

# TRAUMA AND RECOVERY: A LITERARY PRAGMATIC READING OF CHINESE AMERICAN WOMEN IN *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE*

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**Abstract:** This paper conducts a literary pragmatic study on the linguistic representation of Chinese American women's trauma and its recovery on the basis of specific textual analysis, with the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Chinese American writer Amy Tan as a case. As a result, it is found that the linguistic representation of trauma as well as the recovery vary in terms of lexicon, grammar and speech acts. Specifically, the symptoms of the heroine's trauma are composed through the use of hedges, mixed narrative tenses, and directive speech acts; the causes of her trauma are highlighted via the use of imperative if-conditional sentences and directive speech acts by the people around her; her efforts to gradually recover from the trauma are framed in her increasing use of positive adjectives, narrative tenses with explicit adverbials of time, and assertive speech acts. All these findings not only shed new light on interpreting women's trauma from a pragmatic perspective, but also enrich the veins of Chinese American literature and trauma literature analysis.

**Keywords:** Chinese American literature; Women's trauma; Recovery; Linguistic representation

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the release and popularity of the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* put the spotlight on the survival of Chinese women in the United States. Over the past three years, the COVID-19 epidemic has caused catastrophic damage to almost every aspect of life of ethnic minorities in the United States, especially ethnic women who suffer both racial and sexist persecution. Among them are Chinese American women long-tied by traditional Chinese patriarchy and mainstream American culture. Accordingly, the film is a magical and fantastical glimpse into the process of the heroine's struggles for liberation and interdependence. The mythically expected image of a great and devoted mother projected by the heroine is in reality a microcosm for thousands of ordinary traumatised Chinese women.

Like other literary works of marginalised minorities, the literature on Chinese American women has a duty to portray the ongoing psychological and physical trauma suffered by the disadvantaged group in the white-dominated society. The Chinese American autobiographical novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan is chosen as the object for a textual analysis that explores the heroine's traumatic memories and her recovery from trauma. Both the images of the heroines in this novel and in the film mentioned earlier are no longer just a cultural symbol, but represent efforts to reconstruct the female myth to create a more contemporary image of Chinese women and ultimately to inspire and guide Chinese women's recovery of trauma in real life today.

Currently, research on Chinese American literature at home and abroad mostly examines the plight of ethnic minorities in the United States from the perspectives of ethnicity, feminism, and post-colonialism. As for the trauma of Chinese American women, domestic scholars tend to pay more attention to the authors' contribution, Bildungsroman, multiculturalism, themes and narrative tactics to promote the export of Chinese culture. Unlike China, foreign scholars link their research to mainstream American ideology and literary criticism. However, the trauma of women in Chinese American literature is hardly analysed from the perspective of pragmatics in both domestic and foreign research. Based on the above studies, this paper pragmatically examines the representation of women's trauma and recovery in *The Kitchen God's Wife* at the three levels of linguistic forms including lexicon, syntax and speech acts. The aim is to suggest more subtle and profound ways in which traumatic experiences can be better understood and healed, and to enrich the research perspective of Chinese American female literature and trauma literature analysis.

This paper totally consists of five parts. Chapter 1 introduces the background information and the research significance of this paper. Chapter 2 reviews the previous studies of *The Kitchen God's Wife* at home and abroad. Chapter 3 presents research questions and data collection and analysis of the paper. Chapter 4, as the main part of the paper, makes a discussion of the linguistic representation of women's trauma and the recovery of trauma in *The Kitchen God's Wife* at three levels of lexicon, grammar and speech acts. Chapter 5 summarizes the major findings, research limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Two years after her success with the first book, Amy Tan presented *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Since its publication in 1991, it has been hailed as Tan's second achievement and sparked passionate discussion both domestically and internationally.

## 2.1 Previous Studies of *The Kitchen God's Wife* Abroad

Academic critics from abroad have studied this book with in-depth findings from various vantages such as mother-daughter relationships, multiculturalism, sexism and narratology. Among them, the mother-daughter relationship receives the most attention. For example, some emphasize that only by recognizing and accepting the importance of their mother-daughter relationships can the female characters in *The Kitchen God's Wife* come to terms with the paradoxes and internal conflicts of women in white male society. However, research is not limited to this family relationship. Increasingly, scholars interpret this stalemated mother-daughter relationship combined with the era backgrounds. On the one hand, some scholars in the context of the increasing turnover and cultural exchange on a global scale, focus on multicultural identity. Some discuss the characteristics of "Otherness", proposing four specific peculiarities, and approaches the theme of otherness between two cultures. On the other hand, scholars combined with a deep-rooted patriarchal culture, emphasize the sexism theme in this novel. Meanwhile, they analyze the gender bias and the oppression the female characters suffered in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. In addition to these studies based on the content of the novel, the subject of narrative tactics is also a common concern. Some investigate a unique strategy of narrative therapy that is used in sharing traumatic reminiscences in diasporic contexts.

## 2.2 Previous Studies of *The Kitchen God's Wife* in China

With the same interest in the topic of mother-daughter relationships and identities, domestic researches so far somewhat overlap with their international counterparts. Many domestic scholars focus more on the heroine's awakening and struggle than on her traumatic experiences. Some point out that sisterhood plays a critical role in Winnie's struggle against patriarchy and pursuit of freedom and equality. Meanwhile, others give an innovative interpretation of the female characters' will and efforts against their fate in *The Kitchen God's Wife* from the perspective of existentialism. However, this kind of research has not made a dynamic analysis from both macro and micro contexts. Given Amy Tan's bicultural background, several researchers discuss the main character's conflicts from the perspective of cross-culture. This kind of research aims to explore more effective transmission of Chinese culture in cross-cultural communication. For instance, some intend to illuminate cross-cultural context and mechanism of misreading of Chinese image in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, which reflects the narrative and survival strategies of Chinese American writers in response to the mainstream culture. Furthermore, different from the research around the heroine, others creatively give a sociological study of the loss of functions of Winnie's first husband, Wen Fu, in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, which is a significant expansion of the methods of literary criticism and the scope of interpretation of texts.

In conclusion, the foreign and domestic studies on *The Kitchen God's Wife* have developed a varied and versatile research mode. Nevertheless, they lack a pragmatic exploration of the recovery of trauma of Chinese American women in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Along this vein, this paper contributes to enriching the research on Chinese American literature by undertaking a detailed analysis of the characters' discourse from the perspective of Literary Pragmatics.

## 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

### 3.1 Research Questions

Based on trauma theory, the study of literary pragmatics is conducted into the linguistic representation of Chinese American women's trauma and the recovery of trauma in *The Kitchen God's Wife* and mainly focuses on the following two research questions:

First, what are the linguistic representations of Chinese American women's trauma in *The Kitchen God's Wife*?

Second, what are the linguistic representations of the recovery of Chinese American women's trauma in *The Kitchen God's Wife*?

This paper attempts to answer these two questions by providing a detailed pragmatic analysis of the characters' discourse in *The Kitchen God's Wife* at lexical, grammatical and pragmatic levels.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This paper takes the Chinese American novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* as a case. The novel mainly involves one pair of Chinese mother's and American-born daughter's stories. Notably, Amy Tan provides the mother with nearly two-thirds of the whole novel's length to tell her own story in old China and the United States in the first-person voice. Such an arrangement aims to expose the double marginalisation of Chinese American women by both traditional patriarchy and colonial hegemony, and their struggle against such hardships. In addition, there is a parallel mother-daughter narrative, in which the narrative of Winnie not only aids in her own self-restoration, but also assists Pearl in recovering from her trauma.

During data collection, based on a close reading of *The Kitchen God's Wife*, the related discourse of the main characters was selected and divided into two aspects and then further categorised into three levels of linguistic forms. The study adopts a qualitative and inductive approach and the research design is hermeneutic and interpretive. Using textual analysis as the research method, the trauma and trauma recovery of Winnie and Pearl in *The Kitchen God's Wife* is understood and examined and then described and explained in the context of the theory.

## 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

By exploring linguistic forms of representation of female characters' trauma and its recovery in *The Kitchen God's Wife* at lexical, grammatical and pragmatic levels, this chapter explores Winnie and Pearl's traumatic symptoms, causes, and efforts to recover from trauma.

### 4.1 Linguistic Representation of Women's Trauma in *The Kitchen God's Wife*

#### 4.1.1 Lexical representation of trauma

At the lexical level, the symptoms of the women's trauma in *The Kitchen God's Wife* manifest themselves mainly through the use of hedges. Lakoff defines hedges as words or phrases that make something more obscure [1]. Therefore, women tend to use hedges to avoid conflict and tone down hostility in order to maintain current harmonious interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, due to social factors and personal trauma, women unconsciously use hedges to hide their insecurity and powerlessness, which serves as a form of self-defence and self-protection. For example,

Ex 1:

Winnie: "She's become very weak from so much diarrhea, I'm afraid. [2]"

In this example, Winnie avoids absolute statements by using a hedge, which stands for possibility and uncertainty. Influenced by social customs, traditional culture and psychological factors, women tend to adopt hedges more often than men to indicate hesitation. Besides, hedges can leave the speaker with a choice of whether to assume responsibility [3]. Therefore, suffering from sexual violence, Winnie is completely helpless so she uses the hedge to avoid conflicts with Wen Fu while accepting the probability of being beaten and scolded.

Pearl's trauma is also reflected in her use of hedges. For example,

Ex 2:

Pearl: "Ma, you know that slight problem with my leg I told you about. Well, thank God, it turned out not to be cancer, but--" [2].

In this example, the use of the hedge "you know" and the parenthesis euphemistically indicates Pearl's resistance to Winnie's excessive concern and her attempt to maintain a seemingly harmonious mother-daughter relationship. In a situation of horror, people spontaneously look for the first source of comfort. However, the secrets about the trauma that Winnie has kept to herself for decades lead to an unspeakable rift between her and Pearl, who has hidden the secret of her malignant brain tumor. Ignorance of Winnie's traumatic past and confusion about her overprotectiveness drives Pearl to resist her mother's manipulation of her life, ending up with intergenerational trauma.

#### 4.1.2 Grammatical representation of trauma

Grammatically, imperative if-conditional sentences and dual narrative tenses are utilized for traumatic representation in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Grammar and pragmatics are interactive and complementary in their interdependence. Therefore, linguistic sense cannot be separated from the participants and the context, nor can it be vacuumed from the vehicle of grammar, i.e. the structure of language [4].

##### (1) Imperative If-conditional Sentences

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, the imperative if-conditional sentences present an unequal relationship of dominance and subordination between the participants [4]. Under the double burden of semi-colonial and semi-feudal systems, especially when haughty men are eclipsed by imperialism, their perverted male superiority and dignity can only find their way into the slavery of women. Therefore, Wen Fu occupies a dominant position with the power and status to issue orders, while Winnie is always a passive recipient in a subordinate position.

In the following case, the imperative if-conditional construction expresses two pragmatic meanings: a threatening illocutionary meaning and a seductive illocutionary meaning [4]. When Wen Fu uses this structure to intimidate Winnie, he mainly applies a discourse form that combines a negative if-conditional clause and a declarative sentence. When this sentence pattern is used for hoaxes, it consists of an affirmative if-conditional clause and a declarative sentence. For example,

Ex 3:

Wen Fu: "Of course I will kill you and everyone else in this house if you do not obey."

Wen Fu: "If she says she is sorry, I will forgive everything, and she can come home with me." [2]

In this example, Wen Fu uses several imperative if-conditional sentences to dissuade Winnie from divorcing him, and also makes a false promise to get her to give in. Rowbotham notes that language conveys a certain power, which is one of the instruments of domination [5]. Therefore, resistance and compromise are intertwined in Winnie's state of mind. Beauvoir states that "humanity is male and men define women not in herself but as relative to him; woman is not regarded as an autonomous being" [6]. Consequently, Wen Fu repeatedly demonstrates his total conquest over Winnie, who is repeatedly forced to surrender.

##### (2) Dual Narrative Tenses

The representation of trauma in Chinese American literature is often an interplay of two tenses, with the present tense containing the pain of the past while the past tense expressing the ongoing resentment [7]. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, when Winnie tells her daughter about her past, she cannot clearly distinguish between past and present with a blurred and uncontrolled perception of time, reflecting the ongoing and profound effects of her trauma. Pierre Janet explains this by saying that "the traumatic event triggers an overwhelming emotional response and consequently an altered state of consciousness" [8]. For example,

Ex 4:

Winnie: "A little child can say, 'My body is my body.' I was a grown woman, and I could not say this. [2]"

In this example, in describing this experience of perpetual psychological trauma, Winnie uses the general present tense to reproach herself and the general past tense to show her powerlessness in the face of oppression. Just as Laub says, the traumatic event "has no beginning, no end, no before, no during and no after" [9]. Victims may enter a numbing state of surrender at the time of a traumatic event; however, long after that, traumatised people relive the event in their thoughts, dreams and actions as if it were constantly repeating itself in the present [8]. Such representation of linguistic forms reflects Winnie's deep trauma of marital and sexual violence and reflects the delayed traumatic reactions.

#### 4.1.3 Pragmatic representation of trauma

At the pragmatic level, traumatic representation is much depicted in the characters' directive speech acts in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. A direct speech act is one in which the speaker gives the listener some kind of command, instruction or order. Directive speech acts in *The Kitchen God's Wife* are used to reproduce real traumatic scenes and to further explain the causes of trauma, as shown in the following examples:

Ex 5:

Wen Fu: "Kneel down. Bow your head and beg me to forgive you. Kneel down!" [2]

Example 5 is only part of the many directive speeches with strong imperatives that Wen Fu uses when he beats and rapes Winnie. Wen Fu uses his language as an act of domination and the perlocutionary equivalent is often physical violence. Marital and sexual violence in particular is a serious blow to the dignity of the individual [8]. Especially when the rapist is a husband, the victim is the most vulnerable of all. Moreover, discourse is inevitably or necessarily domination, a form of "power over" others [10], so Wen Fu's illocutionary purpose is to force Winnie to obey him absolutely. It also shows that Wen Fu holds an absolutely high and authoritative position in the marital relationship.

Ex 6:

Winnie: "You go see Wen Fu! You go to hell down below!" [2].

In this case, when Winnie sees the image of the Kitchen God, she adopts a directive, swearing speech act. Traumatized people are more likely to perceive environmental stimuli that remind them of the traumatic event [11]. Therefore, Winnie is easily emotionally disturbed and is so frightened that she thinks Wen Fu is still torturing her like a demon. It is one of the symptoms of trauma called hyperarousal, implying a recurrent anticipation of danger [8]. So, her illocutionary purpose is to curse Wen Fu and try to eradicate his influence from her life, which is "an experience lived belatedly at the level of its unspeakable truth" [12].

Ex 7:

Winnie: "Pearl-ah, have to go, no choice."

Pearl: "Ma, we're fine. Don't worry. Go to bed. [2]"

In this example, Winnie uses forcefully commanding directives with the illocutionary aim of forcing Pearl to obediently follow her orders. Therefore, the conversations between mother and daughter are always bumpy and spotty like arguments. Although Pearl's directive speech act in the example sounds gentle, persuading Winnie to take a rest, she nevertheless expresses enduring impatience at her mother's excessively penetrating worry. Consequently, their mutual misunderstandings lead to trauma that crippled the two when they intend to construct a trustworthy mother-daughter relationship [8].

## 4.2 Linguistic Representation of the Recovery of Women's Trauma in *The Kitchen God's Wife*

### 4.2.1 Lexical representation of recovery

At the lexical level, Winnie uses more adjectives, especially those with positive senses, to disclose her inner world during the recovery process. Such adjectives can intuitively reflect the mood and attitude of the characters at that moment. On the way to overcoming trauma, Winnie has been guided to develop more and more courage to gradually reveal her true self. Traumatic memories have become only one part of her experience, and begin to fade as other memories do [13]. In parallel, Winnie's emotional situation is reflected in an increasing number of positive adjectives. For instance,

Ex 8:

Winnie: "Very fancy, fine porcelain. And the style is good too. See how nicely she sits in her chair, so comfortable-looking in her manner." [2]

In this example, after open communication with Pearl, Winnie uses juxtaposed positive adjectives like "fancy", "fine", "good" and "comfortable-looking" to describe a figurine of the Kitchen God's Wife, which is a stark contrast to her earlier reaction to the statue of the Kitchen God. Talking about one's emotional experiences enables the person to integrate the traumatic memory into their own chronology of the past [12]. Hence, Winnie's more frequent use of positive adjectives expresses a sense of relief after revealing the secrets buried in her heart for years. It also demonstrates that she "is ready to engage more actively in the world" [8].

### 4.2.2 Grammatical representation of recovery

At the grammatical level, the mixing of narrative tenses also represents the recovery of trauma. It is a slow process in which traumatised victims regain their temporal perception and cognitive abilities. The term "temporal perception" refers to "a personality trait in which an individual perceives, experiences and acts in relation to time" [14]. It is difficult to describe trauma in everyday terms because victims' temporal perception is weak, and the key to recovery is to improve this perception. For example,



Ex 9:

Winnie: "Now I don't have to worry. For so many years I thought he was going to fly out of a closet, or jump underneath my bed." [2]

In this example, although Winnie also crosses the tenses past and present, there are explicit adverbials of time "now" and "for so many years" in her discourse, suggesting that she is gradually recovering from the marital trauma. After a traumatic event, the traumatised often remain in a state of seclusion. However, the possibilities for healing often depend on social connections, such as through witnessing or compassion [15]. Therefore, by creating new connections with others, Winnie is able to work through trauma with the love and support of family and friends. The appearance of the time adverbials "now" and "for so many years" marks the survivor's ability to distinguish between past and present, her improving perception of time [7], and her gradual escape from the dissociation caused by the trauma.

#### 4.2.3 Pragmatic representation of recovery

At the pragmatic level, assertive speech acts play a crucial role in Winnie's efforts to deal with her trauma. The illocutionary meaning of assertives is the speaker's action to make the hearer believe in the proposition's content [16]. People around Winnie use assertive speech acts to help Winnie establish security and reconnect with normal life [8]. With their love and support, Winnie can learn to take control of her life and create a new future, which is mainly represented by assertive speech acts. It can be seen in the following examples:

Ex 10:

Jimmy: "Baby-ah, shh-shh, don't think about this anymore, you are in America now." [2]

In this example, Jimmy uses assertive speech acts when Winnie is intruded on by traumatic memories, whose illocutionary purpose is to constantly convince Winnie of "a secured defensive position of basic safety" [8]. Herman notes that recovery is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections, including the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy [8]. Therefore, it can be seen that Jimmy's sincere and destined love plays a crucial role in speeding up Winnie's recovery process.

Ex 11:

Winnie: "Because then you would know how weak I was. You would think I was a bad mother."

Pearl: "I wouldn't have thought that."

Winnie: "Yes you would. If I had told you--then it would be even worse!"

Pearl: "I never thought you were a bad mother." [2]

In this example, Winnie's assertives indicate that she fears whether her story will make her appear a cowardly and foolish mother. Although the wounds can be treated to result in great relief from the acute anguish, any hurt, be it physical or mental, is almost impossible to be recovered with no scar. Moreover, the telling of the trauma story inevitably plunges the survivor into profound grief [8]. Therefore, it takes a lot of guts for Winnie to voluntarily relive the pain of the traumatic event and to become more open to "new forms of engagement with children" [8]. According to Straus, Winnie's story-telling performs a special kind of action that clearly attempts to affect her hearer [17]. Consequently, Pearl repeats assertive speech acts that express strong affirmation, aiming to convince Winnie that she is not a horrible mother but rather a strong woman. As the listener, Pearl plays an important role in the healing process, as Felman and Laub state, "Only when the victim passes on the story to the listener who is outside of it can trauma be healed" [9].

## 5 CONCLUSION

With a Chinese American female novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* as a case, this paper makes an elaborate interpretation on the linguistic representation of Chinese American women's trauma and its recovery from the perspective of Literary Pragmatics. For the linguistic representations of trauma, the symptoms and causes of the female characters' trauma are analysed at three levels. Lexically, women tend to use hedges as a form of self-protection to avoid conflict. Grammatically, Wen Fu, the perpetrator, usually adopts imperative if-conditional sentences to threaten or coax Winnie to obey his commands. In contrast, Winnie's trauma narrative uses a mixture of two narrative tenses to represent the profound effects of the trauma of marital and sexual violence imposed on her by Wen Fu. Pragmatically, Wen Fu and the surrounding elders frequently use directive speech acts to force Winnie to give unquestioning obedience to them. Moreover, the unresolved trauma caused by such speech acts is passed on to Pearl for generations.

For the linguistic representations of recovery, the love and support of the afflicted and the efforts of the traumatised are discussed at three levels. Lexically, women tend to use an increasing number of positive adjectives to express relief. Grammatically, adverbials of time also represent coping with trauma. Pragmatically, families use assertive speech acts to offer Winnie security and confidence. The assertives that Winnie and Pearl use show the final overcoming of their trauma. The above different linguistic forms at the three levels demonstrate that the recovery of Chinese American women's trauma is a tough and complicated process.

This paper is a tentative exploration into the traumatic representation and linguistic forms to explore women's trauma and recovery from a pragmatic literary perspective, focusing on the discourse of the characters in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. It unfolds a whole new vein of Chinese American female literature and trauma literary analysis, providing a good illustration to demonstrate the feasible cutting edge of Literary Pragmatics in interpreting literary works. However, due to word limits, the conclusions cannot be taken for granted as replicable in all the examples from other texts at the present stage. Therefore, in terms of future research, the literary pragmatic exploration of this novel can give prominence to other aspects such as implicature, relevance, deixis and etc.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

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