

Identity Conflict in *The Kitchen God's Wife*

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Abstract—This paper aims to address the identity struggles experienced by the female protagonists in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Through a detailed textual analysis, the study investigates how the novel portrays the conflicts faced by Chinese-American women in reconciling their dual cultural identities. In this novel, Amy Tan vividly illustrates Winnie Louie's culturally transformative experiences as a Chinese immigrant woman and their enduring impact on her sense of self, particularly in relation to her American-born daughter, Pearl. Tan emphasizes the intergenerational tensions arising from differing cultural expectations and personal histories. This paper employs Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory as a research method to explain the identity conflict within the characters, focusing on Winnie's past traumatic experiences and their role in shaping her identity. The study explores how these issues lead to significant conflicts with her daughter, Pearl. In addition, Tan introduces a feminist struggle over culture and identity between Winnie and Pearl due to their differing perspectives on life in the US. Their quest is for identity and self-discovery. The result of this paper demonstrates to what extent communication between mother and daughter aids in resolving the identity struggles that they experience, empowering them to assert their power in the world.

Keywords—Culture, Feminism, Forgiveness, Identity, Love

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kitchen God's Wife is an important piece of fiction that discusses the life of Jing Winnie, a Chinese immigrant woman, who encounters gender bias in her homeland. Jing Winnie escaped from the male-dominated society in China to immigrate to the US, creating a life of her own to have choices and opportunities. She decides to break her silence and discuss the life of sorrow, pain, and oppression that she left behind in China. Amy Tan forcefully reveals Winnie's hardships in China and the reasons that led her to change her fate by seeking a new life in the United States. This novel illustrates how patriarchal societies, deprive women from their rights and identities. Women are considered voiceless and are left under men's dominant shadow. They find themselves stereotyped as emotional, weak, ambiguous, and submissive. For that reason, they are highly susceptible to be abused within male-dominated societies. In this regard, Abeda Sultana notes "due to patriarchy, women were deprived of their legal rights and opportunities patriarchal values restrict women's mobility, reject their freedom over themselves as well as their property" (Sultana, 2012, p.7).

Winnie embodies these victimization, the traumatic events she endured profoundly impact her future life and relationships in the US. Her experiences can be understood through the lens of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development

Theory, which identifies eight developmental stages in human development. These stages include Trust versus Mistrust (Infancy), Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt, Initiative versus Guilt, Industry vs. Inferiority, Identity versus Role Confusion, Intimacy versus Isolation, Generativity versus Stagnation, and Integrity versus Despair. Erikson asserts that each stage involves a crisis that must be resolved before moving on to the next stage. As Erikson (1963) states, "Each stage becomes a crisis because incipient growth and awareness in a new part function go together with a shift in instinctual energy and yet also with some necessary loss of a once-sustained equilibrium" (p. 273).

Furthermore, Erikson defines identity as a blend of sociocultural and personal elements, asserting that cultural values and their manifestations significantly influence the formation of one's identity. This identity encompasses an individual's beliefs, ideas, self-awareness, and perception of their role in the world. According to Erikson, "the sense of identity provides the ability to experience one's self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly" (Erikson, 1968, p.50). Erikson demonstrates that its vital for individuals to complete each stage successfully to have healthy personalities. On contrary, failing to any of these stages will result in conflicts and crisis within the self. Winnie and Pearl undergo these developmental stages and

due to the difficulties that surround them, they fail to obtain a coherence sense of identity. Winnie's suppressed life in China impacts her personality in the United States and she faces internal and external conflicts.

Erikson's conception of identity aligns closely with Winnie and Pearl's life experiences, illustrating the complex interplay of societal expectations and personal development in shaping their identities. Furthermore, the novel revolves around the characters' intercultural and intergenerational conflicts, particularly in the context of traditional Chinese norms versus modern American values. This research examines the character's developmental stages in the lens of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory such as Trust versus Mistrust, Intimacy versus Isolation, Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt, and Identity versus Role Confusion, and Integrity versus Despair, presenting how these stages shape the lives of the characters.

Winnie's journey from an oppressed past in China to her life in America is fraught with identity conflicts, shaped by her experiences of war, abuse, and cultural displacement. Similarly, Pearl grapples with her dual heritage and the pressures of assimilating into American society while honoring her Chinese roots. Winnie and Pearl's relationship undergoes significant transformation as they confront and resolve past misunderstandings and traumas. Moreover, this study delves into how these characters navigate societal expectations, resist oppression, and assert their agency in multifaceted ways. By focusing on the protagonists' struggles with identity, the research highlights the profound influence these conflicts have on shaping their lives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

At the time of the study, the researcher found that several other studies have been conducted on *The Kitchen God's Wife*, tackling various aspects of the novel. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, the Chinese American writer Amy Tan depicts various problems facing women in general and immigrant Chinese women in particular. In his book *Transforming Chinese American Literature*, Chang suggests that "Tan not only portrays the remarkable life of a woman vividly but also provides a detailed depiction of a repressive society" (Chang, 2000, p. 21). Tan illustrates the contrasts between the old and young generations. In this context, Hsiao (2000) points out that "Tan creates several kitchen scenes where the older and younger generations can share secrets, express their feelings, or argue with each other" (p. 215). In addition, Tan portrays the power transformation from mothers to their daughters; Ching notes that "Tan wants to depict the empowerment of daughters through their mothers' intervention and stories" (Ching, 2000, p. 27).

Amy Tan's works draw heavily from her personal experiences and the tragic history of her Chinese ancestors. She incorporates her mother's and grandmother's myths and histories to explore her Chinese heritage. In *Amy Tan: A Critical Companion*, Edward Huntley notes that "Both Daisy and John had unusual backgrounds that would, in due

course, provide their daughter with a great deal of narrative material for her novels" (Huntley, 1998, p. 7). In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Tan depicts the complexities of Chinese-American identity and the conflicts that occur as a result of these complexities. In her research article, Costino focuses on the duality faced by Winnie and her daughter, Pearl. She asserts "the struggle to reconcile their Chinese heritage with their American experiences forms the crux of their identity conflicts" (Costino, 1998, p. 15). This identity duality causes external and internal conflicts.

In *Cultural Identity and Generational Conflict in The Kitchen God's Wife*, Davis outlines that "the tension between maintaining traditional Chinese culture and assimilating into American society creates a significant source of identity conflict for both Winnie and Pearl" (Davis, 2003, p. 13). The feeling of exile haunts the characters and causes misunderstandings between the first and second immigrant generations. In this context, in *A Search for a Space: Dislocation and Identity in Amy Tan's The Kitchen God's Wife*, Divya Johnson outlines "The rising tension between the Chinese and American culture and between individual desires and family connection are what create the intergenerational conflicts and misunderstandings" (Johnson, 2013, p. 32).

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there are few, if any, studies that utilize Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory in this context. Therefore, this study applies Erikson's theory to explore the identity conflicts experienced by the main protagonists and the various developmental stages they encounter. Furthermore, the study examines how the protagonists overcome these conflicts to assert their role in society.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this research paper, the researcher employs Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory as a research method to examine how the female characters in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* struggle the concept of identity. It analyzes how main protagonists negotiate societal expectations, resist oppression, and assert their agency in various ways. Moreover, the study portrays the struggles of identity and its influence on shaping the protagonists' lives. It employs excerpts from the novel as primary data to interpret and analyze the conflicts of identity.

Furthermore, the research methodology involves utilizing excerpts from the novel as primary data, enabling a focused examination and interpretation of the conflicts of identity portrayed. In addition, the researcher integrates secondary sources like journals and books to enrich the analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of identity conflict and its ramifications on character development within the novel.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) delineates women's resistance and struggles within patriarchal and cultural frameworks inspired by a Chinese myth about the

God of the Kitchen. This myth tells the story of a deceitful and unfaithful husband who abandons his loyal wife for other women. Despite his betrayal, when he finds himself in need of help, it is his wife who saves him by serving his favorite meal. Overcome with shame, he throws himself into the kitchen fire and burns to death, ultimately becoming a god as a reward for his repentance, as Winnie asserts "I know you think it strange that we have a Kitchen God, but he is one of the oldest gods we have. He is always with us, watching. He knows what we do. He keeps a record" (Tan, 1991, p.32).

In this novel, Tan portrays Winnie's challenging journey from a privileged upbringing to an abusive marriage, culminating in her decision to flee to the US for safety. Chang observes that "the average Chinese woman had greater influence in the United States than she could have attained in her native village" (Chang, 2003, p. 8). Since childhood, Winnie's life was controlled by others; after her mother escaped with her communist lover, Winnie was sent by her father to live with her uncle when she is only six. Here she receives injustice treatment and this environment fosters a deep sense of mistrust in her character. This event significantly impacts her later life and she does not develop a sense of trust of her surroundings. This experience exemplifies Erikson's first stage of human development, Trust versus Mistrust which is considered a significant stage in shaping one's identity.

Winnie's mother escaped from the patriarchal norms to find her own identity, which was taken away for a long period; everyone makes fun of Winnie because she is the daughter of a rebellious woman, as she narrates "many years, my mother was the origin of humorous and tragic stories, terrible secrets, and romantic tales" (Tan, 1991, p. 24). During this period, Winnie navigates Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt stage, the early loss of her mother, contribute in developing a sense of Autonomy as she learns to depend on herself. Nevertheless, family dynamics and societal norms often lead her to feel shame and self-doubt.

In traditional China, girls were expected to be voiceless and comply with their family's wishes, only to become subservient to their husbands after marriage. Winnie had no say in her marriage to Wen Fu; she recounts, "An old aunt presented a marriage proposal from the Wen family. I neither agreed nor disagreed. Nobody sought my response because the decision was not mine to make" (Tan, 1991, p. 32). Winnie hopes to find a good future with her husband, but her hopes soon collapse when Wen Fu starts to abuse her physically and psychologically; she accepts all kinds of mistreatment from her husband as she was told by her mother-in law, "The type of sacrifice made for a husband never goes unnoticed" (Tan, 1991, p. 67). Winnie's forced marriage at a young age significantly stifles her development. Instead of nurturing her sense of industry, the abusive marriage environment fosters a sense of inferiority and helplessness, derailing her natural developmental progress. This period of Winnie's life marks Industry versus Inferiority stage in the Psychosocial Development Theory where individuals develop a sense of competence through encouragement and achievement, or a sense of inferiority through failure and criticism.

During the Japanese war, Wen Fu relocates frequently, and Winnie is expected to follow and honor him as a loyal wife, even as he brings mistresses into their home. Winnie compares herself to *the Kitchen God's wife*, who endures insults and betrayal for the sake of tradition, yet receives neither praise nor blame for staying with her husband. She remarks, "Nobody praised me for staying with Wen Fu. I was like the wife of the Kitchen God. She was also not praised. He had all the excuses, she was forgotten" (Tan, 1991, p. 55). The myth of *the Kitchen God's Wife* mirrors the lives of women used as objects by their husbands, suffering silently without raising their voices. *The Kitchen God's Wife* doesn't demand what is rightfully hers; she remains passive, without identity, her name tied to her husband's. The kitchen, where the husband's burning occurs, symbolizes continued control over her even in his absence, as it's the only space belonging to the woman during the war.

Moreover, through this story, Amy Tan portrays the first Chinese generation through Winnie's character. She is a symbol of resistance of patriarchal constraints in old China and escaped to the US to build a new life. She exemplifies the traditional Chinese women whose life was shaped by the oppressive societal norms of traditional Chinese culture. The patriarchal norms of her society dictated her role and suppressed her individuality, leading to a sense of isolation. Winnie questions her identity and looks for ways to find it. Therefore, she decides to escape to the US with her friend Helen; she refuses to continue the miserable life set for her. This condition supports Erikson's psychosocial development theory of the impact on the role of society and the environment on the development of individuals. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory emphasizes the role of society and the environment in the development of individuals. According to Erikson, each stage of development involves a psychosocial crisis that must be resolved for healthy psychological development. In Winnie's case, the oppressive environment of traditional Chinese culture forced her to confront issues of autonomy and self-doubt, shaping her identity and leading her to question her place in society. This stage of Winnie's life aligns with Intimacy versus Isolation stage of human development. Winnie's escape to the US and her second marriage portrays her attempt to overcome this isolation and rebuild intimate connections.

After escaping from the abusive marriage to the US, Winnie grapples with the conflicts between traditional Chinese values and modernity in the US. In China, she was silenced by tradition, and in America, the challenge of learning a new language contributes to her silence. She cannot adopt the English language or the American lifestyle. In addition, Winnie is always in between and fails to determine her identity; she preserves memories, sorrows, and secrets. David Li states that "Although the mothers may grow older and age in America, their thoughts and memories remain preserved in their ancestral homeland" (Li, 2000, P.12). At the same time, she fails to cope with the modernity in the US; Winnie's wish before coming to America was leaving all the memories behind and design a new destiny for herself, as she narrates "I was thinking I could change my fate" (Tan, 1991. p. 93).

This stage of Winnie's life occurs into the Identity versus Role Confusion stage where individuals grapple with their sense of identity while navigating personal aspirations and societal expectations. She finds hardship in determining her identity amidst the conflicting demands of traditional Chinese customs and the new environments in the United States.

This role confusion impacts Winnie's personality and prevents her from creating a healthy relationship with her daughter, Pearl. There is a psychological conflict between Winnie and her American-born daughter over identity and culture, which lies at the core of their broken relationship. Pearl, born to a Chinese mother and a Chinese-American father, has faced identity and cultural crises since early childhood. This stage in Pearl's life aligns with Erikson's fifth stage of development, Identity versus Role Confusion, where individuals struggle to obtain a sense of belonging, often leading to an identity crisis. Pearl is stuck between the Chinese environment at home and the American atmosphere outside. Consequently, she fails to identify herself clearly and falls into an identity crisis. An identity crisis is considered a social identity threat that occurs when individuals are not recognized as members of the society they belong to due to differing interests within a group. These crises result from struggles and conflicts between individuals and their environments, potentially leading to significant changes in one's personality. Erik Erikson defines identity as providing a sense of well-being, feeling at home in one's body, direction in life, and mattering to important others (Erikson, 1968, p. 25).

Furthermore, Pearl faces hardship in constructing her identity as she finds herself stuck between two different cultures. She is surrounded by American friends at school and outside, but at home, she must adhere to Chinese traditions, creating an imbalance in her personality. This imbalance hinders her ability to form a cohesive identity. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, in *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, describe identity formation as "the outcome of a complex interplay of various factors, including individual decisions, life events, and key national events" (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 1998, p. 4). The alienation and gap between Pearl and her mother prevent Pearl from expressing her ideas and feelings. She feels isolated from her Chinese roots and prefers to adopt American customs. This estrangement deepens the mother-daughter problems; American culture dominates Pearl's mind, and she is fascinated by everything American. Pearl's marriage to an American man, Phil, further distances her from her cultural roots, hindering her from creating a bicultural hybrid identity that integrates Chinese and American elements. This aligns with Erikson's explanation of the role of society and the environment in shaping one's identity.

Moreover, Pearl perceives Chinese traditions as obligations rather than enjoyable practices, leading to a growing sense of isolation. She also suffers from a disease but chooses to conceal it from her mother. Simultaneously, she acknowledges her mother's loneliness, expressing, "Mostly I see my mother sitting one table away, and I feel as lonely as I imagine her to be" (Tan, 1991, p. 33). Despite praising American identity and culture, Pearl struggles to define herself; accepting a self-identity requires embracing one's

personality as it is, recognizing that identity is not fixed. Caesar argues that "Personal identity, much like personal and political truth, is complex and multifaceted, often accepted rather than discovered" (Caesar, 2014, p. 12).

Winnie conceals her difficult past in China from Pearl, including the fact that Wen Fu is her biological father, in an effort to uphold Chinese cultural values in her daughter's eyes. She critiques Pearl's behavior and worldview, as Pearl rejects her mother's perspective on life. Winnie's attempts to protect her daughter and promote honesty in her relationship with Pearl demonstrate her generative instincts, whereas her emotions concerning her marriage to Wen Fu and the traumas she endured reflect stagnation. This period aligns with Erikson's seventh stage of human development, Generativity versus Stagnation, which centers on the conflict between contributing to the next generation and feeling stagnant or unproductive. Pearl experiences generativity in her profession and role as a mother, alongside stagnation due to a lack of communication with her mother and internal insecurities stemming from unresolved identity issues.

Helen, Winnie's old friend, encourages Winnie to tell Pearl the truth so that she can reach a new understanding, "We should sweep all lies out of our life" (Tan, 1991, p. 112). Winnie reveals to Pearl the identity of her father who is Wen Fu; Wen Fu raped Winnie before escaping the marriage, and Pearl is a product of rape. By revealing the realities, Pearl also tells the truth about her disease to her mother and the mother-daughter relationship enters a new phase. By revealing the hidden secrets, they can understand each other's beliefs and ideas. Pearl comes to recognize the sorrows that her mother endured for many years. Thus, she gets a new understanding of her identity; she decides to accept her bicultural hybrid identity and find herself again. As she asserts "In the end, it was my mother who taught me the most about being strong, being Chinese, being American, being a woman" (Tan, 1991, p. 276).

Renaming a nameless Goddess that Winnie buys at the end in a shop and writing down the name by using her gold paints is evident that Winnie is going to reconstruct her female identity, but this time free of sufferings and sorrows as she says, "I will call it Lady Sorrow free" (Tan, 1991, p. 12). Through renaming herself as *the Kitchen God's wife*, Amy Tan transforms the narrative from one of an unworthy and deceitful husband to that of a woman reconstructing her identity. Her identity is no longer tied to her spouse; she becomes a symbol for silenced women oppressed by patriarchal societies. Snodgrass implies that "Tan demonstrates that Winnie's journey to self-liberation is internal rather than dependent on external factors" (Snodgrass, 2004, p. 6). This stage is aligned to the final stage of human development which is Integrity versus Despair where individual contemplate about their past live, seeking to make sense of their experiences and achieve a sense of fulfillment and coherence. Her efforts to make peace with her past presents her journey towards gaining Integrity. She strives to find coherence and meaning for her life.

Amy Tan effectively explores the evolution of the mother-daughter relationship, showcasing how Winnie and Pearl

overcome longstanding conflicts and redefine themselves. Through their journey, Tan highlights the dynamic nature of identity, particularly within the context of a bicultural Chinese-American experience. This narrative arc resonates with Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, which posits that identity is not static but evolves as individuals navigate various life experiences. The novel demonstrates that identity conflicts can be successfully navigated, leading to personal growth and reconciliation. Winnie and Pearl's ability to embrace their hybrid, bicultural identities signify their resilience and adaptability. By sharing her past, Winnie fosters a deeper understanding and connection with Pearl, allowing them to bridge the generational and cultural divide. Ultimately, *The Kitchen God's Wife* illustrates Erikson's concept that identity is not fixed but fluid, shaped by the cumulative impact of life experiences. Through their intertwined narratives, Winnie and Pearl exemplify the possibility of overcoming identity conflicts and achieving a cohesive sense of self. This transformation is a testament to their strength and the enduring power of the mother-daughter bond in navigating and embracing their complex identities.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intricate identity conflicts that the women protagonists face in *The Kitchen God's Wife* throughout utilizing Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory. Intergenerational tensions and dual cultural identities experienced by Chinese American women are vividly portrayed in this novel. Tan's narrative underscores the profound impact of Winnie's traumatic past in China on her sense of self and the subsequent conflicts that arise in her relationship with her daughter, Pearl.

Winnie's and Pearl's developmental stages influence their identity formation and interpersonal dynamics as conceptualized in Erikson's theory. Winnie's experiences in China, marked by patriarchal oppression and gender bias, align with Erikson's stages of Trust versus Mistrust, Autonomy versus Shame, Doubt, Intimacy versus Isolation, Industry versus Inferiority, Identity versus Role Confusion, Generativity versus Stagnation, and Integrity versus Despair. Winnie's journey to the US represents an attempt to overcome these identity crises and seek a new sense of self. Pearl's struggles with her bicultural heritage and her efforts to balance traditional Chinese values with modern American norms further illustrate Erikson's concept of identity as a dynamic and evolving construct. The conflicts experienced by the characters are not merely personal struggles but are demonstrating of broader societal tensions between tradition and modernity, individualism and collectivism, and autonomy and interdependence.

The application of Erikson's theory has illuminated the ways in which these conflicts are negotiated and resolved, offering insights into the resilience and adaptability of the characters. Pearl and her mother, Winnie, reject their identities to be connected with a husband or a mother and recreate their identities by themselves. Though Winnie was

raised in traditional China, her self-realization leads her to refuse to remain inferior to her husband and endure her miserable life; she is an image of an independent and strong woman who seeks a new life that brings happiness to her.

Overall, through story narration and communication, the mother-daughter relationship evolves to a new level. This new understanding helps the protagonists reach to a new comprehension regarding their identities and resolve the struggles that they were suffering from. Ultimately, they are able to overcome the identity conflicts and they claim their power in the world.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

Literary academic scholars may find other significant themes in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*. These themes include resilience, survival, women's self-assertion, and Memory. Scholars could delve into these different themes to conduct further research on the novel.

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