

BOOK REVIEW

Review of Tan, Amy. The Kitchen God's Wife.
New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1991

CASTING OFF THE KITCHEN GOD OF FATE

The Kitchen God is a minor Chinese deity. He was a rich man who persecuted his wife and led a profligate life which caused his fortune to be reversed. But when he died, the Jade God in heaven rewarded him for humbly admitting his misdeeds by making him Kitchen God, whose assignment was to watch over the deeds of people on earth to determine the fate they deserved.

While he was honored, his long-suffering wife who rescued him from hunger and illness had been forgotten. "Nobody worshipped her. He got all the excuses. He got all the credit." (p.255)

Thus must the Kitchen God be cast aside, and the Kitchen God's wife freed from bondage. But it is an arduous task which she must herself achieve through strength and courage.

||

Amy Tan's second novel about Chinese-American women in San Francisco, California goes back into the China of the decades immediately before and after the Second World War as in her best selling *Joyluck Club*, published in 1989. This time focusing on the friendships of two women from the First Chinese Baptist Church of her first novel, she presents an intricate web of lives woven together by shared tragedies and dreams.

Helen (Hulan) and Winnie (Wei-Wei) met while they were young brides of Chinese air force officers fighting the Japanese. Their friendship spans 50 years, from the air base in China to Chinatown in San Francisco. They knew most of each other's pains and joys, sensed, and kept each other's secrets. Although told mostly from Winnie's perspective, Helen's life and adventures seem credible because they were told from episodes shared with Winnie.

Winnie and Helen shared many experiences. Helen knew of the philanderings of Winnie's husband, of the beatings he gave her, of his total

disregard for her and even his children, of the thoughtless ways in which he spent her money. Winnie sensed without without being told of the convenient relationship between peasant Helen and her more upper class husband, a marriage forged to rectify the error he committed against her sister who died bearing his unwanted child.

Winnie's story goes back to pre-war China. Her mother, unhappy as the second wife of a rich man, left him and her daughter for love. Winnie was sent to live with relatives who openly showed preference for their own daughter before her, a situation from which marriage to what she considered an exciting man, was an escape.

Winnie's story goes farther beyond the war. She fell in love with a Chinese-American with whom she eloped, for whom she was sent to prison by her husband, to whom she fled after being raped by her ex-husband in a cruel attempt to keep her chained to him.

She kept secret her knowledge that her Chinese-American daughter was actually sired by her dreaded ex-husband in that last rape. Helen makes Winnie tell her daughter that secret almost 40 years later, as she made her daughter Pearl tell her mother she suffered from multiple sclerosis.

III

The book deals with the same theme of mother-daughter tensions taken up in Tan's first book. As Pearl put it:

Mostly, I see my mother sitting one table away and I feel as lonely as I imagine her to be. I think of the enormous distance that separates us and makes us unable to share the most important matters of life. (p.34)

It tackles the same bond of filial love. As Winnie told Pearl:

I loved you the most, more than all the children I had before you . . . I loved you in ways you never saw. And maybe you do not believe this. But I know this is true . . . Because you broke my heart the hardest, and maybe I broke yours the same way. (p.86)

But *Kitchen God's Wife* explores other themes as well — romantic love, friendship and solidarity between women, and courage to change one's sad fortune.

Winnie summed up her friendships with Helen in this manner:

. . . She is not related by blood, not even by marriage . She is not someone I chose as my friend. Sometimes I do not even enjoy her company. I do not agree with her opinions. I do not admire her character. And yet we are

closer partners than sisters . . . And we have a kind of loyalty that has no word in this country. (p.73)

Her daughter, seeing her mother and Helen together, observed:

I am laughing, confused, caught in an endless circle of lies. Or perhaps they are not lies but their own form of loyalty, a devotion beyond anything that will ever be spoken, anything that I will ever understand.

Winnie described her first stirrings of love:

I felt the danger, that it was how you love someone, one person letting out fears, the other drawing close to soothe the pain. And then more would pour out . . . sorrow, shame, so much released until you overflowed with joy to be rid of it, until it was too late to stop this new joy from taking over your heart. (p.203)

She expressed her joy in the discovery of her more mature, albeit still forbidden love:

To see his face! The joy in his face! We said no words. And we stood in the road, our eyes wet with happiness, knowing without speaking that we both felt the same way. (p. 346)

She cried, ending her story:

I do not know why something that made me so happy then feels so sad now. Maybe this is the way it is with the best memories. (p. 346)

Winnie's story was not so tragic because she did her best to change her own fate. Once she ran away from home with her child, but was found by her husband. The second time, she eloped with her lover with the help of a group of women who, in post-war China, had also begun to set themselves free from hapless marriages.

Her escapes began in her mind:

But at night, in my room, in my mind, I was arguing with Hulan, with myself: Sometimes a girl makes mistakes. Sometimes a mistake can be changed . . . This could still happen. (p. 194)

Her escapes reached her dreams:

Sometimes, I would dream . . . I had gone back to Shanghai to work at the Great World. And it was the same life, the same kind of torture, pulling me apart, inch by inch, until I no longer recognized myself. (p. 280)

Her first escape was not without difficulties. It meant loss of face (so difficult among orientals), even imprisonment. But finally, she was able to change her fate.

Fearing the tragic fate that might befall her daughter afflicted with multiple sclerosis, she resented the Kitchen God:

... I saw that picture of Kitchen God, watching me, smiling to see me unhappy. I took his picture out of the frame. I put it over the stove ... I watched his smiling face eaten up by the fire. Right then my smoke detector went off. Wanh! Wanh! Wanh! Oh, I was scared ...

But then I listened again. And I knew ... This was Kitchen God's wife, shouting. Yes! Yes! Yes! (p. 413)

Thus did she cast the Kitchen God - with the prodding of the Kitchen God's wife in her mind. She replaced him with another deity which she herself named Lady Sorrowfree: "happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world." (p.415)

IV

Amy Tan's second novel has the makings of another best seller. As she has said in interviews, it is not a continuation of the first wherein the lives of four Chinese-bred mothers and their American-born daughters were told. Rather, it is a deepening of one woman's story of her second class status as a child, her second class status as a wife, and her second class status under traditional law.

Tan has the ability to look into a woman's life and see her soul. In her two novels, she has been able to capture the pathos, the dreams, the joys of her subject women. She is able to tell their stories in delicate prose, with profound understanding.

Proserpina Domingo-Tapales