



The Role of Silence and its Influence on Female Characters in Amy Tan's novel The Kitchen God's Wife

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Abstract. This research offers a valuable addition to the comprehension of silence that challenges the conventional perspective of interpreting silence as a manifestation of the incapability to interact or communicate with others. Drawing upon Margaret E. Montoya's views, this study examines Amy Tan's novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, to argue that silence can serve as a form of resistance against oppression or as a consequence of oppression. Within the novel, female characters possess the capacity to articulate their thoughts through language; nevertheless, they consciously choose to remain silent due to certain reasons that will be elucidated in this investigation.

Keywords: Female silence, Amy Tan, Feminism, Margaret E. Montoya.

1. Introduction

The concept of silence holds various connotations across different cultures. Its utilization by women, in particular, encompasses a wide range of meanings. It is important to note that the interpretation of silence is largely dependent on





the context. According to Saville-Troike, silence can signify a lack of participation, grief, anger, respect, disapproval, hatred, indifference, isolation, avoidance, disguise, confusion, and manipulation (1958, p.61). Silence is not to be mistaken as the absence of a voice, but rather a process of interaction. It can be perceived as a carefully thought-out response to the actions of others. Correspondingly, Lakoff maintains that silence is a suitable reaction to inappropriate inquiries (1973, p.76-453). Deciphering the implications of silence can pose a challenge, as it may suggest conflicting meanings such as power and vulnerability.

The realm of Feminist Cultural Criticism was the pioneering discipline to investigate the implications of the absence of women's voices during the 1970s. In her groundbreaking literary work entitled *Silences*, Tillie Olsen identifies and distinguishes the various types of silence, such as "hidden, other, censorship, foreground, and illiterate." (Olsen, 2003, pp.8-10) She delves into the manifold ways in which female silences are construed and comprehended. According to her, Silence is deemed a liability, an incapacity to articulate one's thoughts and feelings.

Olsen places significant emphasis on the female voices that have, regrettably, been forcefully silenced and neglected throughout the course of literary history. This is underscored by her use of the term "unnatural silences," which draws attention to the pervasive social injustices that render certain voices powerless, thereby precluding them from being heard. In this regard, Olsen's attention is directed towards women who belong to specific ethnic or religious groups.

Elaine Showalter, a renowned feminist critic recognized for her Gynocriticism theory, has made valuable contributions towards the comprehension of the concept of silence in literature. In her publication titled "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," she undertakes an analysis of anthropological affirmation, highlighting the creation of a covert language by women in specific societies. This secret language is deemed to serve both as a form of privacy and defense mechanism against the purportedly imposed silence. Showalter proposes that feminist critics must prioritize women's access to language, emphasizing the importance of a diverse lexical repertoire for word selection. (1981, p.192, Ibid.,193) She posits that the reason for women's silence lies in their restricted access to the complete range of linguistic resources. Consequently, women tend to remain silent for only a finite duration.



In her work entitled "Silence, Self and Sacrifice in Gertrud Kolmar's Prose and Dramatic Works," Suzanne O'Connor presents a positive interpretation of the concept of Silence. Rather than being viewed as a passive and oppressive mode of communication, it is instead considered an active and subversive form of communication. Silence is portrayed as a protective barrier that enables a character to remain strong by remaining inaccessible to others. Furthermore, numerous literary characters have employed silence, represented in writing by two dots, as a means of composing encrypted messages in order to safeguard themselves from the Nazis (O'Connor, 2010, pp. 131-137).

Wan Roselezam bt. Wan Yahya undertakes an exploration of the concept of Silence in her work entitled "Female Silence in K.S. Maniam's Play The Sandpit: A Monologue". The employment of monologue as a narrative technique is purposeful and intentional. The author utilizes this technique to effectively communicate the protagonist's innermost thoughts and emotions, particularly those that may not be effectively conveyed through dialogue. In the realm of Feminist Criticism, such silence can be viewed as a dynamic strategy for resisting and rebelling against the constraints of socially oppressive roles.

In her article, Yahya poses inquiries regarding the function of Silence as a mechanism for cultural communication and self-revelation for the protagonists in the chosen literary works, as well as the implications of the rationale of silence for the female protagonist. The investigation expounds upon how the silencing that is specific to a given culture affects the existence of a working woman. This is accomplished through an exploration of a woman's status within a particular family structure, as well as the interplay between this family and other communities in various countries.

According to Catherine Belsey's perspective, the lack of vocalization among females does not necessarily connote a submission to the patriarchal system; rather, it signifies the inability to seize an opportunity to express oneself (Belsey, 2014, p. 149). Meanwhile, Helene Cixous posits that silence is a manifestation of hysteria. The great hysterics, having lost their ability to speak, are metaphorically decapitated and their tongues figuratively cut off. Consequently, the body speaks, but man is unable to perceive its language (Cixous, 1981, p. 49).

King Kok Cheung, Susan Gal, and Dorutlw E. Roberts espouse the notion that silence can serve as a potent instrument of opposition to subjugation. Cheung, for her part, has undertaken an exhaustive analysis of silence in her seminal work "Articulate Silences", wherein she posits that silence may be





construed in a multitude of ways depending upon the culture. She firmly rebuffs the notion that silence should be viewed as indicative of inertia or frailty. At the outset of her treatise, Cheung notes that silence is regarded by Japanese characters as the antithesis of "noise," "motion," and "commotion," instead perceiving it as a symbol of contemplation, perceptiveness, and vigilance. This contrasts with the Eurocentric tradition, where silence might signify inactivity, or run counter to communication or expression (1994, 113).

Cheung (1994, 119) identifies a type of silence, which he labels as 'stoic', as being associated with traits such as dignity, forbearance, and endurance. According to Cheung, this form of silence possesses a dual nature in that it provides individuals with a significant source of strength, while concurrently being capable of being perceived by others as a manifestation of submission or weakness (1994, 119). This perception of silence as passivity rather than an active choice is likely to be a determining factor in how it is interpreted.

Susan Gal, in her work entitled "Between Speech and Silence," posits that silence can be considered a verbal form within a given language, and as such, may assume a variety of meanings and effects (1991, p. 176). Depending on the context, silence can symbolize inactivity and impotence for those who have been denied the opportunity to speak or have not been heard. Conversely, silence can also serve as a strategy of resistance against dominant forces. This notion is consistent with the perspectives of Patricia Laurence, who contends that the use of silence by women signifies both resistance and choice. Laurence regards silence as a tacit truth and an inner revelation, and it may be viewed as a mode of expression within specific cultural and historical contexts.

(Laurence, 1994, p158) Additionally, Laurence posits that the absence of female speech can be perceived as a form of "existence" and a literary work to be orally delivered (Ibid., p157). Fulton contends that this is a form of "silent protest" that can effectively communicate a point (2012, p66).

Furthermore, Robert, in her work titled "The Paradox of Silence," asserts that silence can serve as a strategy of resistance that is both enlightening and thought-provoking, as stated by Margaret E. Montoya. The examination of silence as either silencing or as a form of resistance is a complex undertaking, as it can be misconstrued, especially by those in positions of power.

After conducting a comprehensive survey of divergent perspectives on the concept of silence, the present study endeavors to scrutinize the dual fundamental rationales behind the phenomenon of female reticence in Amy Tan's chosen literary masterpiece, namely *The Kitchen God's Wife*. The occurrences depicted in the novel have been meticulously examined from two



distinct vantage points, namely regarding silence as a manifestation of resistance against subjugation, as well as an outcome thereof.

2. The Concept of Silence in The Kitchen God's Wife.

Tan, a writer of Chinese-American descent, has received widespread recognition for her literary accomplishments. Her second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, which is a compilation of her best works, is a semi-autobiographical masterpiece that highlights the strong bond between a mother and her daughter. Additionally, it provides a window into the societal norms of a predominantly male-dominated world, heavily influenced by the doctrines of Confucianism.

The female characters in the narrative are shaped by distinctive experiences, yet they share a commonality of being silenced in some capacity. Furthermore, this perception that women's voices are disregarded or ignored exacerbates the issue. Females feel that even if they desire to express themselves, their words will fall on deaf ears. Eagleton posits that when women discuss their silence, they are not alluding to their inability to effectively communicate through language, but rather to the cultural and societal pressures that erode their self-assurance and instill fear of speaking (1996, p. 16).

Gal concurs with Gumperz's proposition that silence functions as a "subversive defense" and a form of political dissent that posits that all linguistic forms constitute strategic actions that are generated in response to cultural and institutional paradigms (1991, p. 176).

Winnie, similar to her fellow characters in the literary piece, has adapted to fulfill the societal expectations and demands placed upon her. She elects to remain mute, ostensibly stemming from oppression, yet in actuality, this serves as a stratagem to defy patriarchal control. Her taciturnity depicts her as a passive persona, who is deemed to be a dutiful wife and daughter. Winnie has withstood her father's abandonment and mistreatment during her formative years. Furthermore, she has endured the wrath of her spouse's irritable disposition, silently bearing it for an extended period, while being subjected to repeated disrespect in front of her loved ones and acquaintances.

In the novel, Winnie is portrayed as an individual who tacitly accepts the decisions of others. It is her mother's departure that serves as the impetus for her reticence. As a result of her mother's abandonment, Winnie's father arranges for her to reside with her uncle, whose household comprises two spouses - Old Aunt and New Aunt - the preeminent female figures in Winnie's life, who endeavor to eschew any reminders of her mother. Winnie has been





bereft of any paternal affection or safeguarding. In her uncle's abode, she is regarded as an outsider and acquires the art of deference.

The protagonist establishes an undisclosed realm within her uncle's estate's western confines as a means of evading her melancholic existence. This garden serves as a covert enclave where she, akin to her vocalization, withdraws from actuality. Additionally, she experiences a sense of disregard, which further contributes to her reticence. Throughout the course of this novel, silence serves as a testament to how men can utilize culture to subjugate women. As such, it can be argued that men are either directly or indirectly responsible for perpetuating women's silence. Gal posits that Gender is a cultural framework that is founded upon power dynamics (1991, p. 176).

Winnie's nuptials to Wen Fu were not a matter of choice, but rather, a decision made without her input. Essentially, Winnie was bereft of agency in the realm of matrimony. She had been conditioned to abide by the wishes of her father, and subsequently, her spouse. Following Wen Fu's passing, she dutifully followed the directives of her male offspring (Xu 1997, p.280). Gayatri Spivak posits that "speaking always occurs within the nexus of actions that include listening, responding, interpreting, and qualifying" (2016, p.254). Therefore, any communicative exchange is not a unilateral event, but instead, an interactive process that necessitates both speaker and listener for it to be efficacious.

For Winnie or any other female, the act of verbal communication is rendered futile in the absence of the party to whom it is addressed. After entering into the institution of marriage, Winnie experiences a dearth of affection and interest from her spouse, a situation which remains unaltered. Consequently, she transitions from a state of being a silenced and neglected daughter to a silenced and marginalized wife. Furthermore, she is forced to endure both psychological and physical torture at the hands of her cruel husband, as a means of self-preservation. To make matters worse, her husband proceeds to betray her. Despite enduring the loss of her first child, she chooses to maintain silence regarding this tragic event, refraining from confiding even in her confidante, Hulan.

The level of cruelty exhibited by the woman's spouse is on the rise, with his aggressive demeanor becoming increasingly unpredictable and his unpleasant temper no longer concealed. The woman is subjected to physical abuse and public humiliation, being referred to as a "whore" in the presence of her spouse's friends and others. The cultural norms, as postulated by Confucius, which relegate women to a lower status, prevent onlookers from intervening





despite the brutality. Winnie's acquaintance, Hulan, aligns herself with the patriarchal system, thereby promoting female subjugation, which is a common trait among women like her in society.

In a particular instance within the novel, Yiku, the second offspring of Winnie, was subjected to severe physical abuse by her father until she ceased weeping. The child articulates her agony throughout the ordeal. Subsequently, Yiku realizes that her tears were the catalyst for the assault. In an attempt to safeguard herself, she resorts to silence, which ultimately becomes a manifestation of brutality and subjugation. Incapable of weeping, Yiku finds an unconventional outlet for her suffering. She forcefully pulls a strand of hair from one side of her head and repeatedly strikes her cranium against the wall. In this scenario, muteness transforms into aggression. The child is deprived of the opportunity to articulate and confess her pain through tears, and thus, she evades making eye contact with others at all costs. Yiku's peculiar conduct has been exceptionally thought-provoking as it brings to light the author's endeavors to employ prospective techniques in order to provide Yiku with a voice. Subsequently, the child's demise ensues a day later as her father, Wen Fu, declines to administer treatment on account of her gender, despite Winnie's beseeching for assistance.

This marks the second instance in which Winnie has experienced the loss of a child, leaving her in a state of profound devastation. She retreats to her quarters and weeps inconsolably for a span of several days. It dawns upon her the dire nature of her circumstances, causing her to arrive at a decision to abstain from motherhood. Her rationale stems from a desire to spare future offspring from enduring the tribulations that she and Yiku have confronted as a result of her perceived obligation. Despite these circumstances, she maintains a stance of stoic silence.

There are two potential explanations for her lack of speech. The first is rooted in the possibility that she may be suffering from hysteria as a result of the events that have transpired with her daughter. In accordance with Cixous, silence is often an indicator of hysteria (1981,p49). Conversely, King Kok Cheung posits that silence is not always synonymous with passivity or fragility, but can also be indicative of strength (1993,p3). I align myself with the ideology presented by Cheung. Winnie's silence transforms into a formidable tool of resistance. Her choices become somewhat unpredictable once she delivers Danru and returns home. Upon discovering that her husband Wen Fu has brought his mistress into their shared bed, she remains unperturbed and



describes Wen Fu's mistress as a "guest" to Hulan and her aunt (Tan 1989, p238).

Cheung postulates that the utilization of silence can be employed to expose weaknesses or as a strategic approach to resist the expression of unspeakable matters or taboo topics (Cheung, 1993, p.4). Conversely, silence, according to Winnie, does not indicate frailty. She undertakes a transformation, exhibiting no apprehension or distress regarding her husband's mistress. Instead, she opines that her husband's paramour is instrumental in liberating her from her oppressive spouse. Bolstered by a newfound sense of audacity and self-assurance, Winnie demands a divorce, marking her initial vocalization. The roles are now reversed as her husband maintains a reticent demeanor, offering no reaction. This silence could potentially be construed in two ways; first, as a tool utilized by her husband to reassert his masculinity, reminding Winnie of his dominance. Alternatively, it could indicate his incapacity, caught off guard by Winnie's unexpected defiance (Gal, n.d.).

In chapter fourteen, a discernible shift in Winnie's thought process can be discerned by the reader, which is indicative of a transformation in her character. She chooses to reject the prescribed identity that her culture has imposed upon her and instead, rebels against Chinese codes and norms that dictate that a woman must experience pain, suffering, and tears before being deemed worthy of love. Furthermore, she puts an end to the "cabbage game," which was a means of oppression employed by her husband to force her to consume a vegetable that she disliked. By pretending to enjoy it, she realizes that she possesses the ability to resist and learns new strategies to counteract oppression, transforming silence into action. Ultimately, she makes the decision to chart her own course and refuses to acquiesce to the desires of others.

In his essay entitled "A Womanist Production of Truths," Wenying Xu posits that Winnie ultimately acquires the agency and fortitude necessary to reclaim her rights and emancipate herself from the constraints of patriarchal tradition. Through heightened awareness of her own degradation, she is motivated to effect change in her existence. The pivotal moment in Winnie's journey occurs upon meeting Jimmy Louie, whose encouragement and support embolden her to break her silence after years of subjugation to Wen Fu's mistreatment. Winnie has hitherto lacked control over her own destiny. Through the guidance of Jimmy Louie, the protagonist realizes the potential for women to exercise agency over their own lives, including the language they use. Louie's example demonstrates to Winnie the inherent value of women and





their right to be treated with respect, regardless of familial ties. The support and encouragement that Louie provides Winnie empowers her to take control of her own life and assert her own voice and agency. Amy Tan's work highlights the strength and resilience of women, once they have claimed their own autonomy and voice, and suggests a strong correlation between language use and identity formation.

Peanut, who happens to be Winnie's cousin, remains silent as a result of experiencing oppression. She is portrayed as a passive character, opting to keep quiet in order to avoid creating any conflicts for herself and her loved ones. Peanut is married to a homosexual who resides with her as a sibling. She refrains from expressing her thoughts or grievances. Peanut has no intention of altering her situation since she associates speaking up with disgrace and humiliation.

Hulan and Auntie Du are two characters who remain taciturn even when confronted with the sight of Winnie being subjected to physical abuse by her spouse. They are emblematic of women who, to some degree, participate in perpetuating patriarchal subjugation of other women. Consequently, they bear responsibility for their own silence as well as that of Winnie. In this context, women's silence serves two functions: "subverting and reinforcement" (Roberts, 1999, p. 344). This phenomenon pertains to women who have remained silent while also silencing other women. The onus for victimizing women cannot be solely placed on the patriarchal system, as women have played a role in creating such victims (Kadhim, 2017, p. 234).

In her latest work, Amy Tan introduces yet another female character who has been tragically silenced, namely, Winnie's mother. The subject in question is wedded to an elderly gentleman and has subsequently taken the place of his previous spouse, who perished by her own hand. Despite the challenges she encounters, this individual exhibits an unwavering determination to flee from her circumstances and, regrettably, leaves her daughter Winnie to cope with the aftermath.

Winnie relocates to reside with her uncle, where his second spouse tragically takes her own life subsequent to his remarriage. For the latter mentioned individual, her abstention from speaking morphs into a tool of opposition, as she anticipates that her voice may perhaps be acknowledged posthumously. This scenario draws parallels with that of "Bhubaneswari", who similarly committed suicide in the hopes of being comprehended. As noted by Spivak (2016, p. 101), "this woman thought she could be heard by death and through death".





3. Conclusion

This study presents a challenge to the pre-existing assumptions regarding silence. It necessitates an in-depth exploration of the language of silence and posits that silence in literature is not merely the lack of sound or communication. Rather, it can be regarded as a poignant expression of sound and significance, as well as a medium for transmitting the unspoken.

In this study, we have presented an argument regarding the relationship between silence in literature and violence and abuse against women. It is suggested that women may adopt silence as a means of self-protection or as a method of resistance against the hegemonic cultural forms represented by male dominance. Several scholars, including Olsen, Showalter, Gal, Cheung, and Roberts, have shared their different perspectives on this topic. They have demonstrated that silence can be utilized to convey the inability of voices to find expression, while others argue that language is a tool of the dominant order (male) and that women are expected to speak within its confines. This has led some women from diverse cultures to create their own language that they believe will enable them to express themselves more effectively. All of these scholars agree that an individual's voice or language is crucial to defining their identity. However, when injustice is not permitted to be expressed, silence becomes the norm.

In Tan's novel, the author endeavors to demonstrate the prospect of silence evolving from a consequence of oppression to a strategy of resistance, rather than the contrary, for certain women. Paradoxically, the novel encompasses two distinct categories of male characters in the protagonist's life: the oppressor (antagonist) who subdues the female and the rescuer (protagonist) who advocates for the female and empowers her to articulate her apprehensions and construct her selfhood.

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