WHAT MYTHS DID TO AMY TAN'S NOVELS: READINGS OF *THE JOY LUCK CLUB* AND *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE*

O QUE OS MITOS FIZERAM COM OS ROMANCES DE AMY TAN: LEITURAS DE *THE JOY LUCK CLUB* E *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE*

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ABSTRACT: Myths have always been a source of inspiration and an ever-present theme in literature. However, what contemporary literature produced by women writers shows is that myths are being more and more appropriated and subverted not only to emphasise the importance of the presence of women in literature, but also to stress how male-governed these myths have been. This essay focuses on how Chinese-American writer Amy Tan appropriates Chinese myths in her two first novels, *The Joy Luck Club* (2006a) and *The Kitchen God's Wife* (2006b).
Keywords: Amy Tan; myths; appropriation.
RESUMO: Mitos sempre foram uma fonte de inspiração e são temas presentes na literatura. Entretanto, o que a produção feminina contemporânea mostra é que os mitos são cada vez mais apropriados e subvertidos não apenas para enfatizar a importância da presença da mulher na literatura, porém também para chamar atenção para quão governados por homens esses mitos são. O presente artigo foca em como a escritora sino-americana Amy Tan se apropria de mitos chineses em seus dois primeiros romances, a saber *The Joy Luck Club* (2006a) e *The Kitchen God's Wife* (2006b).
Palavras-chave: Amy Tan; mitos; apropriação.

When Chinese-American writer Amy Tan published *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, she instantly became a household name. Her debut novel dealt with themes such as mother and daughter bonds and identity, two of the topics that are of the utmost importance in contemporary literature. Tan's next novels also dwelled on the

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importance of communication between mothers and daughters, stressing how hyphenated subjects were caught amidst the chaos of not being able to fully recognise themselves as part of a single national tradition. In the case of *The Joy Luck Club*, the subjects were daughters raised in the USA by Chinese-born mothers who left their homeland to start a new life. One theme which has caught the attention of readers and critics but which has yet to be fully investigated is the presence and the relevance of myths in Tan's works. In this essay my aim is to highlight how Tan appropriates, subverts and rewrites Chinese myths in her first two novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, with a view to calling attention to the subjugation of women as hyphenated subjects.

In her collection of essays entitled *The Opposite of Fate*, Amy Tan describes not only the writing of *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, but also the importance of her mother's and grandmother's past in her writing. In the essay "Required Readings and Other Dangerous Subjects," Tan mentions that she had originally planned to write *The Joy Luck Club* structured in five parts with three stories each. However, at the suggestion of her agent, she decided to give up the idea and keep writing other stories to compose the novel. When she reached the number of seventeen stories, Tan's late editor and best friend, Faith Sale, read them all and commented that one story did not fit the concept because it was "the story about Rose's former boyfriend. All the other stories have to do with a mother and a daughter" (TAN, 2004, p. 303). Tan received the comment as a surprise, because it had not occurred to her that these stories shared a theme, and decided to drop the seventeenth story which did not fit. Afterwards, they reorganised the sixteen stories and Tan proposed "that the structure be an emotional one, linked by a small fable, yet to be written, that resonated for each piece included under its rubric" (2004, p. 304).

From the very beginning, it is noticeable that Amy Tan decided to use several myths, images and fables from China because these were parts of her own life as a

daughter of a Chinese woman. Tan criticises those who "assume that very personal experience, specific, and fictional stories are meant to be representative, down to the smallest detail, of not just Chinese Americans, but sometimes all Asian culture" (TAN, 2004, p. 305). The author argues that she is a writer and her responsibility as a writer of fiction is not to tell people what to think. However, while reading *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, it cannot be denied how the uses of Chinese symbols and myths enrich the stories; they are very much inherited from Tan's own background. In both novels, these symbols and myths are part of mothers' and daughters' lives, therefore making themselves as much part of the story as the characters themselves.

Regarding the presence — or absence — of myths in literature produced by women writers, Adrienne Rich, a writer, poet and activist, states in her seminal work *Of Woman Born* that,

> The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother daughter passion and rapture (RICH, 1995, p. 237).

Perhaps the most famous example of mother-daughter relationship is the one shared by Demeter and her daughter Persephone. When Persephone is abducted into the underworld by Hades, Demeter does not give up on her search for her then-lost daughter. Since Rich first called attention to this issue, several authors such as Marianne Hirsch, Adalgisa Giorgia, Andrea O'Reilly and Yi-Lin Yu have written about mothers' and daughters' experiences with a view to exposing different societal constructs and regulations.

According to Oxford University professor Carolyne Larrington, myths furnish us "with more than a repertoire of literary plots and themes" (LARRINGTON, 1992, p. ix). The professor of medieval English literature argues that the study of myths may

introduce us to "new ways of looking at social structures, so that we can examine constants and variables in the organization of human society" (1992, p. ix). By interpreting how myths have been appropriated by our society — by politicians, artists, psychiatrists — we may learn more about ourselves.

In the introduction to *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, Larrington addresses the issue of how women have been (mis)represented as simpletons, "purely in terms of their sexual function and thus confined in a catch-all category labelled fertility" (1992, p. ix). It is not difficult to understand Larrington's concern when readers are faced with, for instance, the silence of Penelope in *The Odyssey*. Female characters have become the subject of several research projects in which feminist anthropologists and literary historians "have illuminated mythical patterns and re-examined historical traditions from a feminist perspective" (1992, p. x).

In her book *A Short History of Myth*, British writer Karen Armstrong explains that a myth is not a simple story which we are told (ARMSTRONG, 2005, p. 09). Rather than a meaningless story, myths have been interpreted as a means to illustrate which behavior we should follow. However, with the advance of science as a field of knowledge, myths soon lost its place in a world intrigued by a new understanding of the individual.

Even though myths lost their previous significance, Armstrong highlights that mythologies are not an attempt to make history because they are not concerned with objectivity or facts. Instead, myths are as fictitious as novels in which both may lead subjects to question, wonder and marvel themselves at the possibilities behind a "what if?" (ARMSTRONG, 2005, p. 13).

Considering the connection between literature and myths, one way in which literary works have dealt with the presence of the latter is by appropriating, subverting and reinterpreting them, as can be seen in the cases of the aforementioned myths of Persephone and Demeter or the Kitchen God in Amy Tan's second novel.

Regarding the technique of appropriation, Newcastle University professor Julie Sanders says in her *Adaptation and Appropriation*:

> the intertextual relationship [between two forms of art] may be less explicit, more embedded, but what is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer's, director's, or performer's decision to re-interpret a source text (SANDERS, 2005, p. 02).

As an appropriation implies "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (SANDERS, 2005, p. 26), the deconstruction of sexist values in Chinese myths in Tan's novels offers a critical perspective, perhaps in the same vein as Adrienne Rich displayed in her lauded essay, "When We Dead Awaken Writing as Re-vision." In this essay, Rich compares the act of writing in new ways to the challenge of walking on ice, especially in regards to women trying to break free from the writing of the past to move to a space of their own.

In her essay, Adrienne Rich highlights that a critique of literature, "feminist in its impulse," would consider the way women have lived and how language has trapped them, how they have been "led to imagine themselves" (RICH, 1972, p. 18). As a result, it is no wonder that Sanders considers Rich's essay an influential piece in appropriation studies, especially when Rich states that,

> Re-vision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction — is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society (RICH, 1972, p. 18).

These appropriations make room for women who question views and values in a "male-dominated society" and try to uphold women writing. An example of this revisionary process is the treatment of female myths and legends in the writings of Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga. Regarding Moraga's takes on Mexican American

myths such as La Llorona and La Malinche, University of Texas professor Elizabeth Brown-Guillory explains that:

> (...) by reinventing or reinterpreting these myths, Moraga creates revolutionary women, usually daughters, who are not easily controlled or manipulated by patriarchy and who are in the process of reclaiming their race and their sexuality (BROWN-GUILLORY, 1996, p. 09).

Since Brown-Guillory calls attention to how this reinvention of myths may imply the rise of women who are independent and able, I would consider it important to focus on how the appropriation of myths and symbols in Tan's novels serves a political purpose and metaphorically avoid "falling for the trap of patriarchy" as observed in several myths. In *Writing Mothers and Daughters*, University of Bath professor Adalgisa Giorgio highlights that,

> A plot which is variously employed in texts across the spectrum of national literatures is the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Predating patriarchal myths, it is resurrected and rewritten to either draw attention to and grieve for the missing mother/mother-daughter story or to create positive figures of female identification (GIORGIO, 2002, p. 32).

Giorgio underlines that the resurrection of the myth of Demeter and Persephone may have surfaced written to focus on the absence and acceptance of rules made by men. Demeter had to acquiesce to Zeus and Hades' rules of having Persephone temporarily on Earth because her daughter had already swallowed some seeds in the underground after being kidnapped by Hades. Perhaps what Adalgisa Giorgio calls attention to is how several novels have dealt with the mother-daughter relationship negatively, not allowing these women to break grounds and become the rulers of their own lives. Then, while appropriating myths and legends of different sources, creating positive female figures means giving mothers and daughters a voice in these stories which are often portrayed through the male gaze. This perspective is in tune with the

definition of Thomas Bonnici's *Teoria e Crítica Literária Feminista* for "writing back." Bonnici describes the strategy of writing back as one used extensively in several literatures to create a new literary text from silences, allegories, metaphors and ironies found in canonical texts. Even though many myths are being rewritten and reshaped, there are novels in which silenced female subjects are being given a voice and are able to fight back the stereotypes to which they had been previously subjugated. Some examples are Marina Warner's *Mermaids in the Basement* and *Indigo*, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*.

My reading of Tan's novels takes into consideration the perspective of reshaping myths so as to create the aforementioned positive female figures that challenge patriarchal rules. By appropriating some aspects of Chinese myths, my argument is that Tan manages to explore some sexist notions regarding the position of women in myths and subverts these in favour of an understanding which celebrates women.

Published in 1989 to great critical acclaim, Tan's first novel *The Joy Luck Club* is narrated by four daughters and three mothers. Separated into four sections of four stories, the novel focuses on the negotiation between mothers and daughters in terms of their identities and (her) stories, especially those referring to how mothers left China in search of a better life in the USA. The first four stories are in a section entitled "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" and they are introduced by a short parable which tells the story of a woman who purchased a strange-looking "swan" which had once been a duck, but tried so hard to become a goose by stretching its neck that it eventually became a swan. This woman thought of giving her daughter this swan so that she would know her value and would not allow anyone to "look down" on her.

> Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrows! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan — a creature that became more than what was hoped for (TAN, 2006a, p. 17).

What this woman expected was that her daughter would have a better life, one which would not be limited to a few options. Unlike her mother, this daughter would have the chance to do what she wanted and would not conform to what society expected from her. Then, these daughters could become more than what was hoped for.

However, by the time this woman got to America, she had her swan confiscated by the immigration officials, being left with only a single feather from a thousand *li* away, a thousand miles away. Years later, when this woman is old, she realises she cannot communicate with her daughter, who had grown up swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrows and was able to speak *only* English. This nameless woman then decided to wait "for the day she could tell her daughter [about the feather which carries all her good intentions] in perfect English" (TAN, 2006a, p. 17). Unfortunately, this daughter does not seem fully able to understand her mother, especially because this mother's stories are unknown to the daughter.

While there is plenty to talk about regarding this short parable which opens the first section, it is important to notice how communication breakdowns are present from the very first page of the novel. Mothers are not able to get their messages across to their daughters, a fact which also becomes the rule when it comes to daughters trying to communicate with their mothers. With bursting unknown histories lying underneath their skins, mothers have decided to efface themselves so that daughters could live a free life and make choices.

On the one hand, the telling of the woman who is unable to tell her daughter about the feather she brought from China is a powerful opening and details much of what the stories in *The Joy Luck Club* are about. On the other hand, this is only the first topic which is discussed in the novel. The other sections emphasize the issue of communication, the importance of one's generation, the dialogue between experience and knowledge and the quest for happiness. This short opening story somehow

signals that Tan is also going to appropriate the mythical idea of the American Dream in her novel, especially when considering the fact that mothers do not understand their daughters' "American behavior" in contrast with their "Chinese ways."

The first section of the novel is narrated by mothers, especially because their stories have some things in common: the linking thread is the mothers' experience in China. An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-ying St. Clair explore their childhood stories to illustrate how they had to face their lives being restricted mostly by gender. Suyuan Woo is the only mother whose stories are the product of a double voice. As Suyuan has passed away, Jing-mei, her daughter, is in charge of telling her mother's stories and relate them to her own experiences.

The second fable, introduced in the part "The Twenty-six Malignant Gates," describes a mother who asks her daughter not to ride her bicycle around the corner because she cannot see her daughter and if the latter fell, she would not hear her. Enquired by her daughter how she knows that she will fall, the mother explains that it is all described in a book, *The Twenty-six Malignant Gates*. The daughter doubts her mother and demands that the book and the stories be shown to her, but the mother ignores her daughter's words. Even though her mother advised her not to ride around the corner, the daughter refuses to obey and, on a whim, does exactly what she had been told not to. Eventually, she fell even before she reached the corner.

The story highlights the issue of communication, or perhaps the lack of it. The mother's refusal to show the book on the grounds that it was written in Chinese does not satisfy the daughter, who rebels against her mother's advice. This tension between doing what one wants and neglecting the given advice also refers to experience and knowledge. The mother tries to infuse her daughter with her advice so that she will not make the same mistakes, but the latter does not understand her mother's meaning, either because of the language barrier or because of the cultural differences.

The third section, "American Translation", highlights the clash between generations. A mother is visiting her daughter and she is startled to see that her daughter placed a mirror at the foot of the bed. While the daughter does not see what may be wrong with it, the mother criticises and comments that all her marriage happiness would "bounce back and turn the opposite way" (TAN, 2006b, p. 147). The daughter feels angry because her mother sees bad omens in everything and that was something she had grown used to. However, when the mother places another mirror over the headboard and the daughter enquires why she has done it, the mother says that this mirror facing the other will multiply her luck. The curious daughter looks inside the mirror and is faced with the reflection of herself looking back at her.

A daughter looking at herself in the mirror is an interesting metaphor which is used to symbolize a daughter's need to see and understand herself. The mother suggests that her future grandchild is in the mirror, a statement that hints at the grandchildren looking like mother and grandmother. The clash between a mother's belief in tradition and a daughter's skepticism towards it are represented in the mirrors and in the daughter's fancy purchases which mean little to the mother. The stories which follow this part are told by the daughters and expose their inability to understand their mothers' omens as advice. Lena St. Clair remembers how her mother predicted she would marry a bad husband in "Rice Husband" after her mother linked the fact that she did not finish her rice bowls with marrying a bad man. Whilst Ying-ying, Lena's mother, comments in another story that she did not want her daughter to end up a ghost as she had for accepting everything that was offered to her and not having a mind of her own, Lena fails to understand her mother's message: that she should think highly of herself and never put herself below anyone else. The problem is that Lena understands the reason why she is unhappy in her marriage and does not try to do anything about it. Only when her mother visits her does Lena comprehend all

the signs of the bad things which were coming her way. Ironically, Lena was as able as her mother to see bad omens/signs when bad things were about to happen.

While the other stories dealt with aspects which may be regarded as troublesome in a relationship, the last fable is one which accounts for the idea of connection and the quest for happiness. In the last section, in the opening fable "Queen Mother of the Western Skies" — explicitly referring to the Taoist myth of the Queen Mother of the West, the guardian of the elixir of immortality — a grandmother is playing with her granddaughter and wonders what lessons she would teach her laughing grandchild because she realises she once was also "free and innocent" and that she "too laughed for no reason." (TAN, 2006a, p. 213) Then, the grandmother explains to her grandchild that she taught her daughter to throw away her innocence to protect herself, but now she wonders whether this "kind of thinking [was] wrong." She then teases the child by calling her Syi Wang Mu, the Queen Mother of the West, which Tan decides to stylise as Queen Mother of Western Skies. The woman then asks her granddaughter to teach her mother the same lesson of "how to lose your innocence but not your hope, [how] to laugh forever" (TAN, 2006a, p. 213).

According to the definition provided by the online Mythology Dictionary, the Queen Mother of the West, Hsi Wang Mu, spelt differently from Tan's version, is the embodiment of the yin principle and regarded as a tiger/leopard woman. It is also said that the Queen Mother of the West had a special connection with all women, making her the highest goddess of the Taoist religion. For this reason, Hsi Wang Mu is also the guardian of immortality. Tan's appropriation of the Queen Mother of the West may be understood as a metaphor of these mothers' desires to teach their daughters about their experience ("Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" and "The Twenty-six Malignant Gates") and how they need to come to terms with their daughters' perspectives as well ("American Translation"). Through the appropriation of a female goddess, Tan

highlights the positive aspect of the mother-daughter relationship and the stories which compose this section are narrated by mothers.

In Tan's sophomore novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, the appropriation of myths is clearly established in its title which references the Kitchen God, a Chinese deity. In the novel, the protagonist Winnie Louie tells her daughter, Pearl, that Auntie Du, a relative of them who has passed away, left a small altar in the will and that it now belongs to Pearl. Winnie's daughter decides to pick it up and is curious about the picture of the man who is in the altar. Winnie then briefly explains that this man is named Kitchen God and expresses her criticism about him as she did not deem him an important god. Her reasons are rooted in her views regarding what this man did to his faithful wife, as she narrates the story that one day,

> there was a rich farmer named Zhang, such a lucky man. Fish jumped in his river, pigs grazed his land, ducks flew around his yard as thick as clouds. And that was because he was blessed with a hardworking wife named Guo. She caught his fish and herded his pigs. She fattened his ducks, doubled all his riches, year after year. Zhang had everything he could ask for — from the water, the earth, and the heavens above (TAN, 2006b, p. 54).

However, as Winnie's story goes, Zhang was not satisfied and started a relationship with another woman, Lady Li, who later chased Guo out of her own house. As soon as Guo was away, the two lovers were able to splash out and do anything they wanted. However, after two years, "all of Zhang's land [was] empty, and so was his heart. His money was gone, and so was pretty Lady Li, ran off with another man" (TAN, 2006b, p. 54). Not having a penny to his name, Zhang became a beggar and knocked from door to door to beg for money. One day, feeling exhausted and unable to go on, Zhang fainted, "ready to die." However, he was rescued and woke up near a warm fireplace in a comfortable kitchen. Thinking about how thankful he was for the help, he realized the person tending to his need was his very first wife, Guo. Ashamed of his behavior, he tried to find a place to hide and ended up in the fireplace. Guo's tears

were not enough to put out the fire and she "watched her husband's ashes fly up to heaven in three puffs of smoke" (2006b, p. 55). For having the courage to admit he was wrong, Zhang was made a Kitchen God by Jade Emperor in the skies. A Kitchen God would then watch everyone's behaviors throughout the year and would tell the Emperor who deserved good or bad luck. After telling Pearl and her grandchildren this story, Winnie complains that she would not like to have that kind of person to judge her, "a man who cheated on his wife," especially when his wife was the good one (TAN, 2006b, p. 56).

Winnie's story parallels that of Guo's, the Kitchen God's wife who was subjugated and humiliated. However, Tan's appropriation of this Chinese god subverts the idea that the woman is left behind and that the man manages to be successful. In Winnie's story, she goes through different ordeals and manages to become independent while her husband is left behind. Not only was Winnie constantly abused by her husband who took everything from her, but she was also left to her own devices during wartime in which she had no friends and support. Only later would she meet her husband Jimmy and leave China in search of a different life in the USA.

At the end of the novel, Winnie looks for a goddess to replace the Kitchen God she burnt at home and she tells the shopkeeper that she is "looking for a goddess that nobody knows. Maybe she does not yet exist" (TAN, 2006b, p. 413). Then, she is offered a statue which was a factory mistake because no name had been printed down. She buys the "mistake" and creates her own goddess, Lady Sorrowfree, "happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world." (TAN, 2006b, p. 415),

> (...) her smile is genuine, wise and innocent at the same time. And her hand, see how she just raised it? That means she is about to speak, or maybe she is telling you to speak. She is ready to listen. She understands English. You should tell her everything. (...) But sometimes, 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 away everything bad (2006b, p. 414-415).

The message Winnie gives her daughter is one infused with experience and happiness, in spite of all the difficulties both have faced. Winnie's message is that her daughter should not accept being subjugated and humiliated. A message that echoes Adrienne Rich's ideas: a woman who refuses to be part of the self-destructiveness in a male-dominated world. It is possible to draw a parallel between Winnie's story and that of the Kitchen God's wife: both married abusive husbands and suffered a great deal, but while the latter forgave and cried her husband's death, the former understood that there is no real love in forgiving and forgetting. Tan's rewriting of the myth makes room for an important way to interpret the story because Lady Sorrowfree will not judge the "sinner." Instead, she will listen and offer a shoulder to lean on, thus creating a space in which sisterhood is fostered.

To conclude, I would like to borrow Karen Armstrong's suggestion that, if a novel is written and read carefully, as a myth or a great work of art, it may as well serve as a step towards understanding our own rites of passages (ARMSTRONG, 2005). She points out that a novel, like a myth, teaches us to behold the world in a different way because it may help us see the world from a perspective which goes beyond our own interests. Therefore, Armstrong emphasises that novels as much as myths may help one broaden one's own horizon.

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