women both within the family and in the society.

Jonetta Rose Barras (1991), a reviewer of the *Washington Times*, remarks: Tan's characters are those "who have seen their innocence stolen, blossomed despite the hardships and shaped their destinies with hope where circumstances dictate none should exist." *The Kitchen God's Wife* also contains a fragment of Tan's mother Daisy's life experiences. Rosinky (2007) states in *Amy Tan: Author and Storyteller* that Tan's mother Daisy is influenced mostly in her literary works, especially *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Snodgrass (2004) describes in *Amy Tan: A Literary Companion* that, "*The Kitchen God's Wife* marks Amy Tan's feminist writing at its most poignant." Adams (2005) considers Winnie as "the mythological Guo 'is' the Chinese women in Nanking during the Sino-Japanese War, all of them suffering under patriarchy and/or imperialism, and without safe structures." A woman may be seen and unstated by her father in one way, her husband another way, her son and daughter in some other ways, and by herself in yet another way. The estimation of each of the perspectives depends on his/her interface in diverse situations. Tan draws attention to a particular era in China where there is no impartiality between men and women. The reviewer of *Atlantic Journal*, Emily Ellison (1991) comments, "every scene teems with smells, taste, sights, sounds, and textures that reveal China as it was at the end of the Ching dynasty (1644-1912) and before the Communist takeover in 1948."

Tan uses the legend of the Kitchen God's Wife in her novel "as commentary on Chinese patriarchal society which rewards the fallen husband instead of the charitable wife" (Snodgrass 2004). The Kitchen God resides in a central frame like a king or religious icon and writes with a quill on a table. Zhang was a wealthy farmer because of his hardworking wife Guo. But he chased away Guo when his second wife Lady Li came. Soon he was reduced to a pauper. He was given shelter by his wife Guo, when he came to know of this he leaped into the fire. In heaven Jade Emperor named Zhang as the Kitchen God who has to report the wrongdoing

every year. The legend regards the Kitchen God's Wife as unpredictable, sometimes cranky or biased against the household if the family members of the house that failed to impress him. The Kitchen God characterizes "the superior value of males even bad ones, over females in a patriarchal society" (Snodgrass 2004). Tan beautifully brings out the pitiable and dismal circumstances of women through the mother-daughter relationship in this novel. Winnie says, "nobody worshipped me for living with Wen Fu. I was like that wife of Kitchen God. Nobody worshipped her either. He got all the excuses. He got all the credit. She was forgotten" (Tan 1991).

The main concept which makes women to revolt against men is the patriarchy system enabling men to be in charge of politics, legal rights, economics and religious beliefs in the society. The physical structures and norms of the society instigate men to rule, suppress and oppress the women in the society. In the patriarchal system, equality between men and women does not exist. Winnie stays at her Uncle's house, accepting whatever her relatives tell her to do. In the same way after getting married she submits herself to her husband and becomes a victim of domestic violence and sexual harassment. "Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior that is used by one intimate partner to gain and maintain power and control over another partner. It can involve violence such as physical assault: hitting, kicking, pinching, choking, slapping, biting, throwing things and shoving. Sometimes it ends in death" (Newmen and Newmen 2008). Tan highlights the pathetic conditions of those women who are victims of domestic violence and have to suffer within the four walls of a house, a world of wife beating, a torrent of malevolence, brutality and humiliation. Winnie is often raped and sexually abused and assaulted by her husband. She is regarded as a sex object and has to satisfy him whenever, wherever and whatever time he wants. McCue (2008) observes that sexual abuse does not have to include violent rape. It can be demanding sex when the other partner says no. In Winnie's words, "That bad man was using my body, as if I were -what? - a machine!" (Tan 1991). Winnie is a victim of spousal abuse, a victim of a husband who forces her to crawl on the floor and beg for sex and say dirty words. Their skin is compared to "white jade," and "summer peach" and their bodies to "chamber pots" (Tan 1991). At one point when Winnie said no to what her husband asks her to do, she is dragged "like a bag of rice. He opened the door, then pushed me outside into the corridor of the monastery, where anyone passing by could have seen me, naked like that" (Tan 1991). Even though Winnie is helpless and started pleading, "Open the door! Open!" And he said nothing, did nothing, until several minutes had passed and I finally said, "I will say them" (Tan 1991). Winnie is tormented emotionally and physically abused and tortured by her husband as his fundamental rights.

Even though Winnie suffers a lot in the hands of her husband, she understands and criticizes the circumstances which have enforced her to accept this atrocious

behavior in the hands of her husband. Tan observes that despite torture and troubles, they lack the courage and fail to revolt against the traditions and live without the support of the husband. Women have no role in the family as well as in the society where they are living. Winnie uses her dowry money to feed her husband and his friends. Winnie cannot say anything because she knows, "this was China. A woman had no right to be angry. But I was unhappy, knowing my husband was still dissatisfied with me, and that I would have to go through more suffering to show him I was a good wife" (Tan 1991). This is the plight of women, the value of women in the society. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1972) says, "for him she is sex absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is incidental. As opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute - she is the other."

Winnie's upbringing compels her to endure sufferings silently. "When Wen Fu chased Min away, he came back to my bed. By that time he was sleeping also with many different kinds of women; native girls, prostitute, even a schoolteacher. I think they were all the same to him, like a piece of furniture to sit on, or a pair of chopsticks for everyday use. If I said one word against any of this or against anything else he liked a big fight would come, always during daytime. I tried to keep my mouth closed so our house would stay peaceful" (Tan 1991). Winnie despite being a dutiful wife finds herself lonely and has an estranged relationship with her husband. Tan pictures a society in which women are born to gratify men's desires and submit to their wants and dislikes. Winnie tolerates the unwanted and forceful demand of sex with her husband to stay alive for her children. As a mother to a child and as a dutiful wife, Winnie endures all the sufferings with a hope that one day her husband will transform and love her. She is terrified to go against her husband whenever he rapes her, "that night, with a gun to my head, he raped me, telling me I had lost privileges of a wife and now had only the duties of a whore. He made me do one terrible thing after another. He made me murmur thanks to him. He made me beg for more of his punishment. I did all these things until I was senseless, laughing and crying, all feeling in my body gone" (Tan 1991). As Beneke (1997) states "virtually any stress or distress - physical pain, situations of danger, challenges, excessive consumption of alcohol, fear, "grossness," grief can serve as occasion for boys and men to prove manhood." Winnie escapes to America after getting divorce from Wen Fu. Her character is shaped by the experiences she had endured and suffered in the hands of her husband. Winnie says to Pearl, "I didn't tell you about my past, which includes not necessarily through fault of her own, abortion, child abuse and infanticide, and still you thought I was a bad mother. If I had told you - then it would be even worse" (Tan 1991).

Winnie is unable to fight against her husband, against the society which supports her husband's deeds. As Newmen and Newmen (2008) explain, religion is in favour

of men: "There is the religious belief that has already been mentioned. Some husbands believe their wives are their property, and pervert Bible verses to excuse and promote violence to control their wives. They believe wives should submit to their husbands." Winnie becomes a puppet because of her children even though she knows the hopelessness of patriarchal marriage. She undergoes three abortions to protect her children. She considers the procedure of abortion "a form of self-protection, a reclamation of her dignity, and maternal love for the unborn children" (Snodgrass 2004). She considers herself like a chicken in a cage, mindless, never dreaming of freedom (Tan 1991). She spends two years in jail for leaving her husband without divorce.

Domestic violence also has its impact on the children. In the name of seeking control in the house, what emerges is a picture of obnoxious men in the hunt to control every aspect of lives of women and children by using not only physical or sexual violence but also unvarying intimidation, mortification and other forms of poignant psychological abuse. Children struggle to articulate forceful manner of fright, misery, rage, embarrassment, remorse, perplexity and despair which inexorably affect not only their self-esteem, their manners, their edification, their health, their aptitude to make acquaintances and their bond with their mother. Wen Fu not only beats and rapes his wife, he also shows her callous temperament to his child. Whenever Wen Fu began to shout, she always cried, cried all night long, and would not stop until I told her more lies. "Yiku, be good, and your life will be good too" (Tan 1991). The effect is not only the mental torture to the woman of the family but also to the kids. An aura of fear, horror and terror fills the minds of the children. They lose faith and trust in their parents. Newmen and Newmen (2008) observe, "Children who witness domestic violence are seriously affected by this crime. Frequent exposure to violence in the home predisposes children to social, emotional, and physical problems." As Winnie states, she saw her daughter Yiku "had rolled up into a little ball. She was making small animal sounds. And I was crying and begging Wen Fu, "Forgive me! I was wrong! Forgive me!" (Tan 1991). She has to bow down to calm her child. "She became a strange baby. She never looked at people's faces. She pulled out hair from one side of her head. She banged her head on the wall. She waved her hands in front of her face and laughed. She did not cry. She spoke no words, only the outside shapes of them, like the voice of a ghost" (Tan 1991). This is the outcome of domestic violence which is happening in every nook and corner of the world. McGee (2000) remarks in *Childhood Experiences of Domestic Violence*, "experiencing domestic violence means that children are exposed to and affected by a range of abusive behaviours." Newmen and Newmen (2008) add that "Domestic violence includes violence and abuse to all members of a household." Winnie says, "he cursed and called me all kinds of bad names, the same ones he had used throughout the marriage: "Whore! Foxdevil! Traitor!" (Tan 1991). Winnie's husband Wen Fu uses bad words and

abuses her often. Winnie tells Pearl, “you looked like Mochou. You looked like Yiku. You looked like Danru, Danru especially. All of them together. All the children I could not keep but could never forget,” (Tan 1991). Winnie sees all her lost children in Pearl. Northrup (2005) comments in *Mother Daughter Wisdom*: “Our bodies and those of our daughters were created by a seamless web of nature and nurture, of biology informed by consciousness, which we can trace back to the beginning of time. Thus every daughter contains her mother and all the women who came before her. “ Pearl represents all Winnie’s lost children Mochou died stillborn; Yiku from dysentery and Danru died from a disease spread by Japanese-raised rats. Winnie searches for a goddess, a unique one and tells her daughter, “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 everything bad. See her name: Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world” (Tan 1991). The changing of the Kitchen God to a female Goddess highlights the coming up of Winnie in the society which is dominated by men.

Tan is rightly acknowledged for highlighting especially the civil rights of women and also other social issues corrupting the society. She has succeeded in revealing and exploring the predicament of women who are helpless, subjugated, humiliated and sexually exploited. Tan’s approach has been an advocacy for the development and upgrading the status of women rather than outright condemnation of a representation of a repressive male-dominated society. Amy Tan portrays women as fighters, defenders and survivors of all circumstances in varied forms.

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