

Women, Silence, and Agency in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

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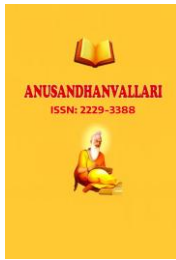
Abstract: Amy Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), stages the life of Winnie Louie, a Chinese immigrant woman who has spent decades withholding the story of an abusive first marriage and a war-torn past from her American-born daughter, Pearl. This study examines how the novel represents women's silence not as a fixed attribute of feminine passivity but as a mobile condition that is first imposed by patriarchal and cultural authority and later reworked into a resource for self-expression and agency. The research problem it addresses is a persistent tendency in the existing criticism to treat silence, trauma, memory, and cultural conflict as discrete thematic concerns rather than as linked stages of a single trajectory. Working through close reading and feminist literary analysis, and drawing on theories of silence and voice, of trauma and memory, and of gendered agency, the paper argues that the novel is organised around a sustained movement from silence, through oppression, memory, and storytelling, toward voice, agency, and a re-authored identity. The analysis shows that Winnie's silence originates in fear, marital violence, and social isolation; that her belated narration follows the fragmented rhythm of traumatic recall; and that the act of telling reconstitutes her as the subject rather than the object of her history. It further contends that the agency the novel imagines is partial, negotiated, and relational, achieved with the collaboration of other women and transmitted across generations to Pearl. In foregrounding the interdependence of silence and agency, the study clarifies the feminist logic of Tan's narrative form and contributes to the criticism of Asian American women's writing and its recovery of suppressed female histories.

Keywords: Amy Tan; *The Kitchen God's Wife*; women's silence; female agency; trauma and memory; storytelling; Chinese American literature

1. Introduction

Amy Tan plays a key and visible role in contemporary American Asian American literature. The success of *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) commercially and critically helped to bring Chinese American writing to the mainstream of the American literary canon. Her repeated emphasis on immigrant mothers and their assimilated daughters has shaped the reader's image of the inner life of Chinese American women (Bhattacharya, 2019). *The Kitchen God's Wife* has become a key text for Asian American women to gain agency against the limitations of patriarchy, not in individual heroism, but by drawing strength from each other (Bhattacharya & Neelakantan, 2019). Her writing is not only popular fiction, but an archive of texts that rings with meaning in an experience that was largely mute in the Chinese tradition and the American stream.

The Kitchen God's Wife (1991) is, however, the longer consideration of the conditions under which women can be given permission to speak, in many ways. Throughout the novel, the story of Winnie Louie, the moral centre of the novel, follows that of Tan's own mother (Adams, 2003), whose life in feudal-era China, terrible marriage to Wen Fu, and decimation was caused by the Second World War. The concern of a plot summary is event, and the novel is a



much more focused one on what isn't told, the terrible truths kept 50 years ago from Winnie, and that govern her relationship with her daughter. It is their women who are not as bound by what happens to them as by their myriad relationship to speech, what they are not allowed to say, what they might be inclined to withhold, what they finally dare to tell.

Silence is more than an absence of sound, or an absence of communication; it's a socially constructed state full of history and politics, in feminist thought. The original account by Tillie Olsen (1978) discussed the lack of voice in situations where a culture does not expect women to voice themselves, and Adrienne Rich (1979) wrote about the lies, secrets and enforced reticence by which women's experience is dealt with. In Asian American studies, King-Kok Cheung (1993) complicated any easy equation of silence and oppression and describes how silences that are imposed are not the same as expressive and protective silences. From this viewpoint 'silence' is a wound and it's also possibly a language.

To speak is the correlative of silence—it is the ability of a subject to act, to will, to create the conditions of her own life. In feminist theory, agency has come to mean not a heroic assertion of power over others to escape from power and to be pure and autonomous, but rather the use of "power in" and "power against" those power structures that constrain it (Butler, 1990). Rereading this, one might question: how do *The Kitchen God's Wife's* women travel from one state to the other, unevenly, partially, with assistance from others?

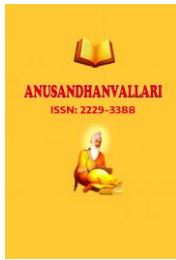
There is a wide body of literature on Tan that has revealed many of the questions that the novel poses: How is history portrayed and what is its attitude towards trauma? How does the novel deal with the mother/daughter relationship and how does it negotiate a bicultural identity? But these have typically been studied separately. Studies on silence tend to focus on the mechanics of traumatic memory, while studies on trauma rarely broach the subject of agency, and accounts of cultural conflict rarely make the connection between the daughter's final realization and the mother's recovered voice (Guo, 2023; Yang, 2023; Kareem, 2024). Fewer studies have explored the interdependence and adjacency of these elements, that is, how they are sequential and mutually dependent aspects of a process.

In this paper, it is considered as a process of negotiation for agency from imposed silence to the negotiated agency, as documented in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. It claims the novel has a definite movement, from silence and oppression through memory and storytelling to voice and agency, to a re-authored identity, and that this development is the novel's feminist core. Most importantly, the argument is that the agency that is finally envisioned in the novel is not total, or single: it is partial, limited by the very histories that it meets; it is achieved through the solidarity of women; it is transmitted across the generational divide to Pearl. The sections that follow place this claim in the context of current scholarship, establish the theoretical and methodological underpinnings for this claim, and flesh it out by engaging closely with the novel's major movements.

2. Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine how patriarchal and cultural authority impose silence on women in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*.
- To trace how fear, isolation, and traumatic memory shape the fragmented rhythm of Winnie Louie's narration.
- To analyse storytelling as the process through which imposed silence is converted into voice and agency.



- To explore the intergenerational negotiation of identity between Winnie and her daughter, Pearl.
- To synthesise existing scholarship on patriarchy, silence, trauma, and cultural identity into a single, connected trajectory from silence to agency.
- To assess the extent to which the agency the novel envisions is partial, relational, and achieved through solidarity among women.

3. Scope and Methodology

The scope of this study is confined to a close textual reading of *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991); it does not extend to Amy Tan's other novels or to empirical reader-response data, and secondary scholarship is used to situate and test the reading rather than as an object of study in its own right.

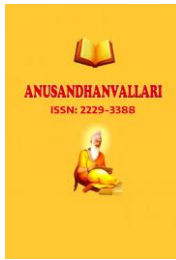
This research is of qualitative type – literary and textual research. It focuses primarily on reading the novel after which it is named (*The Kitchen God's Wife*, 1991, by Amy Tan) closely and in full, and its approach is the sustained close reading that was the traditional mode of feminist literary criticism, reading a text with a focus on narrative structure, focalisation, figurative language and the allocation of speech and silence between characters. Instead of a story summary of the novel, the analysis focuses on the instances where silence is imposed, maintained, broken or altered, and on how each is understood through the theory outlined in the above paragraphs.

Secondary material comprises peer-reviewed scholarship on Tan and on the novel, and foundational scholarship of feminist, trauma and Asian American literary theory. These sources are drawn on both to define the state of the field and to test and further develop the readings proposed in this work, and where the analysis varies from or adds to that of other critics, these differences are made explicit. It is not empirical, relying instead on reading evidence and argument and not on measurement; it is not thematic, in that it is not a set of concepts organized around a central theme; it is interpretive. The quotations from the main text are short, as pagination has varied with different editions of the novel, and when an edition cannot be identified the quotations refer to the novel as a whole rather than to an unidentifiable page.

4. Literature Review

It has been a constant feature of her fiction that scholars on Tan have singled out patriarchy as being central to her work. The first and recurrent criticism of *The Kitchen God's Wife* is it is a book of a woman's survival of a man's brutality, which is an old concept of the "subservient wife" (Adams, 2003). Building on this tradition, Bhattacharya and Neelakantan (2019) foreground solidarity in which Tan's women fight against their marginalisation, proposing that the novel is not a product of individual defiant acts, but rather a product of collective resourcefulness of the women characters in the novel. That is, there is an overall agreement that the novel is a critique of patriarchy, but on what aspect of patriarchy it criticises and how it criticises it remain debatable.

It's an old question of silence, and it has been a lot of commentary written. In her groundbreaking study, Cheung (1993) concluded that silence is not simply adversarial, and that critics need to listen to the ambiguity of silence, instead of assuming it is simply a sign of defeat in the writing of Chinese American and Japanese American women. With these understandings, Guo (2023) explains *The Kitchen God's Wife* as an imposed invisibility, where Winnie is kept hidden in a long silence from her past and the contempt she feels with regards to, and disillusionment with, a patriarchal system that she is unable to voice. In this respect silence is eloquent, witnessing the very wars it appears to be silencing. The commonalities of these readings are that they do not consider Winnie's passivity to be silence; the differences are how much each reading assumes that emancipatory potential is in silence itself.



The third category of scholarships is dedicated to trauma and memory. To trauma, the book's non-linear narrative, its delays, its flashbacks, is a formal metaphor for traumatic memory, and the healing process through retelling of the trauma narrative, as described by Herman (1992). This is a helpful, informative cross-over between narrative and 'psychological' contents and the shutting and the opening of the novel are no accident, but a reference to the memory of a damaged consciousness. However, it focuses mostly on the origins and manifestation of trauma, and not so much on the political implications of its narration.

A fourth strand of studies is on identity and cultural displacement. In Kareem's conception (2024), the novel is a study of identity crisis, tracing how Winnie's Chinese identity continually becomes a factor in her life, yet also in Pearl's life, as the tension of negotiating and disagreeing over it becomes an ongoing force. Bhattacharya (2019) sees the relationship between mother and daughter in a matrilineal context, such that Tan's daughters are replaced by an authoritative and critical mother whose struggles are more intense than theirs. Readings like this help to tie inheritance to identity, and they anticipate the argument that the daughter's story is the mother's story, too. But they seldom think about the road walked to reconciliation or how it is accomplished – through the power of story.

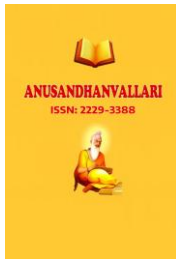
These shared ground points are educational: the novel decries patriarchy, the empty spaces of the novel are not empty, the form of the novel reflects on the way traumatic memory works, and the resolution is dependent on an intergenerational exchange of understanding. This criticism fails to provide a complete, coherent description of interrelationships among these elements. But these are treated in isolation in the novel, and its one special achievement in modelling the seamless passage from one state to the other has not been properly theorized. This is a connecting argument which this present study is trying to furnish.

5. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is based on three theoretical resources which have been selected because they assist in the understanding of the various stages the novel is passing through. The first of these is the feminist theorisation of silence and voice. According to Michel Foucault (1978) silence is not something that exists outside of discourse, but one that operates in parallel with the things said, and so cannot be innocent of power. The feminist critique has focused on this insight in gendered ways, such as in the analyses by Olsen (1978) and Rich (1979). Cheung (1993) has pointed out its ambiguity: women are silenced but they can say a lot through their silence. bell hooks (1989) has added that it is a defiant and self-constituting act of women who are oppressed to pass from silence to speech. As two points on a continuum of power and resistance, these two roles are juxtaposed to problematise silence and voice, not as two categories.

Trauma and memory studies is the second resource. Consistent with Caruth's (1996) work, trauma is an unclaimed experience that comes back to haunt, and reorganizes in a way that is not linear, can help account for Winnie's inability to remember and tell her story in an orderly fashion as well as her inability to present a coherent narrative when she does speak or write about it. Herman's clinical recovery model of three steps—safety, retelling of the traumatic story and reconnection with others—is offered as a lens to help understand Winnie's telling as both a therapeutic and political event. It's a theory of the novel that links the disjointedness of the novel to the psychology of survival and that accounts for the need to recover memory before voice.

The third resource is related to agency and its boundaries. But with the caveat that agency is enacted in the structures that define the subject, as Judith Butler (1990) suggests, Winnie's transformation as a flight away from pure autonomy is not to be interpreted as a flight away from the norms that limit her. Gayatri Spivak (1988) has pointed out that the speech of a doubly marginalised subaltern woman is structurally hard to hear and that is why it is so important that



such a woman is the one who is telling her story. The novel has an intergenerational aspect insofar as the novelistic self of the daughter relies on the restoration of the maternal narrative that was not expressed in the inherited modes of storytelling, which is why Marianne Hirsch's (1989) concept of the mother/daughter plot is apt. They are used simultaneously and not as an addition to the text; they are simultaneous and form the coordinated ends of the one process.

6. Result and Finding

6.1 Silence as a Condition of Patriarchal Power

The first and most basic idea of the novel is that of the power of silence. In the feudal, semi-feudal China of her youth, Winnie's speech is subordinate to her husband's, and a general rule of speech and public behaviour is that women should be reserved: "There is a whole apparatus of social observation, from her family members to the servants, her friends, and her community at large [Guo, 2023]". Here, no one is silent of their own accord, but because they must be so in a society that sees a wife as her husband's property. In these scenes, what a woman can say is as tightly bound up as what she must say, as Foucault (1978) noted, and this silence is literalized.

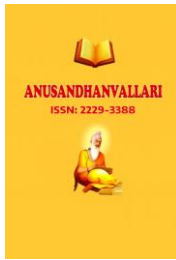
In the novel's overall symbol, this is illustrated. The unnamed, unholy wife is the nourisher; Winnie calls her tyrant husband "the Kitchen God," who is a folk god dedicated to the kitchen. The renaming itself is a minor private act of interpretation—a female interpretation—one that is a diagnosis of the basic asymmetry of a patriarchal culture: men are venerated, women are effaced (Bhattacharya & Neelakantan, 2019). The novel brings about just that: a god's forgotten wife with no shrine.

First and foremost, Tan shows that the only way in which the patriarchal silence is assured is by women who internalise the patriarchal logic – women who can say no when men can. Most above all, Tan shows, is the fact that the only way in which the patriarchal silence is preserved is through women who have absorbed the patriarchal logic – who can say no when men can. It is her friend Hulan (Helen) who convinces her to bow down and apologize, because she has to avoid the forthcoming humiliation because if she does, she will be subjected to more cruelties (Guo, 2023). It is educational to see how it does what it does to silence its victims, how it does it to the members of the institution, how it does it from the head of the institution to the members, and how it does it from one woman to another. Any treatment of the novel's patriarchy that would only emphasize the evil of the individual male misses this structural aspect.

6.2 Winnie Louie and the Experience of Female Silence

Winnie's silence is over-determined, multiple reinforcing pressures create it. The most apparent is fear: Wen Fu's physical and sexual abuse is risky; speech is risky because it has a tendency to self-suppress after marriage, as a bodily reflex in her life in America (Yang, 2023). Isolation is another factor in her silence. She is separated from her mother who left her as a child and from kin in a safe haven. It's exacerbated by a lack of institutional power: in the legal and social structure she lives in, a wife has few means by which to resist a husband, and silence is more of a rational than a preference response to powerlessness (Kareem, 2024).

But it doesn't make this silence passive like a novel does. Winnie's withholding of her story from Pearl, on the one hand, is a protective move, to save her daughter from a terrible history; on the other hand, it is a judgment; a refusal to give her sufferings to a world that is not fit to receive them in the right way (Guo, 2023). It is relevant to Cheung's (1993) distinction between disabling and expressive silence: Winnie's silence is imposed and in the guardedness of it, it is an agency manifested in the only register at her disposal. To be defeated, is to be the same as a novel that protests against being erased.



This layering is accentuated by making the heart of the story-frame obscure to each other. For decades, Winnie and Helen have kept each other's worst secrets, and the novel's action begins when Helen thinks she's dying and threatens to reveal the past, so Winnie decides that it's time to do so—except it will be Winnie and not Helen. Here silence is found to be relative and relational, negotiated, not absolute, women's agreement to each other is renegotiable as conditions change (Bhattacharya & Neelakantan, 2019).

6.3 Trauma, Memory, and the Recovery of Suppressed Histories

Winnie's story finally comes out in the way that trauma theory would suggest; disjointed. The narrative is one that "runs in a circle around the most painful experiences, attempting to get closer to them without going straight for them" (Yang, 2023), is often told in flashback, digression, and repetition, and also shifts between the American past and Chinese present in an abrupt manner. The history of Winnie is not narrative incompetence, but mimesis: in line with Caruth's (1996) understanding of trauma as an event that is not fully registered at the time of occurrence and that comes back later and out of order. The wound is conveyed in the form of the telling.

Memory is also revealed in the novel to be reconstructive and not just retrieved. Winnie's recollections of her lost mother are deliberately and explicitly defined as incomplete and in a state of flux: "made up of bits and altered with every remembrance" (Yang, 2023). Not a fault in the evidence but a truth: Broken testimony can only be re-membered: only through active, imaginative labour. This is why the process of recovering suppressed history is always a construction process and is always related to the narrative through which it is carried out.

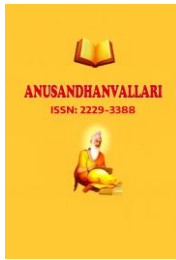
It is an collective and not an individual recovery, because it is a life and death affair. For Adams (2003) the novel is a form of historical representation, a counternarrative that foregrounds the lives of women that were ignored by official history. Herman's (1992) emphasis on the importance of a relationship of trust to the process of recovering the trauma story connects the private and public elements: Winnie's storytelling to Pearl is both a personal work through and an entry into the public record of a suppressed history of a patriarchy and a nation. To remember, is already resisting, here.

6.4 Storytelling as a Movement from Silence to Voice

The starting point of the novel is silence, its raw material is memory, and the process by which it is converted into the novel is storytelling. The Kitchen God's Wife is not an outside occurrence that causes it to turn, but rather, Winnie's choice; she chooses to tell her story, to be the one carrying her story, instead of keeping it to herself (Guo, 2023). That is this transformation from silence to speech in hooks' (1989) words, which is a self-constitution process: Winnie is the person who creates herself by telling her story.

The novel's storytelling does a number of functions. It shows what is domestic, rather than as a private misfortune of a wife, hidden as violence, but reveals it. It offers a critique of male dominance that is represented in the Kitchen God myth, highlighting the marginalized female representation and situating the woman at the centre of the story, rather than the male, with authority and autonomy. (Bhattacharya & Neelakantan, 2019). Telling reframes too, relationships: the relationship between Winnie and Pearl goes from being hidden from each other to being recognized. In short, narration is not about the transformation; it is the transformation itself.

So it is not possible to separate out the feminist aspect of the novel from its form. To allow Winnie the voice of the storyteller, to let her voice be heard in a book that begins in her daughter's voice is a formal redrafting of the power that the story speaks of. (Yang, 2023) An oblique response to Spivak's (1988) question of whether the subaltern woman can be heard is that the novel does not eradicate the structural problems of subaltern speech, but it reminds us of its



importance that a marginalized woman becomes the voice of a history that would otherwise be told about her, if it were told at all.

6.5 Pearl and the Intergenerational Negotiation of Female Identity

Pearl is the second protagonist of the novel and carries the argument across the generational divide. At the beginning, mother and daughter are not only different temperaments, but they are also different cultures, different languages, and a difference of symmetries—the secret of concealment: Winnie hides her past from Pearl, and Pearl hides her multiple sclerosis from her mother. (Yang, 2023) Silences reverberate with one another, between a Chinese-born mother and an American-born daughter who have taken on mutually incompatible interpretations of what is and is not allowed to be said, to whom. (Yang, 2024) The distance between them is Kareem's (2024) reading.

The gap is not closed by assimilation of one into another but by a mutual disclosure that is affected by the narration of Winnie. Winnie shows Pearl that her mother is not a critical and superstitious woman, but rather one who survived disasters even more terrible than Pearl's. It's the intergenerational transmission that the mother/daughter plot in Hirsch's (1989) account often forecloses; the recovery of the maternal voice and the daughter's access to a history that reframes her own. The fact that Pearl reveals her illness, is a revelation of herself, so that the transformation 'silence to voice' is rendered reciprocal.

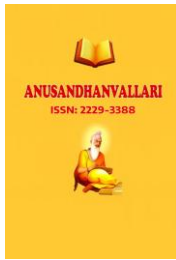
The novel, then, might best be viewed as a negotiation, and not a resolution, in the process of reconciliation. As Guo (2023) explains, the only way for understanding between generations to happen is when both sides recognize the other as a subject rather than as their own extension, and the conclusion of the novel is not an amalgamation of identities, but a sweet intimacy in Pearl's ability to imagine her mother's feelings. Silence isn't just shattered, reimagined as a conversation and ongoing dialogue.

6.6 From Victimhood to Agency

The moral of the book is offered in the presence of Winnie's transformation from victim to agent, but Tan is hesitant to end the victimization of the novel. The exit of Winnie from Wen Fu is a slow process that involves significant cost and other women who encourage and help her practice. The action of Winnie leaving Wen Fu is not an instant one, it's a gradual one, and depends not on someone's strength, but on the encouragement and physical help of other women (Guo, 2023). It's a true change in her life that her marriage to Jimmy Louie (taking her as an equal) brings to her, but this isn't a rejection of her past; that fear is an automatic response, and she is a prisoner to past pressures, even today. (Yang, 2023)

This favoritism does not hinder Butler's (1990) account, it is realism. On this reading, agency is not a rejection of power, but the power enacted through agency; and by resisting this way, Winnie is engaging in those roles which her culture has assigned to her as wife, mother, widow, storyteller. She does not avoid her situation, she walks through it and gives herself permission to explain and tell herself the story of a life that she cannot escape (Kareem, 2024). It is thus the novel's rejection of a triumphant conclusion that accurately reflects the actual agency's limitedness.

This understanding is reinforced by the use of the end symbolic gesture. For some, Winnie's act of supplanting Kitchen God with a goddess of her own making is an example of the creation of a personal deity to whom she can give her power, and from whom she can receive her power, as well (Bhattacharya & Neelakantan, 2019). Winnie is claiming her meaning in a simple, domestic gesture, but one that's in the house, where she was originally subjected to.



6.7 Gender, Culture, and the Complexity of Agency

One needs to keep in mind that Winnie's agency is not a general cultural/historical reality. Her oppression is linked to the Chinese patriarchy of her youth and to disruption (wars and migration), and to the expectations of her family members who accompany her across the ocean; and her eventual assertion of herself within an American context that opens new possibilities and cancels the old constraints (Kareem, 2024). In the novel, female agency in the realm of the intertwining of gender and culture is therefore placed without divorcing them.

But it must be remembered that the novel does not fall into the easy temptation to set this up as a dichotomy between oppressive East and liberating West. The novel's Chinese culture is both the source of Winnie's subjection and the source of her strength and sense of community, while the American life inflicts its own estrangements, such as the cultural distance between Winnie and Pearl (Bhattacharya, 2019). Instead of the triumph of one culture over the other, however, it's the recognition of one another across difference, writes Guo (2023). In this perspective, agency is not granted by America, but rather is negotiated between America and China.

Solidarity is another aspect of this complexity in the novel. Helen both enforces and subsequently helps to break Winnie's silence, and the friendships that support Winnie are not only ones of trust but competitiveness and concealment as well (Bhattacharya & Neelakantan, 2019). The novel refrains from stereotyping female community, instead of describing agency as the inevitable consequence of common victimization, it is a result of struggle among flawed individuals in challenging circumstances.

6.8 Female Agency and the Rewriting of Identity

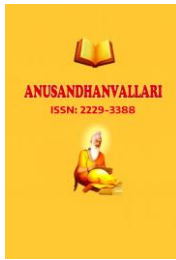
The multiple 'threads' of the analysis come together in one conceptual thread. In the novel, silence, as a tool of patriarchal control, becomes the agent of oppression; in the novel, memory, which is painfully reconstructed, provides the substance for storytelling; and in the novel, storytelling becomes the tool for voice, voice becomes the tool for agency, agency becomes the tool for a re-authored identity (Guo, 2023; Yang, 2023). Each stage is dependent on the others and none may be omitted or missing; to recover memory, something must be said; and something must be said to pass from silence to speech.

Ultimately, the expression of agency is in the right to define oneself – that is the place to which the novel heads at the end. However, not deconstructive is the narration of Winnie, but rather allows her to experience and relate to a history she creates, instead of one imposed on her (Adams, 2003). Bhattacharya (2019) describes the daughter's movement as the silencing of the mother's critical voice and the gaining of a voice of a woman who has been hurt and struggled. It's the same with Winnie, who is given her voice instead of being silenced. If identity, on this telling, is not found, then it is constructed created and reconstructed in the telling.

That's the meaning in which *The Kitchen God's Wife* is truly a feminist novel. Not only does its politics indict the brutality of the patriarchy, it demonstrates that the recovery of voice is the recovery of self, that it is individual, personal and historical (hooks, 1989; Cheung, 1993). The silenced past which Winnie eventually shares is her own, but when she shares it, she's sharing the stories of the many wives who never got a chance to be remembered by the myth of the Kitchen God.

7. Research Gap

Based on the previous review, it is evident that each of the individual elements of *The Kitchen God's Wife* has received treatment; however, not all of them have. Though other studies have analyzed the novel's patriarchy (Adams, 2003; Bhattacharya & Neelakantan, 2019), its silences (Cheung, 1993; Guo, 2023), its trauma (Yang, 2023), and its identity



conflicts (Bhattacharya, 2019; Kareem, 2024), these focus points are not mutually exclusive. The effect is a very disjointed picture of a novel whose power is all in its continuity: the enforced silence that must be spoken, made audible, to be able to understand speech, and then agency.

This study, however, is a conceptual study as it is seeking to fill a gap which is conceptual. The silence and the agency have not been linked; it isn't a lack of it. The paper aims to read the novel as a single, graduated movement (silence, oppression, memory, storytelling, voice, agency, identity) to attempt to transform "parallel" observations into a "connected" argument in order to make sense of the significance of storytelling in Tan's feminist project. The gap is not stated in opposition to a straw man or figure; it is the studies mentioned above that offer the elements that this analysis wants to synthesize.

8. Finding

Taken together, the analysis finds that silence in *The Kitchen God's Wife* is not a fixed condition but a staged one: imposed by patriarchal and social authority, sustained by fear and isolation, and gradually reworked through memory and storytelling into voice and agency. Winnie's belated narration follows the disjointed rhythm of traumatic recall, and the act of telling reconstitutes her as the subject rather than the object of her history.

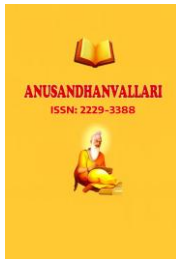
The agency the novel ultimately envisions is partial, negotiated, and relational rather than total: it is achieved with the collaboration of other women and transmitted across generations to Pearl. The interdependence of silence and agency, rather than either treated alone, is the key finding that connects the novel's feminist logic to its narrative form.

9. Conclusion

The study did not want to "read the text" and isolate the various themes found in it but rather to read it as a connected journey, and the analysis shows that we did not come up with too little and too late. The silencing of women, trauma and memory, theory of storytelling and imagination of agency are not separate issues, they are successive and interwoven steps of one movement. The novel begins in silence, built into by the power of the fathers, kept up by fear and social norms, and repeated even among the women. It is partial, negotiated and shared from the agency. Between is remembering, and foremost, telling is passing. But silence and agency do not only go hand in hand. Winnie's voice is an early and limited form of self-defense and her silence an indication of her subjection; her voice does not end her silencing, but transforms it – it is a voice imposed on her, but a voice chosen and self-authored. This feminism is not a barrier to the novel, but its most sincere; Butler has said that it takes a long time and is very costly, and that it's never done.

There are two pieces of evidence that can't be forgotten when making this argument: Winnie and Pearl. The novel might have been a story of one woman's survival, but the recovery of the mother's voice is becoming inextricably woven into the narrative, giving rise to the transformation of the daughter's identity, as if from voicelessness to agency, one generation to the next. Pearl's newfound ability to grasp her mother and her mother's ability to grasp her both culminate and complete one another, without either one would've been able to finish it alone. This is where the novel reiterates the maternal voice that is too often missing from inherited modes of narration, as Hirsch outlines in his discussion of the mother/daughter plot (1989).

Storytelling and memory are the means by which all of this is accomplished. The form of the novel is not a matter of incidental to its meaning, but instead the formal signature of a traumatic history being re-assembled and re-assembled as it is being mastered (Caruth, 1996; Yang, 2023). To narrate is to transform unclaimed experience into owned experience, it is to go from the subject of a history to its author. The feminist implication is wide-ranging: If the power



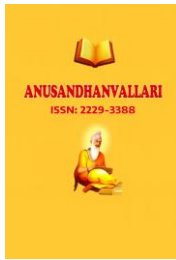
to tell stories is being wielded to control what can be said, then the exercise of the power to tell stories is a political act; the intimate, domestic space of a mother telling her daughter a story is a space of real counterhegemonic resistance (hooks, 1989).

The wider meaning of the novel is here. The Kitchen God's Wife belongs to a long line of Asian American women's writing which has been concerned with the recovery of silenced female histories, and which in particular shows the intermingling of silence and agency in this process (Cheung, 1993; Adams, 2003). This study started with the reading of both as parts of a process with connected ends, as part of a process to elucidate the feminist logic of Tan's narrative form, and to show the importance of storytelling in this form.

There are still some avenues available for further inquiry. It might be interesting to compare the novel to other novels about intergenerational trauma, to better understand the model's trajectory of silence-to-agency as it plays out in the genre, to discuss a more in-depth analysis of the intersectional theory in relation to the model, and to explore the novel's reception in different national readerships, which could reveal the politics of women's silence in each nation's culture. The present analysis has revealed that breaking silence does not only involve speaking, in this novel, but it also involves a self as a self-authoring.

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