Chapter VI

Conclusion

Most mother-daughter stories in general are immersed within the theme of patriarchal negotiations where the young nubile daughter is separated from the mother with or without her consent. This separation initiates the daughter into an economic negotiation either as a wife or concubine which is accompanied by overtones of rape in the sense that the man is entitled to sex for the daughter’s security and survival. While rape became an instrument for the Greek gods in the literature of antiquity to dispossess the goddesses of their power and strength and hence reduce women to subservient beings, the lords of feudal society assumed the right to rape the female serfs working under them. So also, slave stories of ancient Roman, Egyptian empires and the colonial era are replete with sexual exploitation of women slaves. The mothers were left with heavy frustration or even guilt because they were powerless to rescue their daughters from this patriarchal negotiation.

Meanwhile, the resentment of daughters towards their mothers grows when they find themselves forced to comply with the patriarchal decisions because they fail to understand their mothers’ powerlessness. Between their frustrations and resentments a chasm is formed and
mothers and daughters find themselves on different sides separated by the force of sexual, economic, cultural and social exploitation.

During the years after the two World Wars, most stories of mothers and daughters portray the “disgraceful” mother. Daughters write about mothers addicted to alcohol and drugs. Post war stories depict mothers as “sexually suspect” with the rise in divorce cases and extra-marital affairs. Perhaps the largest number of motherdaughter stories is that of Jewish women writers. Recent writings of “disgraceful” mothers are to be found in the stories of Chicana and Puerto Ricana writers. In the literature of matrilineage of female Black American, Asian American, Chicana and Puerto Ricana writers, much of the ambiguities and complexities of mother-daughter relationships lie within economic, psychological, cultural and historical negotiations. Poverty, menial employment, slavery, cultural and historical misplacement determine to a great extent the attempts made by mothers to forge a better future for their daughters and their angst and frustration whenever they are unable to succeed in this attempt.

On the other hand, the daughters’ antagonism toward mothers is grounded on the belief that all that they have inherited from their mothers is poverty, enslavement and a confused identity. Thus, separation of daughters from mothers can be seen in the daughters’ attempts to
establish identities for themselves different from that of mothers’. The daughters refuse to be extensions of their mothers who they perceive as retrogressive. There is a fear that a continuum of mothers’ values, choices would thwart their growth as independent individuals. The romantic notion that self identity is obtained by separating from mothers and choosing for themselves inversely force daughters to dissociate themselves not only from their mothers but from the community of women:

The romantic illusion that a woman can “find herself” in isolation from her community has been dangerous for women. It tricks a young woman into abandoning the world that has nurtured her.¹

Notwithstanding the concept of mother as ‘disgraceful’ or ‘terrible’, women writers have transcended their fear of mother by recognising the complexities of mother-daughter relationships within a patriarchal society and daughters are now able to not only forgive their mothers but see in their mothers the continuation of their own creativity. Women are developing their mother-daughter bonds on their own terms: “By confronting the Terrible Mother in order to move beyond the entanglements of the mother/daughter relationship and by claiming her as metaphor for the sources of our own creative powers, women are creating new self-configurations in which the mother is no longer the necessary comfort but the seed of a new being, and in which we are no longer the
protected child but the carriers of the new woman whose birth is our own.” Therefore, mother-daughter relationship studies and the literature of matrilineage have achieved the status of a rich and evolving canon in feminist studies.

In modern times, daughters (and women in general since every woman is also a daughter) have realised that they cannot find themselves in isolation from their mothers. A search for maternal roots has impelled daughters to celebrate their mothers because they owe their creativity and imagination to a past that embodies a long history of female power. While Adrienne Rich has brought alive a matrilineal discourse that has been suppressed through the ages, African American writer Alice Walker, in her path finding essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”, goes back to her female ancestor to understand her artistic talent and has greatly inspired Asian American writers like Amy Ling who, in *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*, outlines the literary tradition of one group of Asian American women. Both writers of novels and critical literature on matrilineage are breaking grounds by shifting the daughter’s to mother’s centrality. There is the analysis by Marina Heung that the study of matrilineage need to assume a culturally and historically specific critique because using a single paradigm is not universally applicable. This analysis cannot be refuted for even though the mother-daughter bond
is a universal one, African American matrilineage cannot be understood without understanding the history of slavery and Chinese American matrilineage needs to be studied through historical devaluation.

A beautiful metaphor used by black American women writers to grasp the mother-daughter dyad in terms of material, cultural and aesthetic understanding is the “quilt”. In *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers & Daughters*, Patricia Bell-Scott and Beverly Guy-Sheftall explain how the quilt embodies the creativity of black women handed down from mothers to daughters: “...the most important part of this tradition [quilt making] was the transmission of skills and of a value system handed down from grandmother, to mother, to granddaughter. Bonds were strengthened when a mother taught her daughter to quilt; as the mother imparted skills, techniques, and aesthetic design principles, she, perhaps most significantly, forged a bond essential to the survival of the family, and by extension, the community.” (p. 2)

The dynamics of African American mother-daughter relationships, therefore, is primarily founded on mother as historian. Mothers may not have been scholarly historians but they recorded facts of family and community and told them to their daughter. The pieces of rags stitched together artistically to make a quilt represent recollection of memories and salvaging mother’s talent as well. Most importantly, the quilt-
making is symbolic of the love that mothers have for their daughters; that it is mother’s best intention to keep her daughter protected from the poverty and abuse that she herself had faced:

Black women’s culture is particularly characterized by mother love. The book dedication of black female critics and editors, the short stories by black women writers, and the lyrics sung by the “girl” groups on the Motown label attest to a combination of love and gratitude to the women credited with teaching their daughters about life and helping them dream and achieve lives accessible to their mothers.5

The journey back to female ancestors is a spiritual journey. Daughters inherit a legacy of strength that endures much suffering, toil and hardship; of hope that always strives for the better and fights against the odds of patriarchal negotiations; of creativity that is manifested in “quilt-making”, “calligraphy”, “tending gardens” and “story-telling”; of voice that is founded on the power of language. Walker captures this sensibility in her famous essay: “...it is to my mother- and all our mothers who were not famous- that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the Black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day.... Therefore, we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know.”6 Tan also attributes the inspiration of her books to her mother: “I say the muse is my mother, the woman who gave me both my DNA and certain ideas about the world. Or
I pay homage to my grandmother and say that it is she who inspired me to find my voice because she had lost hers so irrevocably.  

In the sphere of Chinese American literature of matrilineage too, a development that tries to find a middle path between a daughter’s search for identity and the opposition of mother’s ethnic culture can be found in the writings of Maxine Hong Kingston and Tan who believe in claiming one’s ancestral origin without totally rejecting the culture of one’s adopted country in order to establish order and understanding in mother-daughter relationships. Tan herself has commented in an interview with Jay Macdonald that writing is a search for a philosophical middle ground between ‘faith’ and ‘fate’ – to find out what works for her- ‘faith’ or ‘fate’. Elaine Kim too writes in her foreword to *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (Lim and Ling 1992, xiii): “The lines between Asian and Asian American, so important to identify formation in earlier times, are increasingly being blurred.” In the process, Tan has deconstructed and reconstructed myths to circumscribe both the dominant culture and the receding culture. By creating an in-between myth she can locate her in-between existence in America as a Chinese American. In *The Joy Luck Club*, all four vignettes are myths that clearly explain the strained relationship of the mothers and daughters. *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is based on the myth of the ‘Kitchen God’ who is replaced by ‘Lady
Sorrowfree’. In *The Hundred Secret Senses* too she builds a myth upon Kwan’s ‘Secret Senses’ which is in stark contrast to the physical senses. Finally, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* reverberates around the myth of the ‘voiceless woman’ who finally finds her most powerful weapon in the written word. Women writers before Tan have explored ancient myths of ‘mother’ and ‘women’ as a form of self-discovery. Elias Button refers to reaching out for myth as a “complex process in which the current difficulties are transcended through a recovery of the mythological past….involving not a relinquishment of ego development in the name of cyclicity and romantic unconsciousness but rather a reaching-back to the myths of the “mother” to find there the source of our own, specifically female, creative powers.”

*The Kitchen God’s Wife* is the first definitive move of Tan to rework the Chinese myth by reversing the patriarchal domination by placing a female figure as the subject of worship and devotion. While the stories of the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* were exercises in exploring the agony and seemingly unbridgeable gaps in their understanding of each other, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* clearly defines the ancestral order when the mother/female is enthroned on the altar. In *The Hundred Secret Sense*, Tan presents a completely different concept of an ancestor in the person of Kwan, who is not her mother. Yet on another
level, she is given all the attributes of a mother which Olivia also acknowledges. The multiple facets of Kwan perhaps represents Tan’s vision of the possibilities that reworking an ancient myth to suit present circumstances may provide the via-media to bridge the divide between Chinese mothers and Chinese American daughters. In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Tan highlights the need of the written word as a means of understanding between mothers and daughters and also elevating the Chinese mother’s position further by empowering her to overcome silence, both literally and figuratively. In doing so, Tan manages to present a new vision of life for the mothers and daughters, a vision that one may even call the new Chinese American Myth which is a powerful tool for the Chinese American daughter to negotiate her ancestor’s culture with her own and thereby find a common platform where they can stand together and look towards the future.

**END NOTES**


5 Ibid, p.xxxiii-xxxiv

6 Walker, Alice. “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in Generation: Women in the South, Southern Exposure, 4, No.4, p.63

7 Tan, Amy. The Opposite of Fate, Harper Perennial, 2003, p. 250