

The kitchen god's wife essay



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The Kitchen God's Wife is a good novel in that the author was able to convey through her novel her own possible experiences as a Chinese-American.

The novel is also full of themes and symbols which would be the main focus of this paper. Almost every page of the paper is full of symbolisms, motifs and themes which helped the audience better understand the characters of the story. Among the themes present in the story are the difficulties of living a bicultural life, women's struggle in the patriarchal society, the pressure between fate and determinism. All of the themes mentioned above helped the audience better understand the characters in the story, for one, we were able to better understand the existence of a gap between Winnie and Pearl, we found out that Pearl in actuality is finding it hard to live as a Chinese American trapped between the two cultures at the same time we were also able to better understand Winnie's attitude particularly after the experiences she had with her husband prior Jimmy and in a way Winnie also helped us see that somehow belief in fate and determinism could coexist in the same manner that both culture "(the East and the West) could coexist without doing damage or without deserting the other culture. One of the themes of the story is the complexities and troubles one with bicultural life could face.

Experiences such as that of a Chinese American usually focuses around the issues of identity in that an individual usually finds it hard to determine what her real identity is or it could be that an individual finds it hard to be a part of two worlds and often times one of her part seems to be slipping away from her. The Kitchen God's Wife did not depart much from these stereotypes in that it tackles all of these issues which surfaced from the immigrant experience coupled with the generation gap between the immigrants and

their offspring. This particular dilemma and struggle could be mirrored in Pearl's character, which was born in America and was brought up in a family full of Chinese practices and traditions. Pearl finds it hard to live in both world (American and Chinese) and at the novel it appears as though Pearl made an attempt to desert her Chinese heritage and tried to evade all that has got something to do with it as could be seen from her refusal to go home and her distant relationship with her own mother. All throughout the story, Winnie recalls certain events wherein Pearl had been hesitant to learn of things with regards to her Chinese past or Chinese customs and the like. This could be clearly illustrated in one event in the novel wherein her mother tried to tell her about World War II in China and Pearl protested that it is not the same with World War II in America since the other one is Chinese history while what she is studying is American history.

Another example is their different views with regards to beauty as was clearly portrayed when Winnie gave Pearl a dresser she considers beautiful since it is almost the same as the one she used to have in china, yet Pearl did not appreciate the aesthetic value of the dresser. Although Pearl's father is like her in that he was an American-born Chinese, Pearl was not able to talk about her own experiences with her father since he died when she was but a little girl. Amy Tan, the author of " The Kitchen God's Wife" is in a way providing her audiences her own share of experiences as a Chinese-American who grow up in California and was raised in a home where misinterpretations and miscommunications seems to be an everyday basis. This is evident in most instances in the novel such as when Winnie was having trouble what kind of employment Pearl have.

Considerable, Pearl works as a speech therapist, a job which deals with language, which is one significant, factor in the story. Tan wants to point out in her novel that having a hyphenated experience is not really bad especially if one would just learn to accept the beauty of both cultures. In fact, living a life surrounded by two cultures could have its own positive aspects and one could use it to her own advantage. Living as a Chinese-American could make a person obtain a benefit of understanding both worlds and it is evident in the happy ending of Tan's novel.

Another theme of the story is the women's struggle in a patriarchal society which is highly evident in the novel. The role of females in the novel is varies and changes a great deal which is largely because the story covers a great many decades as well as two different countries and cultures. As the story starts the author presented Pearl to us, a modern working woman who is married to a great guy who equally shares the responsibilities with his wife and this could be seen based on the husband's relationship with their children. However, the author also presented to us a different kind of society wherein females are seen in a different aspect and this could be seen in Winnie's stories of china wherein women were taught to be compliant to their husbands. In China, women were taught to be good wives and good to them means "submissive", this ideal was based on Confucius teachings.

Strong women are chastised and avoided as though they did something which stigmatized them. This is clearly illustrated in Winnie's case, being a modern Shanghai woman who speaks her thoughts and is full of self-determination she was snubbed and shunned by her people. Winnie's own father upholds the Confucian ideal and advised her daughter to always put

her husband's own thoughts and wishes before her own. Winnie repeated so many times how she wish that she has known earlier that she has the right to refuse and say no to Wen Fu because she was only able to realize this thing when she is faced with women with similar experiences as her, women who have deserted their husbands.

Winnie struggled during her younger years with the ideals taught to her of how one is to be a " good wife", and the only things these so-called ideals offered her were pure anguish. It was mainly due to this contradiction that she described herself as both weak and strong. In fact this is wisely depicted by the author as we were first introduced to Winnie as Pearl's mother in America wherein the audience sees her as a strong woman. Her strength may have come from her past errors in judgment and probably because of the change in the time and place. For sure, Winnie, as the wife of Jimmy Louie was able to show her true self and thus the evolution from being a mistreated wife of her Chinese husband occurred and she is now the strong woman we know her to be. Winnie reconstructed her own beliefs regarding females in the same way that she reconstructed the divinity that Auntie Du has left behind and made the Kitchen God's Wife from a victim into a goddess, an powerful character, which in a way reminds us of Winnie's own transformation from being an abused wife into a happy and strong woman she had become upon marrying Jimmy.

Another major theme of the story is somewhat philosophical in nature in that the author chose the theme of stress between fate and self-determination.

All throughout the story, the notions of luck, fate, as well as destiny are frequently contrasted alongside self-determination and free will. This is

evident by the way Winnie sometimes talks about how lucky Helen's life is as compared to her. Another factor was when Winnie talked about the discussion she once had with her husband, Jimmy in which she wondered if their being together was a choice made by fate. However, in spite of these all there are also a great deal in the story which has got nothing to do with being predestined and this is mainly evident in Winnie's life, a life full of self made choices and decisions she did based on her own free will (i. e.

her leaving her husband Wen Fu). As a matter of fact, as one reads the story they would not be able to help but acknowledge the fact that Winnie's life is made through her own choices, and she draws her strength based on these choices she made. This is also evident by the way she re-created herself and lived her life anew in America. Winnie as a creator also cast a light on the notion of self-determination over the notion of being predestined or the power of fate. This is evident by the way Winnie produced her very own goddess because she feels that nothing exists which she could use as a gift for Pearl.

It is reasonable to conclude that the juxtaposition of freewill and fate came about because of the juxtaposition of the two cultures in the story (Chinese and American). I remember something about Chinese philosophy, something stated by Confucius and it states that what is important is for someone to do his best because if he gives his best no one could fault him and as long as you give your best you cannot fail. This idea is largely because Confucius thinks that what happens is not for us to decide, everything is decreed by fate and there is nothing we could do about it so as long as you do your best you cannot fail. As could be seen Confucius idea is largely based on fate or

determinism while the Western's idea (or most of them) is largely based on freedom, such as freedom to choose, and the like.

From the fusion of the two philosophies and cultures (Eastern and Western) Winnie was able to create her own goddess to give to her daughter. Cleaning also played a significant part in the story in that in the course of the story Winnie often portrays certain times when she find herself cleaning away, the cleaning is somehow figurative of cleaning away her past as well as the bad things which luck had brought her way. Winnie made an attempt to clean away the past from her mind yet they keep on coming back to her. Example of this was when Helen made an attempt to coax Winnie to tell Pearl the truth and to stop keeping secrets from Pearl, Winnie did not listen and instead spend the entire evening by cleaning.

The cleaning here could be seen some kind of Winnie's habit to forget things she does not want to remember. The naming of the characters should also be taken note of at the story. Most of the significant characters in the Kitchen God's Wife are endowed with more than just one name, and those names depends on the place and time they currently are. Example of this was that Winnie was once named Weili while Helen was once named Hulan. A change in the person's name is somehow symbolic in a person's change in character it could also signifies the sudden growth of the person.

For instance "Weiwei" somehow have a childlike sound to it and it sounds more innocent as compared to Winnie Louie, who have experience much in her life and knows a great deal more than "Weiwei" had. Also, when Jimmy changed Weili with Winnie, in a way it signifies Winnie's entrance into

another world, another culture. Luck is also ever present all throughout the story. As was already mentioned earlier, luck goes at variance with the Westerner's belief on reason and self-determination.

Winnie always seems to see the things which happen in her life as well as to the lives of others to be caused by luck. However, there are also times in the story when she thinks that she was able to achieve something because of her freewill and self-determination. Winnie is also among those superstitious lots and in this regard she is the exact opposite of her daughter, Pearl. However, by the end of the story this superstition along with her self-determination were fused together and enabled Winnie to create her own deity. The greenhouse could be seen as one of the symbols in the story in that when Winnie still resides with her aunties, she made use of the greenhouse which is located in the western part of the house. She used this greenhouse as some kind of a hiding place, her own sanctuary, the symbolism of the greenhouse is apparent for many reasons.

1st of which is that it is emblematic of foreign influences on China in the 20s up to 30s since it was Winnie's uncle does one of her English past times which is gardening. However, when this particular hobby no longer interest her uncle, the greenhouse was then deserted and it was instead used as some kind of a storage place for things which are no longer of use. Winnie felt that she is unwanted by her aunt and uncle and it is primarily the reason why she places herself in the greenhouse among unwanted possessions. In a way, Winnie also feels out of place in China in the same way that English hobbies seems odd to be done in China. Added to that, the greenhouse was

used to cultivate plant, it is a place where the plant grows and in a way this is symbolic in that Winnie did some of her own growing up in the same place.

Also, emblematically the greenhouse is also the same place from whence she could talk to her mother by means of the painting of her mother she found stacked in there. In a way it appears like her mother (even though it is just a painting) raised Winnie in the greenhouse. Hence, as could be seen the greenhouse has many symbolic importance. "My Secret Treasures" also played a symbolic part in the novel in that it is the phrase written in the box Winnie gave Pearl on her 10th birthday. Winnie stumbled on that same box while she was cleaning Pearl's room. Winnie told her daughter that the box could serve as her own safe box from whence she could stuff her secrets along with her American things.

In one way or another the box symbolizes that Winnie is somehow passing on to her daughter the tendency to live a life full of secrets. Lady Sorrowfree also served as a symbol in the story. It is the statuette Winnie made Winnie made for her daughter. In a way, the figurine is emblematic of her own life in the same way that it acts as a symbolism for the hidden strength and power of Winnie which Winnie endowed in the deity she made. As could be seen, *The Kitchen God's Wife* is full of symbolisms and interesting themes, all of which helped the readers to better understand the story as well as the reason why the characters in the story often act in certain ways. The author has a remarkable gift of communicating with her audience and she did most of this communications by means of symbolisms and themes present all throughout the story.

Overall, the themes and the symbols used by the author showed that it is possible for two different cultures to coexist, and though one may first find it hard to live a life trapped between two culture, if one would only learn to accept each culture as they are, there is a huge possibility that the two cultures could coexist, in the end it is up to the individual how she would make use of the chance given to her to live both culture to the fullest.