Reading Amy Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife With and Against the Grain of ‘A Sex Which Is Not One.’

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Abstract

This paper problematizes the traditionalist conception of gender identity in terms of such a rigid boundary as female castration which is best captured in Luce Irigaray’s notion of “A Sex which Is Not One.” The sexist also misogynistic load embedded in this particular discursive formation is doubly affirmed and debunked through The Kitchen God’s Wife (1991), a novel by the contemporary popular writer Amy Tan. By reading this text with and against a paradigmatic phallogocentrism, I try to demonstrate that Tan is not only subservient to and affirmative of gender binary oppositions, even through performing what is called the phallic masquerade, but also makes of the lack fantasy a more elusive ungraspable term. Among the conceptual fluidities resulting from the appropriation and reconstruction of such a Freudian theme is the project of tracing back the protagonist’s disregard of femininity as well as phallic positionings to mythical roots and symbolical structures. Through a gender analysis of Tan’s resistant inversion of the Kitchen God’s Wife tale, I shall point out a feminist search for a more equitable system of signification and stress the incongruities and vulnerabilities of adopting phallocentric frameworks.

Keywords: The Kitchen God’s Wife, Luce Irigaray, gender dichotomies, reading with and against the grain.
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The field of gender studies admits everything but stability, consistence and homogeneity. Prolific at all levels, as Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity shows, the area is far from offering the reader a coherent or uniform body of findings and discussions and, as a result, is inconceivable outside features of splitting and perspectiveness. Paradoxes, ambiguities, gaps and counter discourses are main aspects of gender theories, precisely as they engulf such confounding questions and relations as the metaphysical categories of natural castration or phallic masquerade and penis envy, the three of which will be dealt with as disputable interdependent foci in the current paper. The trio is captured in what is becoming a catch-phrase in this essay, the ideology of “a sex which is not one” which, I suppose, requires a reading with and against the grain (Irigaray, “Sex” 254).

My article argues that the intertwined designations natural castration or phallic masquerade and penis envy are problematically embedded in Amy Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife as a postmodern text which partakes in bringing further trouble and controversy to the constructions of femininity in relationship and opposition to masculinity. By adopting Luce Irigaray’s phrase “a sex which is not one” as a title, it promises to proceed according to a reading with and against the mythical grain of feminine lack, that is, in a way that alerts us to the contributions but also masculinist defects in certain literary works that follow in the footsteps of psychoanalytic and feminist insights about gender matters and themes. The idea is that, in spite of dismantling biological readings of natural castration and its attributes by grounding them in cultural apparatuses, Tan’s account of femininity still tends to interpret gender difference as failure. Indeed, neither referring her misrepresentation of the feminine gender back to a Confucian world view, an Eastern mouthpiece supportive of “female secondariness and seclusion”, nor her narrator-protagonist’s desire for a symbolic stature exonerates the considered text from perpetuating masculinist ideologies (Croll 13).

On the basis of a Freudian / Lacanian story which is founded on a binary structure, I will back up my reading of The Kitchen God’s Wife with specific terminology and theoretical

1 The title of the essay draws on Luce Irigaray, “The Sex Which is Not One,” in From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology, 1996, ed. by Lawrence Cahoone (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003): 254-258. Further references to this essay in parentheses will be shortened into “Sex”. I will follow a similar strategy with other long article or book titles in processing parenthetical references, that is, by citing just the first word in the title of the article or book, without counting demonstrative articles as words.

2 I am borrowing the key term counter discourse to describe theoretical and practical challenges to well-established assumptions (Ashcroft et. al).

3 Note that I am using the 1991 edition of The Kitchen God’s Wife, published by Ivy in New York. Forthcoming parenthetical references to this text will appear simply as Kitchen.

As to my reference to the attribute postmodern, it simply chronicles any form of writing rejecting the modern preoccupations with “the purity of form and technique”, such as Tan’s conscious trusting of her stories to incoherent narrators (Hutchinson).

4 It might be helpful noting that myth and mythical in this particular essay simply register whatever does not correspond to reality, or whatever is based on common fantasies that do not necessarily rely on logic. As to the use of the attribute masculinist, it tries to illustrate any preference of or exaggerated reliance on the reliability and righteousness of masculine aspects and roles.

5 My references to the symbolic play on the process of functioning with a sign system as a subject, rather than as an object (Roudiez 19).
discoveries reviewed, mainly, by Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler and Rosalind Minsky. This is because much of the negativist constructions of the feminine gender in the selected work are motivated as well as questioned by the informative, yet, problematic, results achieved in both psychoanalysis and feminism.\(^1\) Within this controversial frame, the essay will shed light on Winnie Louie’s self-contempt as a cultural construct, rather than a biological given, and demonstrate how her disturbed ego-formation is strongly embedded with a misogynist ideological system. Last, I will scrutinize the notion of penis envy in connection with “women’s masculine self-fashioning” and look into the protagonist’s subversion of phallic signifiers as a polemical feminist search for a more equitable system of signification (Schoene 286).

In its slippery recognition also disruption of the recurrent and central proposition about women’s natural invisibility, Tan’s gender framework seems to have everything to do with an oppositional conceptual paradigm which we always encounter in the analyses of Sigmund Freud, in those of his advocates and even in the attacks of his critics.\(^2\) Now becoming classical, the latter’s dichotomous thinking could be said to hinge on such asymmetrical categories as the clitoris “as a little penis which is pleasurable to masturbation” and the vagina as an organ that “derives its value from the ‘home’ it offers the male penis when the now forbidden hand must find a substitute to take its place in giving pleasure” (Irigaray, “Sex” 254).

In her mockingly re-interpretive criticism of the Freudian implicit insights, Irigaray states that the above differentiation, among other ones, almost suggests undermining woman’s erogenous zones to the sole benefit of a “valued phallic organ,” whereby the clitoris stands as nothing less than “a hole-envelope, a sheath which surrounds and rubs the penis during coition; a nonsex organ or a masculine sex turned inside out in order to caress itself” (“Sex” 254). According to Irigaray’s recuperative censure of Freud, absence or negativity originates in invisibility and is closely tied to a system of signification wherein a woman’s “sex organ represents the horror of having nothing to see” (“Sex” 255). Even in her other book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray comments that “[n]othing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth,” a claim that leaves every woman with a “sexual void” (48).

Nevertheless, what is of interest to us in the involved reflections, especially if we attempt a reading against what I would term the naturalistic grain of the above analysis, is their erroneous tendency to see a woman’s inferiority as being a purely genetic matter, in addition to other deficiencies. The fact of confronting this traditionalist view with the intervention of domestic structures and culture, in the creation of unequal but separate spheres for men and women, leads to the notion that the Freudian insights are, in essence, biologically-packed and blind to other dynamics such as the effects of language and paid versus unpaid productivity on gender formation (Minsky 17).

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1 Dated back to Ferdinand de Saussure, binarism can be defined according to its concern with “violent hierarchies” wherein the first partner in the opposition is dominant and the second is other, dominated (Ashcroft et. al).

2 For this particular reason, in the remainder of my essay, I will speak of Freudianism to account for the continuity of the Freudian tradition and the broad influence of its terminology and conceptions on Western philosophies, in general.
Respectively resonant with Freudian female castration but encompassed rather in a structural outline is the Lacanian principle of phallic masquerade which could be identified as the (non)position of women within language, also used in exchange with “[b]eing the phallus” as a male sign (Butler 44). Interpreting Lacan, Butler explains that “[to] be the phallus is to be the ‘signifier’ of the desire of the other and to appear as this signifier […] to reflect the power of the phallus, to signify that power, to ‘embody’ the phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates” (44). Hence, the phrase living the masquerade speaks of women as they play “the part man has assigned to [them] – the ‘not man’, ‘the lack’, a fictional complement to himself”, i.e. perform the “‘natural’ ‘feminine behaviour’” that patriarchal societies expect of women such as wife, mother, little girl, housewife, mother-in-law, baby doll, iron lady, and so on (Minsky 161).

In parallel with Lacan’s illuminating structuralist analysis, women’s rejection of their feminine identity is, in origin, shaped after the social inequalities between men and women which are, largely, rooted in the interference of what Friedrich Engels calls the master / slave hierarchy, which not only affects private family relationships but also constructs global gender roles. Hence, in line with Engels’ image of the husband as “‘the bourgeois’” and of the wife as “‘the proletariat’”, Irigaray cites a woman’s inclusion “in the exchange market only as a commodity” (sic., Speculum 118). In explicit terms, Irigaray is right in suggesting that there is no single space for a normal sexual development, as long as “the commodities themselves have nothing to ask or say, no desire or need to express, no sale or purchase to make on their own account” (Speculum 118). Hence, apart from women’s different anatomy, their different position in language and economy affects their understanding of femininity and the world’s pejoratively.  

With regard to this indefinite theoretical agenda, which is proposed to allow glimpses of Tan’s text as both embodying and interrogating certain gender controversial notions, the following section tries to establish that The Kitchen God’s Wife could be, at the same time, read as phallocentric but also transcendent of phallocentrism. It addresses itself to a close scrutiny of Winnie’s journey as a contentious instance. At first glance, the novel seems to take the fantasy of female castration and its consequent features at face value. However, its deep examination enables us to decipher the intricate ways in which the question of female invisibility is adapted and traced back, above all, to the pivotal requirements of patriarchal structures. I will show that Winnie has yielded to the falseness of castrated womanhood, as a repressive complex which is subtly engrained in concepts such as self-effacement, to the

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2 Although enlightening of the domestic-cultural building-up of a woman’s sense of lack, the considered revisions are still contaminated with essentialist fissures. The troublesome aspect that provides ample ground for undercutting their convincing vigour lies in what Butler terms the “globalizing reach” and “failure to acknowledge the specific cultural operations of gender oppression” which is liable to constitute “a kind of epistemological imperialism” (13). This particular criticism points out that the gender perspectives reviewed so far are silent on natural castration in its entrenchment in such unsteady and unpredictable cultural prisms as ethnicity, race and hybridity.
3 I expand Rosalind Minsky’s classification of phallocentrism as a major short-coming in Freud’s theory ---- given that “his construction of gender and the inherent quality within his categories of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, seem to centre obsessively around the father and the male genital organ”--- to envelope and affect a major body of gender studies, and their literary adaptations, in varying degrees (63).
degree that she ends up almost defending the natural righteousness in the opposition between male favoritism and female worthlessness.

Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife* destabilizes the argument about women’s sexual inaptness as a natural given per se so as to deepen its intrinsic connection with the exclusive configuration of patriarchal cultures. Through the central character’s contemplation of an early life span in China, during the Japanese occupation, which is replete with exploitation, abortion, inhibition and rape, despite devotion, diligence and selflessness, Tan’s book demonstrates that Winnie’s conviction in female inferiority is picked up and imposed by a religious political organism which is founded on purely oppressive gender codes that form the backbone of Winnie’s growth from a little girl to a mature woman (*Kitchen* 208-210; 246-247; 505).

The narrative bulk of *The Kitchen God’s Wife* mirrors the overt and covert means through which culture filters and reinforces the association between the notions of lack, absence and femininity. It allows us to scrutinize women’s low status as second-class citizens, as an outcome of how Winnie “was raised—never to criticize men or the society they ruled, or Confucius” (*Kitchen* 325). Apart from the fact that, back in China, Winnie is brought up as a spoiled girl in a bourgeois milieu that embraces rather Western culture commodities, her later ritualistic preparation for marital life is starkly impregnated with traditional doctrines about feminine demureness (*Kitchen* 106). Right before Winnie’s wedding, for instance, her father puts it bluntly to her: “‘From now on […] consider what your husband’s opinions are. Yours do not matter so much anymore’” (*Kitchen* 178). As surrogate mothers, even Winnie’s aunts instruct her to believe in her husband and his service as sacramental (*Kitchen* 162-3).

As a result of such indoctrination, Winnie’s restrained will throughout the novel becomes understandable, to a large extent. Giving her tyrant husband the upper hand in their conjugal relationship, Winnie diligently humbles herself to fulfil her domestic obligations, spends her dowry money on entertaining her husband and his fellows and resigns to whatever assaults throughout series of chastising intimidations. Ironically, her prevalent function as the angel in the house culminates with her public censure in Chinese mass media as a bad wife and mother, leading, eventually to her imprisonment (*Kitchen* 473-78). As Bella Adams puts it, everything in the media and law system conjures to make of Winnie the “lecherous” violator and of her wicked husband a victim of women’s perversity (20).

After all, “Chinese patriarchy is so powerful in its affect that there is no structure, no language” to point at men as criminals, deviants or unsound (Adams 20). Mainly, it helps us grasp Winnie’s own comment that “[n]obody worshipped [her] for living with Wen Fu [a husband-rapist]. I was like that wife of kitchen God. Nobody worshipped her either. He got all the excuses. He got all the credit. She was forgotten” (*Kitchen* 322). Reference here is made to an archetypal myth of male superiority suggestive in turn of feminine insignificance, that of the Kitchen God, after which Tan’s novel is entitled. We also learn that an altar of the Kitchen God is left to Winnie’s daughter in an aunt’s will (*Kitchen* 529).

As Tan’s text indicates, the traditional Chinese folktale is about the metamorphosis of a rich farmer into the Kitchen God, ironically, after squandering all his wealth on a passionate affair with a pretty Lady and chasing the legal wife out of the house. Unexpectedly, he is
pitted for this misfortune and rewarded with deification; hence, he becomes the Kitchen God who is to judge the behavior of mortals each Chinese New Year, i.e. reporting to the emperor those who should be awarded with good luck or bad luck (Kitchen 58-61). The binary core of such a mythical tale serves as an outstanding allegory that underpins masculinity as an epitome of perfection and pre-eminence.

As I have announced in my thesis, despite the fact that the novel under investigation stresses the inevitable cultural roots of the female protagonist’s psychological crisis over her insignificant identity as a woman, its commitment to a phallocentric view of womanhood is also indivisible from its adoption of the myth about Freudian penis envy. There are viable reasons to argue that Winnie’s endeavor to heal, substitute and counteract a visibly atrophied body, meaning a decreased subject or degenerate in size, sounds subversive, yet remains caught in phallocentrism, since it essentially tries to transmogrify a phallic symbol and bestow it with renewed emotional potentiality (Webster’s).1

At this particular level, I argue that even the protagonist’s resistant journey is strikingly reminiscent of gender discourses which are reiterative of Freudianism and its principle of penis envy. Afresh rephrasing Freud, Irigaray explains that every girl seeks “to appropriate [the penis] for herself, by all the means at her disposal: by her somewhat servile love of the father-husband capable of giving it to her; by her desire of a penis-child, preferably male; by gaining access to those cultural values which are still ‘by right’ reserved for males alone” (“Sex” 254). Of the mentioned mechanisms of substitution, The Kitchen God’s Wife, starting from the novel’s title itself, espouses a similar posture of male appropriation by struggling with the myth of Man as God and challenging it through nomenclature. Its stance of mimicking, even usurping and uncovering the phallus of its exceptionality and authenticity, arises to the status of an explicit emblem of a deep recognition of the “feminine position of not-having” (Butler 44).

Somehow following in the footsteps of Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, the teller in Tan’s book is equally incited to recoil from a passive contemplation of her individuality as a mere shadow to the interest of enacting a more active gender role. Latent markers of this aspect are foreshadowed by Winnie’s protesting response when she hears of the death of the girl-servant raped by her husband and determines to break up her silence and face Wen Fu with his brutality and barbarity (Kitchen 330-32). In another token of crossing to the phallic attributes of self-expression, Winnie even works on challenging the legal system that nourishes her rapist’s narcissistic power and, hence, the hampering ideology of a sex which is not one, through an eminent volition to endure public censure in Chinese mass media rather than continuing subjugating herself to her husband’s lust for violence (Kitchen 474-78). As E. D. Huntley comments, her prominent impulse to work on sharpening a vigorous self-consciousness and question the status quo speaks to a move from the passivity lending itself to self-containment and self-content toward a newly-formed resistance (102).

However, the gesture the most subversive of conventional gender hierarchies is performed in targeting the patriarchal essence about the very myth of male supremacy. Sensitive to the

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1 I use and understand subversion as a counter discourse technique that consists in standing against or opposing archaic forms and ideas.
unfairness embedded in the folk story of the Kitchen God and, through an episode that coincides with the need to support a low-spirited daughter, Winnie, searches for a symbolical gift in a Chinatown shop which is specialized in trading statues of the principal Chinese deities. After having picked a nameless goddess, Winnie removes the Kitchen God from the altar left to her daughter and replaces it with the nameless statute which is supposed to represent the Kitchen’s God’s Wife (Kitchen 529-32). According to this crucially overturning gesture, Winnie indicates that the dethroned Kitchen God becomes unfit as a gift to decorate Pearl’s altar, because he is no more than a trope for a philandering man (Kitchen, 58-61).

Winnie seems to reason that, after all, he has become a god despite the mistreatment of his good wife, whom, in her belief, is the one worthy of deification for her tolerance and should be rewarded with another chance to experience happiness (Huntley 85). The whole rationale represents a rectification of the gender standards that have shaped Winnie’s earlier sense of dependence and docility and, additionally, demonstrates a repressed complex of penis envy. It is crucial to notice that Winnie’s aspiration for denuding the phallus of its singularity makes explicit Tan’s negotiable re-writing or disruption of inscriptions which are denotative of firmness in men’s phallic power.

Furthermore, what serves the notion of appearing or disguising as the phallus is the subsequent act of Winnie renaming the whole gift Lady Sorrow-free (Huntley 83). The designation Lady Sorrow-free transmogrifies the gift into an incarnation of nurturance, care and consideration, ethics encompassed in the silent gestures of the goddess: “[H]er 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 may be she is telling you to speak” (Kitchen 531). Winnie goes on explaining to her daughter: “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” (Kitchen 532). She can only assert that the gift takes on the authority to liberate Winnie’s daughter of any trouble and nurture her spirit with self-expression, besides resurrecting all of Tan’s mothers in The Joy Luck Club and their endless good intentions. Not only does she overturn the traditional values associated with femininity such as compliance and repression, by inciting articulation which harkens back to a common credit of speech and telling in women’s writings, but further valorizes its potential generosity in affection, empathy and support.

As a result of using Tan’s book in an endeavour to illustrate how feminine identity and its embedding with undermining values such as lack and absence are constructed, I have attempted to demonstrate that this text affirms but also adds volatility to the conventional complex of the “garçon manqué“ and, at times, amounts to a mere complicit variation on the inseparable trio of natural castration, phallic masquerade and penis envy (Beauvoir 296).¹ Both in the denunciation of hegemonic structures and parody of androcentric fantasies, Tan reads with what Irigaray calls a sex which is not one and stresses gender binarism.

In the meantime, although through a masculinist representation of femininity, it should be acknowledged that Tan downplays the importance of sexuality in the development of the

¹ Beauvoir’s own translation of “garçons manqués” is “children who lack something of being boys,” which implies that Beauvoir, in her turn, takes for granted the Freudian mythology of female lack or invisibility (Webster’s).
feminine gender to shade the latter with male-centred androgyneic and ethnic modalities, as Butler terms it (3). Hence, in reading against the negativist grain of invisible sexual anatomy, we are enlightened to the fluctuating cultural interference in shaping the world’s phallogocentric denotations of sex / gender differences, giving utter validity to the word and male realm (Penguin).

More to the point, Tan’s paradigmatic idea of subjecting an essentialist mythical heritage, in its redolence with male favouritism, to subversive renaming carries within it certain perpetuation of binary ideologies and oppositions. Throughout her protagonist’s later endeavours to usurp “the power to ‘embody’ the Phallus”, Tan expresses an overtly disputable wish for achieving masculinity (Butler 44). Accordingly, her descriptions and recastings of femininity epitomize that woman’s “mimicry of masculine behaviour in the name of equality […] significantly thwarts the possibility of any enduring manifestation of female distinctiveness”, albeit Tan re-valuest compassion and empathy as feminine constructs (Schoene 286).

A reading with and against the stereotyped interpretation of being sexually and genderly different as being deficient is best illustrative of the troublesome complex inspirations that Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife has borrowed from the predominant theoretical models. It demonstrates that the relationship between theory and practice is one of both attraction and hostility, support and criticism, adoption and adaptation, enlightenment and contamination. As a result, Tan’s re-inscriptive representations of gender symbols and themes in the archaic realm of female inferiority turn out ambivalently replete with assets, possibilities and yet liabilities. Among these, we can mainly mention her destabilized image as Orientalist in the sense of promoting Westernized misrepresenting constructions of the Orient (Ashcroft et al. 167).

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1 My understanding of androcentrism is based on a general designation of what is “dominated by or emphasizing masculine interests of a masculine point of view” (Webster’s).
2 I am using essentialist to describe the process of assuming the presence of defining “characteristics distinguishing the feminine from the masculine” (Ashcroft et al.).
References


