



Postmemory Formations: Healing The Residues Of Personal And Historical Trauma In Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

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Abstract: History, memory and distress have become the three conspicuous dimensions of Trauma Studies, with the surge in conflicts, unprecedented wars and insurgencies across the globe. The aftermath of trauma is enormous in the case of women, who face complex trauma due to the treatment of gender and the complexities of war that allows the ordeal to perpetuate from one generation to another. This postmemory formation occurs when flustered memories and pain experienced by the first generation are transmitted to the second generation through narrative discourses. This study will focus on Amy Tan's portrayal of the personal and historical trauma, generational alienation in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, which is fixed through chronicling her repressed memories, where the subsequent generations understand, internalize and negotiate healing.

Keywords: Personal and historical trauma, postmemory, narration, domestic abuse, healing

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of trauma can be traced from the literary period of pre-structuralism to post- structuralism. It includes Freud's theory of psychoanalysis that forms the basis of trauma studies extending to other fields of literature: the social, cultural and historical spectrum which intersects with war, holocaust, partition, refugee and immigrant literature. In a globalized set-up, the pain of trauma is revisited in the writings by and on immigrant and expatriate women. According to a study on *Contextualizing the Trauma Experience of Women Immigrants from Central America, South America, and Mexico*, Kaltman et al notes that "The majority of the women reported some type of trauma exposure in their countries of origin, during immigration, and/or in the United States." (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3544003/>). The relegation is doubled, in the case of immigrant women, thereby they face multiple traumatic experiences based on gender roles, colour, custom and ethnicity. The use of trauma in literature came to light by the theory of Cathy Caruth's *The Unclaimed Experience – Trauma, Narrative and History*, she remarks about the role of memory as a means of traumatic relapse at a later stage: "The story of trauma, then, as narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality- the escape from a death, or from its referential force- rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (7), asserts the connection of memory with trauma. Yet another scholar, Marianne Hirsch in her foundational work *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* promulgates the concept of postmemory that defines trauma in a new light: trauma that is passed from one generation to another. Although not a firsthand witness to trauma, the impact of inherited trauma affects the subsequent generation so deeply that they nominally exhibit distress, experienced by the previous generation. Hirsch, belonging to the descent of Holocaust survivors, radicalized the notion of postmemory as a response to their painful experience. She further illuminates the term of postmemory "In doing so in this

essay I proposed to use the holocaust as my historical frame of reference but my analysis relies on and, I believe, is relevant to numerous other context of dramatic transfer that can be understood as postmemory" (108). A term that was confined to the literatures of *Shoah* is now thrown open to the manifold discourses of generational trauma.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The late 1970s witnessed an amalgamation of diverse fields of Asian, South East Asian, Postcolonial literature and Asian-American Studies. Seiwoong Oh, in the Introductory part to *Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature*, remarks "The commonalities between the two (Asian-American Studies and Postcolonial Studies) have allowed scholars to borrow ideas from one another..." (p.vii). Asian-American Literature is well noted for exploring immigrant themes of diaspora in hostland such as displacement, racism, assimilation and loss of identity but less focus is given to the assertions and reasons that drove the migrants to flee their homeland. Considering this, the abandoned past that haunts the migrants as traumatic memories and resolving them through mediated forms is an area that needs investigation. Marianne Hirsch's *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* elaborates on the term of postmemory and the means by which subsequent generations inherit pain. "These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation"(107), this process involves the strife of inherited memories, reaches a point by which the descendants of the victims understand and negotiate the pain. Understanding and imagining the pain of historical and personal trauma other than the victim is impossible but reliving them of this agony is possible through the mediated system of postmemory, such as narration, pictures and other forms, by which, the second generation immigrants connect and understand the first generation's estranged behaviours as unjustified not only due to displacement but also due to past traumatic experience.

III. DISCUSSION

Marianne Hirsch, in her seminal work on postmemory features the thought of generational trauma: "Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (5). With respect to this suggestion, this paper aims to focus on the impact of personal and historical trauma on the Chinese born mother and the affective force of postmemory on the American born daughter. Amy Tan, the second generation immigrant writer, in *The Kitchen God's Wife* explores the dominance of patriarchal society and the brutalities of the war affecting the Chinese migrants especially, women and the vicious residues that aperture the bond between the two generations.

The third novel of Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* depicts the divided relationship between the first generation immigrant mother and second generation American born daughter. The beginning of the novel itself is set off on the remarks of the daughter Pearl "Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument" (Tan, 11). The dregs of trauma that the mother carried from her bolted life in China, is strewn in controlled manner onto her daughter. Positioned as a speech and language clinician, Pearl grew disillusioned about her job, after her Chinese mother "put those thoughts in (her) head (Tan, 15); the apparent understanding formed, that the candidature consisted only of the two. The story throughout, accentuates the mother's impactful behaviour upon her daughter so much that her husband Phil commented that Pearl "was driven by blind devotion to fear and guilt" (Tan, 15). At times her intellect was manipulated by her mother's thoughts and mannerism. She states that whenever she is with her mother she feels as though she has "to spend the whole time avoiding land mines." (Tan, 16) and she is still unsure about giving in to her family obligations. The fragile mother daughter bond is further weakened by the daughter's reticent aliment, concealed from her mother (Tan, 31). After the funeral of Grand Auntie, Pearl receives a present left by the deceased, a Chinese deity, permitting Winnie to recount the tale of the Kitchen God's wife whose position was devalued by one last act of penitence revealed by the husband- his suicidal act, allowing the treacherous husband to rise to the position of the Kitchen God. The demoted travails endured by the Kitchen God's wife corresponds to the position of Winnie who suffered, owing to the patriarchal treatment of her wicked husband which is also inclusive of ruthless hostilities.

IV. PERSONAL TRAUMA

Winnie's narrative elucidates two types of trauma: personal and historical trauma. Personal trauma is a distressful experience suffered by an individual, it is subjective in nature and can be passed to the subsequent generation, articulating the intergenerational affiliation of postmemory. In case of personal trauma, Winnie's life portrayed in pre-Communist China highlights a male dominated society where women, from daughters to handmaidens are treated as material possessions. Winnie's household believed in the age-old practice of women's subservience to men are evident in her early childhood spent at her father's sumptuous house. Born to a westernized mother, who was termed "double second" after owning the second position of Jian Sao-yen's deceased wife, Winnie had to live in confinement, as the house was shared among other wives of her polygamist father. Though she grew in a controlled environment, her pampered position reversed, when her unnamed mother suddenly disappeared and Winnie was forced out to her uncle's place. The emotional residue left behind by the mother's disappearance is evident in Winnie's revelation, even after her marriage to Jimmy Louie, where she meets Lin, a doctor and ex-suitor who was duly rejected based on Old Aunt's opinion. She says "If I had not lost my mother so young, I would not have listened to Old Aunt" (Tan, 67).

Left with no well-wisher, Winnie was trapped in a feudal marriage to Wen Su, a misfortune that befell in her early prime. Though the father Jian Sao-yen fails to raise his daughter, he is given the status of approving her marriage. Bonded by paternal enslavement, she accepts the marriage with clothing, four thousand yuan and nuptial items as a dower prize from him. Traumatic events soon culminate after Wen Fu, a second in-charge pilot flying against the Japanese during World War II, was allotted lodging in the pilot's quarters. The affectionate care rendered on Winnie at her in-laws place, now turns into a nightmare as she undergoes sexual assault, where she is asked to utter abusive language, degrade herself to the role of a concubine urging for such activities. Upon refusing such acts, she was kicked naked out of her own quarters and will be allowed to enter her room, only by begging for such acts. The sadist pleasure that Wen Su derived from marital rape is inconceivable in several instances portrayed in the novel. Winnie was traumatized by the relentless harassment, domestic abuse, marital rape, abortions and death of her children: "I grieved so much, and yet I could not show anything. My heart hurt the same way as when I lost my mother... I would recall many times. When my husband had exhausted himself on top of me, after he had fallen asleep, I would get up quietly and look into the mirror... And sometimes when things were worse than that, when I wondered what I have done to deserve such a terrible life (Tan, 205). In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Hirsch discusses how personal and familial narratives play a role in shaping memory: "Children of survivors of massive traumatic events inherit a personal relationship to the past that they 'remember' only through the stories, images, and behaviors with which they grew up. But these stories, while they are transmitted within the family, are also culturally shaped and publicly received" (22). Though Winnie proves to be one of Amy Tan's resilient women and emerges successfully from this abusive marriage, Postmemory formations occur in the American setting as she carries the repressed memories of her daughter's biological identity.

A few hours before fleeing to America, she is been stalked and raped by her ex-husband, her daughter's presence frequently reminds her, to hold onto her secrets or she may lose her honor as a mother, a Chinese value that the parents maintain. This leads to intergenerational conflict and Pearl Louie believes that this behavior is due to the impact of Chinese culture but, in fact it is the outcome of postmemorial developments that occurred during the traumatized final days spent in China. Though the intergenerational connection is built on love, it still has a communication gap. In spite of Winnie having destroyed all the photographs that would remind her of the abusive Wen Fu, there is still an emotional residue of trauma left behind by both the mother and grandmother of Pearl Louie.

V. HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Hirsch in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, explicitly writes: "The events of the Holocaust are my point of departure; they are the historical, methodological, and theoretical anchoring of my work on postmemory..."(9). The cruelties of the Sino-Japanese war began as a mission to expel the Western influences over China; the divide between the Nationalist and Communist expedited further advancement into Chinese territory as far north of Mongolia (Snodgrass, 105). Winnie and her child experienced life threatening encounters when the Japanese jets struck some of the busy cities and people, including the wives of the Kuomintang air force pilots, had to flee from one city to another evading death. Snodgrass in her Compendium on Amy Tan asserts the sufferings of common man: "Tan depicts a

large cast of characters trapped by hunger, disease, loss, confusion, and terror at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), a general trauma the Chinese call *taonan* (168). Winnie encounters a sudden bombing of the Kunming marketplace and her frantic search for her son Damru represents the fear of *taonan*, a phenomenon most of the Chinese peasants experienced during World War II. Winnie's constant refuge from the bombarded places, marital abuse and established traditions occurs parallel to *taonan*: "This word Taonan... you are lucky you never had to experience this. It earns terrible danger is coming, not just to you but to many people, so everyone is watching out only for himself. It is the fear that chases you, a sickness, exactly like a hot fever in your brain. So your only thoughts are, "Escape! Escape! ... The fever turns into a chill and runs down your back and into your legs ... you are running and stumbling (Tan, 208). Taking refuge, rationing food, witnessing the loss of pilots; adversely affected Winnie and her comrades, where they struggled to grapple with the cruelties of the war.

In another instance, Winnie allows a girl to take the place of a concubine in her own home, she says "The war has made many people that way, full of despair, desperate to live without knowing why." (272). She also adds: "Maybe that would not be such a terrible disgrace. The war had changed people's morals. No one questioned too closely why a woman who left one year with a husband now came back home without him" (279). Her life was "...nothing less than the work that Min did at the Great world. Torture pulling her apart by inch..." (280). The ravages of the political war that the Chinese faced runs parallel to the personal conflict Winnie had against her wicked husband. Like the helpless citizens belonging to war rummaged places, Winnie was helpless in the hapless marriage. An individual's traumatic experience resonates and represents the collective experience of the Chinese peasants and the plight faced by the spouses of air force pilots thereby highlighting the historical trauma which is dominant to the concept of postmemory.

VI. CONCLUSION

The remnants of traumatic memories such as personal and historical trauma conceded to the descendants are central to the theory of postmemory. At a personal level, the immediate posterity are treated as the forerunners in the familial affiliation, impacted by the affective force of inherited memories and at a historical level, the inherited memories are extended to the community at large, identifying the individual's trauma as a representation of collective trauma. Generally the collective trauma, identified as a cultural trauma, is a focus of study in most of the war and immigrant literatures, but in the case of this book, Tan depicts the historical trauma as expediting personal pain. Snodgrass writes in her book *A Literary Amy Tan Companion*, that "Winnie's long list of repressed memories and regrets concerns marriage and family more than war or material loss" (103).

The strained familial relationship is amended, when Winnie tries to substitute all the love that she failed to receive from her mother and showers it on her daughter. Nevertheless, the traumatic events from her horrified nuptial life, doesn't allow her to rest, as every little action of her daughter is evaluated based on her sired rapist father. Healing the mother-daughter relationship instigates, as Winnie recounts her tale. This Talk-Story unravels the secrets that the mother-daughter have kept apart from one another. "By bridging an intergenerational gap between Chinese mother and Amerasian daughter, the story relieves Winnie of guilt over Pearl's siring by a rapist and passes on hope as the gift of the older generation to their children" (94) remarks Sanodgrass, expediting healing – healing the residues of personal and historical trauma.

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