

## FOOD, FAMILY AND DESIRE:-WOMEN AS HUNGRY GHOST FIGURES AND KITCHEN GOD IN SELECTED AMY TAN'S NOVELS

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study focuses Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, and *The Kitchen God's Wife* where communication within family members is accompanied by and sometimes enacted through food imagery. This study focuses specifically on hunger through imagery indicative of the Buddhist mythological figure known as the Hungry Ghost. However this study does not comply with the Zen Buddhism typical happy ending that promises 'balance' and 'enlightenment' but instead their stories coincide with Lacanian insights and describes the Chinese American experience as being more pessimistic, complex and less resolved. As the families in the novels eat and feed each other, they try to strive for balance but never quite reach their destination and are left unsatisfied. This study will then look at how women are depicted as Hungry Ghost through food imagery and dialogue in the selected novels.

**Keywords:** women, representation, hungry ghost

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 THE THEORY OF LACAN**

One of the most glaring images found in Chinese literature is the representation of food and the role of the Hungry Ghost. According to Comiskey (1995), although the art of storytelling is a universal activity, much of its forms and contents depend on its cultural and historical contexts. Jacques Lacan insights can be applied in this study to further understand the depiction of food in the selected stories. Lacan (1977) states that the 'self' is constructed through language. There is no prior or true self. Instead we as humans are compilations of desires mediated through speech. Lacan goes on to say that, the Lacanian subject seeks the 'other', but its yearning cannot be satisfied. An appetite may be physically satisfied according to the Lacanian theory, but it will always have an unsatisfied residue; because appetite is always accompanied by desire. The inevitable result of conversation is what Lacan calls moments of desire in language (Keaton, 2002). In the 'Meaning of the Phallus', Lacan (1997) defines desires as: the splitting, the gap or 'the difference resulting from the subtraction of 'the appetite for satisfaction' from the 'demand from love''. Therefore Lacanian theory can be furthered extended to postulate two factors that motivate speech: one is the impulse of an appetite, the other is the unconscious yearning for the lost 'other' (Keaton, 2002).

Another important context in Lacan's insight is 'symptom'. For Lacan (1997), psychological symptoms are words or actions that which symbolically 'speak' or communicate repressed desires. Lacan explains,

In order to free the subject's speech, we (psychoanalysts) introduce him into the language of his desire...in which, beyond what he tells us of himself, he is already talking to us unknown to himself, and, in the first place, in the symbols of the symptoms.

In other words, a symptom is a language, like speech which conveys desire. Lacan (1977) states that in a symptom, 'the subject, one might say, is spoken rather than speaking' because its meaning has been repressed and symbolically displaced. Furthermore, unlike medical symptoms, where a particular symptom indicates a particular sickness, Lacan (1977) states that psychological symptoms are 'absolutely particular to the subject'. Keaton (2002) provides a good example where she states in regards to food, a cookie might symbolize comfort for some, and it might seem as temptation for others. This study will then focus on how communication between the families in the selected stories relate back to food imagery specifically through imagery indicative of the Buddhist mythological figure known as the Hungry Ghost. As the families eat and dine together, they never quite find a perfect balance and leave the table with unsatisfied feelings. Amy Tan's '*The Joy Luck Club*', and '*The Kitchen God's Wife*' depict a correlation between food and imagery and dialogue in a unique way that presents the women in the selected novels as if they are representing the Hungry Ghost.

#### **1.2 DEFINING THE HUNGRY GHOST**

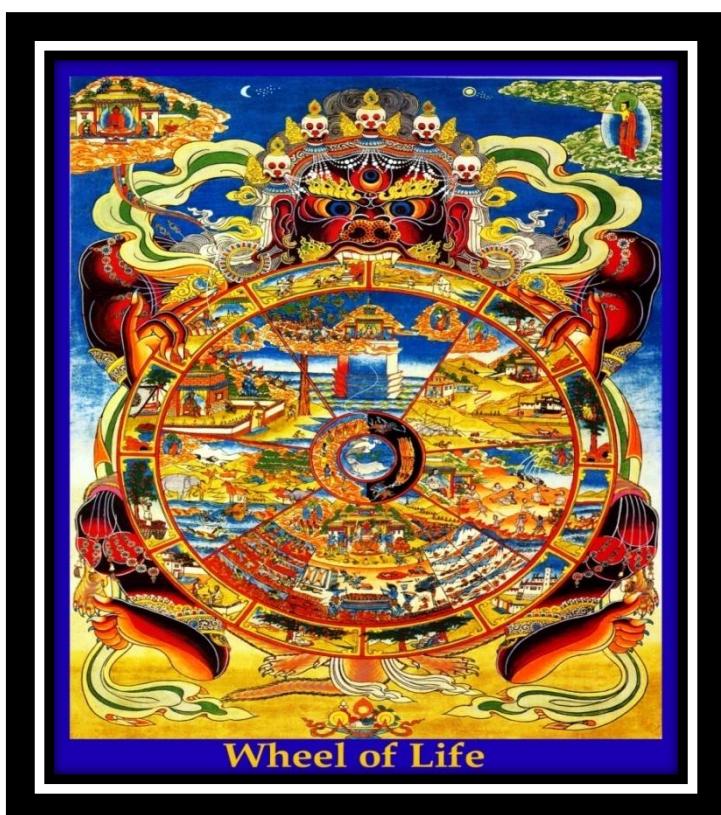
Hungry ghost is one of the six modes of existence in the Six Realms according to the Buddhist belief.

In the Zen of Eating, RonnaKabatznick states that the hungry ghost is both a mythological figure of enormous appetite and psychological desire for desire. Kabatznik(1998) states,

Hungry Ghost are large, mythic beings with huge, distended bellies and extremely narrow throats. They try to eat, but their narrow throats prevent them from getting fulfillment they crave. No matter what they do, or how hard they try, they feel empty and unsatisfied. The Hungry Ghost is not just a figure in Buddhist mythology. There's a Hungry ghost in each of us, too.

Teiser( 1996 ) discusses the Chinese Buddhist way of looking at the Hungry Ghost figure in his book '*The Spirits of Chinese Religion*' whereby he states that the realm of incarnation is divided into six possible forms the human being can take in rebirth, 'at the top are gods, demigods, and human beings, while animals, hungry ghost and hell beings occupy the lower rungs of hierarchy. Only the hungry ghosts hunger for their food as they have to rely on their relatives to feed them.Women are often associated with the Hungry Ghost because in Chinese culture the concept of 'yin' is considered to be female. Teiser( 1996 ) claims that Chinese culture designates 'yin' as female and 'yang' as male. 'Yin' accompanies the lower position, 'yang' the higher position. The 'yang' translation of spirit is 'ghost' or 'giu'; the 'yin' or female translation of spirit is 'ghost' or 'gui' (Keaton 2002).

The figure below provides an insight into the six realms according to the Buddhist cultural believe.



**Figure 1:** The Wheel of Life

According to ([www.buddistsociety.org](http://www.buddistsociety.org)) the Wheel of Life is the context, the way Buddhists see the world and our human condition, the reason we do what we do.

First the context - where we are, the way things actually are. In the Buddha-Dharma this is described by formulae known as the Three Signs of Being. The Buddha said: 'Whether Buddhas appear in the world or whether Buddhas do not appear in the world, it still remains a firm condition, an immutable fact and fixed law that all formations are impermanent, subject to suffering and are without self.' Impermanence, suffering and without self (no-'I'), the Three Signs of Being, indicate the way things really are, but what are 'formations'? The Wheel of Life is held up to us as a mirror by Yama, the god of death, who sends to human beings the messengers of approaching old-age, sickness and death. This famous symbolic picture traditionally can be found at the entrances of Buddhist temples and monasteries. The Six Realms are, beginning at the top, the heavenly realm where divine beings *devas*, enjoy a very long life of godlike blissful existence: nothing goes wrong; everything goes their way. It is said that their bodies and their clothes shine. Moving clockwise, the next is the realm of the fighting demons, the *asuras*, who, despite being semi-divine, are in a constant state of envy, declaring war on heaven and the *devas*.

This is because the tree that they share with the heavenly realm has its trunk and roots in the fighting demon realm, but the majority of the fruiting branches in the heavenly realm. Therefore the divine beings simply help themselves to the majority of the heavenly fruit, while the fighting demons can only look after the trunk and roots. Next is the animal realm. In the West we either view animals sentimentally or see them as dangerous beasts. In the East the life of an animal is thought to be pitiful because they have to accept whatever is meted out to them, having no redress for their suffering. In the wild, very few animals live out their natural lifespan. They kill to eat and will be preyed upon by others. If a lion breaks a tooth and it becomes septic there is no dentist to go to. As the pain increases they can no longer eat and therefore may starve to death. If they are lucky another predator will kill them off; if not, they will suffer a miserable death. The animal state is a pitiful state of suffering. Next comes the hungry ghosts, *pretas*, who are recognizable by their pipette-like necks and huge distended bellies. Their efforts at feeding themselves are continually thwarted by their thin necks. They exist in a state of constant hunger and craving.

At the base section of the wheel are the miserable realms or hells. There are 16 hells in Buddhism, eight hot and eight cold. Here there is unspeakable suffering sometimes for very long periods of time. The human realm completes the circle. Traditionally it is said that it is only from the human realm that liberation from the Wheel of Becoming is possible. In this realm are depicted all the important themes of human life - birth, the religious life, old age, sickness and death. Keaton (2002) states that all deceased ancestors are treated as hungry ghost, and surviving relatives pay homage to the dead by offering food and paper offerings. Strictly speaking hungry ghost can be a deceased person who has failed to become reincarnated due to unworthiness, unresolved attachment or relatives' lack of attention to the death rituals. Keaton (2002) goes on to say that children traditionally feed their deceased parents throughout the rest of their lives. It is the surviving descendant's responsibility to attend to their dead relatives throughout the years especially during the Festival of the Hungry Ghost. When depicted in art, hungry ghost are usually portrayed as women. This connection between lore and art between women and hungry ghost may account in part for why Chinese American women authors have decided to devote whole volumes to such a theme.

## **2.0 THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AS HUNGRY GHOST FIGURES IN AMY TAN'S NOVEL**

In the selected novels of Amy Tan, she focuses on communication among women and how women fail to feel connected to other women in their families. From a Lacanian standpoint in which gender is an assigned designation, these characters believe that they belong within the categories 'women' and more specifically 'Chinese American women' (Keaton, 2002). Keaton (2002) goes on to state that 'the more they attempt to fit into this socially constructed, arbitrary, and symbolic category of femininity, they more frustrated they become'. Amy Tan's novels seem to reflect Lacanian insights where there is no existence of a special female language. Instead the communication between the women is full of conflict. Rose ( ) explains that in the Lacanian theory, the concept of femininity is something constructed in the language; it does not exist within reality: there is no outside feminine language. The female family members in Amy Tan's selected novels struggle and fail to communicate.

### **2.1 THE JOY LUCK CLUB**

This novel which was first published in 1989 revolves around four mothers who were born in China and migrated to America and their daughters who became Chinese American. The novels revolve around the eight women's struggle to unite but due to cultural differences they fail to unite and harbor unexpressed desire. The first character that is introduced in this novel is Suyuan Woo. Suyuan abandons her daughters whilst fleeing a Japanese occupied city in China during World War II. She later remarries and immigrates to America leaving her clueless about her abandoned daughters. Suyuan dies without having found her daughters. Her abandoned daughters having survived the war have assumed that their parents are dead: 'their much loved first parent had died and become spirits ghosts while roaming the earth looking for them' (pg 329). Only after Suyuan's death are her Chinese daughters found and her husband perceives her not only as an ancestral ghost needing to be fed but as a Hungry Ghost attending an unfinished business. He tells his American Chinese daughter, June:

Maybe it was your mother's dead spirit who guided her Shanghai schoolmate to find her daughters. Because after your mother died, the schoolmate saw your sisters by chance while shopping for shoes (p.329)

June Woo is assigned to satisfy her mother's hungry spirit whereby her task is to visit her long lost step sisters in China where she informs them about their mother's death and tells them about her life. Thus, words exchanged between the sisters are to satisfy their mother's hunger. On the contrary the sisters, the sisters have trouble communicating due to language barriers. June Woo's father takes a picture of the three sisters, and as they watch it develop, June says:-

And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open I surprise to see, at last, her long cherished wish (p.332)

The mother's mouth remains open in this scene indicating a facial expression that alludes the desire to speak and eat: an expression linked to the Hungry Ghost. Even during her life, Suyuan acted as if she was an insatiable Hungry Ghost. June describes her mother as always out of balance: it seemed that my mother was always displeased with all of her friends, with me, and even with my father. Something was always missing. Something always needed improving. Something was not in balance (p.19). In her life, Suyuan failed to find fulfillment.

The second character in this novel, An-Mei Hsu, describes the similar relationship between her grandmother and her mother together with the relationship between her and her daughter. An-Mei Hsu's mother; a beautiful widow was raped by a rich businessman and later disowned by her own family due to her families patriarchal mandates. An-Mei Hsu's mother later becomes the rapist concubines to save herself and her unborn child. An-Mei Hsu's grandmother breaks all ties with daughter due to her fallen status as a women forces An-Mei Hsu to be left with her. A few years later when Popo (An-Mei Hsu's grandmother) is dying, An-Mei Hsu's mother returns to nurse her mother back. When all medications fail to cure her mother, An-Mei Hsu's mother cannibalizes herself by cutting pieces of her skin to make soup for her mother. This act symbolizes her desire: an act of penance-the impossible. An-Mei Hsu is portrayed as the Hungry Ghost here due to her inner desire to achieve the impossible. Even until death, An-Mei Hsu's grandmother does not forgive her and this leaves a yearning desire in An-Mei Hsu's mother's heart; another feature of the Hungry Ghost-yearning for the impossible.

Linda Jong, another mother and Chinese immigrant is portrayed as the opposite of the two women discussed earlier. Linda Jong comes across a notice about Hungry Ghost and values the notice only because she plans to use the notice in a deceptive manner. Linda Jong is seen as someone who manipulates her way around people only to achieve what she wants and for her, "I" is the important aspect in her life. For example, Linda Jong employs Chinese American women to teach her the right words to memorize and fill up her visa forms in order to trick the immigration officers into letting her into America. Another example is when Linda Jong notices a church with hand painted sign stating: - 'A Chinese Ceremony to Save Ghost from Spiritual Unrest 7.00 Am and 8.30 Am'. I memorized this information in case the authorities asked me where I worshipped my religion (p.296). Even though Linda Jong manages to use words to manipulate her words for her benefit, she does not find contentment with her daughter. Waverly her daughter often complains the way her mother uses words and food to criticize her and her Caucasian fiancée. For example once Linda Jong and her daughter were busy preparing dinner and they were discussing Waverly's fiancée:-

"So what do you think of Rich?" I asked finally, holding my breath. She tossed the eggplant into the hot oil and it made a loud angry hissing sound. "So many spots on his face," she said. I could feel pinpricks on my back. "They're freckles. Freckles are good luck, you know," I said a bit too heatedly in trying to raise my voice above the din of the kitchen... I couldn't save Rich in the kitchen. And I couldn't save him later at the dinner table (p.196)

At the dinner table, Waverly is unable to enjoy her food as she is in constant check with Rich's cultural faux pas, like politely agreeing with her mother when a food dish needs more salt when Lindo'sself depreciation had been his cue to praise her cooking (p.197). Waverly describes her frustration of talking to her mother as if she must 'fend off a thousand flying cleavers' (p.199). Waverly feels her mother's words have the ability to cut into her like meat. On the other hand, Waverly understand that her mother is not her enemy. Linda is described as "an old woman, a wok for her armor...getting a crabby as she waited for her daughter to invite her in" (p. 204) an act that Waverly cannot do with open arms. This relates them to the Hungry Ghost in ways both mother and daughter yearns for each other but is unable to express themselves.

The last mother and daughter pair in this novel is Ying Ying St Clair and Lena St Clair. Their difficulty in communicating with each other describes them as Hungry Ghost. The mother Ying Ying suffers from silent spells due to the baby she aborted during an unhappy marriage. This incident causes her much guilt and she yearns for forgiveness which will never take place-another aspect in the Hungry Ghost. Ying Ying's American husband relates her mood swing to that of her cooking. When she cooks a fragrant meal, Ying Ying's husband believes that his wife is in a good mood for that day. The family interprets the well cooked food as a sign from Ying Ying but they have no way of finding a cure for her inner sadness. Keaton (2002) states that Ying Ying discovers that her greatest shame is not the fact that she had an abortion; rather, keeping her shame a secret so many years has distanced her from her daughter, Lena, and had left her hungry. Ying Ying recognizes herself as becoming a Hungry Ghost and has taught her daughter to be one.

Ying Ying says "she is the daughter of a ghost. She has no chi. This is my greatest shame. How can I leave this world without leaving my spirit?" (p.286). At the end of the novel, Ying Ying realizes that even though she feels guilty over the abortion she will never find peace and this has affected her daughter making them both to yearn for something that they will never achieve. Embedded in this novel, family meals and dialogues are the revenues in which the women strive to create a close family bond. The mothers and daughters feed and talk to each other but remain metaphorically hungry. Through their best attempts they leave a residue of unfulfilled desires.

## 2.2 THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE

The novel published in 1991, talks about the relationship between the mother, Winnie and her daughter Pearl. Amy Tan wrote *The Kitchen God's Wife* about her mother, Daisy. Most of Winnie's story in the novel is drawn from Daisy's life, including the difficult life and marriage she left behind in pre-communist China. The presentation of Winnie's story, as she tells her story to Pearl, is reminiscent of the oral tradition. Food imagery is juxtaposed into the conversation that takes place between these two women. Their dialogues are full of loose gaps due to the information withholding that these two women have in common and thus find their conversations between each other meaningless in many cases. The story begins with the narration by Pearl Brandt, the daughter of Winnie Louie, a Chinese woman who immigrated to the United States in adulthood. Winnie convinces Pearl to attend an engagement banquet for her cousin in San Francisco. Pearl agrees reluctantly, and then stays in the city an extra day to attend the funeral of Auntie Du. During the engagement banquet, Winnie's old friend Helen informs Pearl she has a brain tumor and will be forced to reveal Pearl's secret that she has multiple to her mother unless she wants to inform the matter to her mother herself. She further hints that her mother, Winnie also has secrets she may want to share with Pearl.

Winnie tells her life story to Pearl in a manner that is parallel to the Kitchen God. (See Figure 2). According to Amy Tan version of the myth, before the Kitchen God became a god, he was a prosperous farmer. But like the Hungry ghost, he was unsatisfied. As a result he brings home another woman who runs off his wife. Finally he loses his mistress, his land and his fortune. He roams around the country and meets up with his first wife who gives him food. Out of shame, he jumps into the kitchen fire and kills himself. In heaven when met with the Jade Emperor, the Kitchen god is praised for accepting his mistakes and he is made a Kitchen God to watch over people in their kitchens. Every year he inform the Jade Emperor who deserved good luck and who deserves bad luck.



**Figure 2:** The Kitchen God

Winnie turns the traditional myth into her own variation whereby the Kitchen God's Wife becomes the main character. Winnie's story is full of food imagery that resonates with unfulfilled hunger. (Keaton, 2002). Pearl who has the same unfulfilled hunger with secrets of her own is able to participate in the conversation with her mother. She informs Winnie that she is suffering from a debilitating disease. From their conversation, the women discover that they are like insatiable Hungry Ghost. To their surprise, the women realize that revealing their secrets has not eliminated their alienation; rather, dialogue has succeeded only in uncovering unanswerable questions (Keaton, 2002) Winnie is portrayed as the Hungry Ghost in this novel based on her fixation on old regrets and desires the impossible- to change the past (Keaton, 2002).

Winnie loses her husband to stomach cancer and suspects that through her cooking her husband might have literally ingested toxins that were left behind by the workman when he was remodeling their kitchen. According to Pearl ‘my mother lived a life of regrets that never faded with time’ (pg. 27). Time can heal one’s wounds, however a Hungry Ghost remains fixated on things that they cannot achieve. Winnie’s most heartbreaking secret is the fact that she had a first marriage in China, something that she has withheld from her daughter. Winnie describes the symptoms that she has similar to the Hungry Ghost. She focuses on minor issues, a trade similar to the Hungry ghost who is often condemned to unfulfilled due to an unresolved obsession (pg.25). Winnie asks Pearl to come over to her house as she might be having a heart attack and when Pearl comes over she is fed with food her mother had prepared. When Winnie begins to tell her daughter her secrets, she feeds her minds with words but this norm of nourishment does not bring satisfaction. Winnie says ‘I gave her more. I watched her drink my soup. And I told her’ (pg. 102) Winnie never intended to tell Pearl her secrets but after being threatened by Helen, she pours out her secrets to her daughter. Winnie can be seen as the Hungry ghost here due to her unsatisfied desire to please her daughter and have a better relationship with her. Winnie realizes her mistake for being the ‘undutiful’ wife towards her first husband and that mistake has been eating her up like a hungry Ghost who is unable to suppress his desire for forgiveness.

Winnie informs her daughter that she was married prior to her coming to America to a guy named Wen Fu. In this novel, Winnie portrays Wen Fu portrayed as the Kitchen God who abuses his wife out of jealousy. Winnie is portrayed as the faithful wife and faces abuse from Wen Fu verbally and physically. Once when he meets with an accident and is injured badly, Winnie nurses him back. She then invites his friends over for dinner to visit her husband. She makes an elaborate meal for them and Wen Fu over hears their conversation from his room. He gets angry with Winnie when he hears of the praises she is receiving for her cooking. He storms into the room, knocks the food off the dining table and threatens to use violence against her unless she begs for forgiveness. The act of knocking the food off the table symbolizes his dissatisfaction with his wife. Another event when Wen Fu resembles the Kitchen God is when he cheats on his wife. Winnie laments that Wen Fu ‘was also sleeping with many different kinds of women...If I said one word against any of this – or anything else he liked- a big fight would come, always during dinner time (pg. 358). Wen Fu does not encourage Winnie to interfere in his personal life as he feels as the man of the house; he has every right to do as he pleases. Winnie leaves her husband and moves to America; an act that is seen ‘unfilial’ for a Chinese. Unlike the Kitchen God who repents for his misdoings, Wen Fu does the opposite and Winnie is surprised to hear how well he has prospered towards his dying days. After hearing her mother’s story, Pearl becomes even more confused and this creates even more confusion and misunderstanding between mother and daughter.

### **3.0 CONCLUSION**

Amy Tan’s selected novels for this study shows how two Chinese myths in Chinese culture is embedded in this study. The study brings forth examples of women being neglected by their family members and their desire to unite. They are more likely to become Hungry Ghost after death due to their unfulfilled desire. The different generations of women try to unite despite their attempt to be against male subjugation.

Amy Tan seems comfortable to use the Chinese Ghost and Kitchen God for most of her novels. Death seems an inevitable scene in her novels and she often relates this to her female characters. In the Joy Luck Club, the women seem to have an unfinished work but are unable to express themselves to their daughters or mothers. There does not seem to be a happy ending for these women in this novel as opposed to the Kitchen God. In the Kitchen God, there seems to be a closer understanding between the mother and daughter but towards the end, there are more questions than answers left.

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