

## Construction of Self-identity: Analysis on The Bonesetter's Daughter from Perspective of Feminism

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**Abstract:** Feminist Literary Criticism is one of the main literary and cultural criticism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western literary theories. It is concerned about the creation of the female writers who are excluded by the male dominated literary norms and examines the relationship between literature and society and history, such as sex, family, patriarchal, law, and so on (Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction: P128). The Chinese American writer Amy Tan's fourth novel The Bonesetter's Daughter centers on the conflicts and reconciliation among the grandmother, mother and the daughter, and completes the construction of self-identity through the awakening of female consciousness, breaking the silence suppressed by the patriarchal society as well as the pursuit of identity (family name).

### 1. Introduction

With the rise of the civil rights movement and the feminist movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the diversified trend of culture, Chinese American female writers have been rising. They withstand the double oppression of race and gender from inside and outside of Chinese Americans, break the long-standing silence of Chinese American female writers, and write magnificent chapters in the history of Chinese American literature. Their special life experiences and social status endow them with dual cultural identity and vision, which makes them think about their rights and identity from the unique perspective of feminism, focusing on women's self-construction and reproduction in the dimensions of gender/sex, culture and race. Starting from the perspective of feminism, The Bonesetter's Daughter, the famous Chinese American female writer Amy Tan's novel, tries to realize the construction of self-identity through the establishment of female subjectivity under the three generational dimensions of daughter, mother and grandmother, the breaking of silence under the oppression of patriarchal society as well as the pursuit of their family name (namely identity).

### 2. The Awakening of Female Consciousness: From Loss to Reconstruction

Subjectivity is a person who has the consciousness of self-existence and self-world relationship under certain historical conditions. The female subjectivity consciousness is relative to the male subjectivity. In the novel The Bonesetter's Daughter, Ru Ling and Ruth, the mother and daughter, acquire their true selves through the awakening of their female consciousness.

Mother Ru Ling did not have the subjectivity consciousness when she was young. When a distant relative of Liu introduced her to a blind date, she did not even ask whether her future husband was smart or not. Instead, she blindly listened to her parents' arrangement and ignored Aunt Bao's advice. Especially when she arrived in Beijing, she found that the clothes she wore and the seasons were not suitable. She didn't wear a comb to comb her hair. She couldn't even survive independently without Aunt Bao. Her real change was to become a formal teacher with all the skills of painting, calligraphy that Aunt Bao gave her before she was sent to the nursery. Since then, she was no longer the lonely girl who used to be and dared to pursue her love with Mr. Pan's son.

Her daughter, Ruth, is the second generation of Chinese American born in the United States. Her female consciousness is much more active. She has a stable career and a good income. But at the beginning of the novel, Ruth's relationship with her boyfriend Yate is at a low ebb. She always feels

that something is wrong, but she can't say what it is. As a matter of fact, what she really lacks is the female subjectivity consciousness. As described in the novel: even if the other side does not ask she will take the initiative to compromise and cater to his feelings, which has become their emotional patterns ("The Bonesetter's Daughter" Page284). It was only after she realized her problems that her emotional problems with Yate were solved. Yate realized that it was important to have some agreement in love, rather than not presupposing love and binding the other.

### **3. Discourse Power under the Patriarchal Society: From Silence to Voice**

"Silence is the absence of voice, words, or the inadmissibility or unwillingness to mention certain topics." Feminists generally believe that women's silence is caused by themselves and external reasons. The three generations in the novel lived in a patriarchal society. They suffered from the double oppression of the patriarchy and white mainstream society, which made them deprived of the right to speak and remained silent for a long time.

In the novel, the grandmother Aunt Bao is portrayed as a new woman with rebellious spirit. However, this rebellious spirit is contrary to the social environment of patriarchy at that time. Therefore, despite the versatility of Aunt Bao, she still could not escape the oppression of the patriarchal society. After losing her husband and father on the day of marriage, she swallowed hot ink to end her life, but eventually lost her voice and could only make a gasping voice.

While suffering from physical defects, her daughter and husband family Liu only treated her as a nanny servant. Even when she heard that her daughter Ru Ling was going to marry the son of the enemy, she told her daughter and Liu's family in sign language the enemy's intention of the marriage, with the hope to prevent the marriage, she, however, was treated as a madman. It can be seen that the talented Aunt Bao not only lost her voice but also had no right to speak under the oppression of the patriarchal society. Even her sign language to tell people the truth was regarded as crazy talk and was ignored.

In the novel, mother Ru Ling was sent to the nursery after her illegitimate female identity was exposed. After her first husband was killed by the Japanese army, she came to the United States to hide her age and marriage history. Her tortuous life experience and her guilt for Aunt Bao doomed her to be an alien in the life of American mainstream culture. She is always complaining and blaming. Although she loves her daughter deeply, she always hurts her daughter with words. What's worse, her poor English made her rejected from the mainstream American culture. So to some extent, Ru Ling is also a silent person in the mainstream culture of the United States.

There is such an interesting description in the novel: in the past eight years, from August 12 every year, Ruth began to lose her voice and could not speak ("The Bonesetter's Daughter" page9). At first, Ruth felt that the throat was caused by a virus, but gradually she was able to adapt to this situation. Before she lost her voice, she told her clients that she was going to have a week of silence meditation. She even enjoyed the state of silence. Ruth's loss of sound is not really a virus. It is actually the performance of her compromise under the patriarchal society or the marginalization of Chinese culture. In this way, she does not have to appease the customer, and does not have to remind Yate what to do, also she does not have to feel guilt about not calling her mother.

At the end of the novel, after understanding the mother's family history, Ruth could better understand her mother. She did not lose her voice on August 12 that year. At the same time, she also found her own reasons for writing and wrote her family history. Ru Ling's own manuscript was translated by his daughter. When she reviewed the family history with her daughter and Mr. Tang who helped translate the manuscript, her thinking was more open and fluent, and his language was clear and fluent. By breaking the silence, this novel gradually disrupts the weak position of women's aphasia, making women become the masters of their body and mind, and rebuilding their identity.

### **4. Pursuit of Identity (Their Family Name)**

The Bonesetter's Daughter is divided into three parts: the first part is about the life of the

daughter Ruth; the second part is about mother Ru Ling's early life; the third part is about Ruth's changes and feelings after she learned about her mother's family history. Throughout the experience of three generations of mother and daughter, they are all facing different degrees of identity crisis. From the loss of identity of Aunt Bao and her voicelessness to the fact that Ru Ling's mother hides her family's history in secret and only complains all day long, to the fact that Ruth, as the second generation of Chinese-American daughter, always feels marginalized, and her relationship with her boyfriend Yate is at a low ebb, it can also be seen that to some extent, the novel describes the family name and family history. Family name, as a symbol of identity, runs through the whole novel.

First of all, Grandma Aunt Bao--she was born in a famous family of bone-setters. Because of her father's favor, her father did not tie her down with feudal dogmas, but trained her to be an independent woman with a wide range of knowledge and mastery of painting, calligraphy and sculpture. Just because her independent personality offended Boss Zhang, she was retaliated by Boss Zhang on the day of her marriage and lost her husband. She intended to swallow hot ink to end her life. After being rescued by the old lady--her mother-in-law, she was burned in the face and lost her voice forever. Aunt Bao survived for the daughter in her belly, however she did not stay in Liu's family as the daughter-in-law or the mother of her daughter Ru Ling. On the contrary, she was left as a nanny in the status of a low-destined nanny to take care of her biological daughter Ru Ling. Moreover, her biological daughter, Ru Ling, never treated her as a real mother, but only regarded her as a nanny. There is such a description in the novel: when I was young, I thought it was nothing. I was very satisfied with the company of aunt Bao. But as I grew up, Aunt Bao's position in my heart became lower and lower. I gradually realized that Aunt Bao was only a servant in my family. She had no status at home and nobody liked her ("Bonesetter's Daughter" page172).

Aunt Bao's identity loss is not only reflected in her stay as a nanny in Liu's family to take care of her own daughter Ru Ling, but also in the fact that no one knows her surname or pay attention to her, even if she writes her story on the manuscript to prevent her daughter Ruling from marrying into the enemy's family. Ru Ling did not care about Aunt Bao's painstaking intention and insisted on marrying Zhang's family. In the end, Aunt Bao had to die to prevent her daughter from marrying the enemy's tragedy. After her death, her daughter Ru Ling lost the chance to learn more about the family history. Therefore Aunt Bao was in a state of no identity from beginning to end. Ruling was also tortured by the guilt of forgetting her family name.

Next, mother Ru Ling, the illegitimate daughter of Aunt Bao, did not receive much attention in Liu's family. Especially after learning about his own life after Aunt Bao's death, she was sent her to the nursery. After meeting her first husband, Pan Kaijing, in the nursery, she came to the United States as her husband was killed by the Japanese army. During her life in the United States, she had to hide marriage history and even falsely report her age. In a sense, Ru Ling became the secret holder of her real age and identity.

In addition, the daughter Ruth also faces identity crisis. As described in the novel: Ruth knows the awkward feeling of being treated as an outsider, and she has often been excluded since childhood. The experience of moving eight times in her childhood made her feel the kind of incompatibility very clearly. ("The Bonesetter's Daughter" page58). First, as the second generation of Chinese-American, Ruth who grew up in the United States experienced the marginalization of the mainstream society in the United States. Secondly, her career has always been to make wedding clothes for others, writing for others behind the scenes--her name has never been printed on them. Finally, her relationship with her boyfriend Yate has also entered a low ebb. She has always catered to Yate but never asked for anything. She was constantly upset that she could not find herself. At the end of the novel, the daughter Ruth knows her mother's family history by looking for someone to translate her mother's manuscript, and understands her mother's past experience. Therefore, she understands the origin of her mother's critical and complaining personality, forgives her mother's early injury to her, reconciles her relationship with her boyfriend, and finds the reasons for writing.

In this novel, through the identification of the name of the grandmother Aunt Bao--Gu Yuxin, the mother Ru Ling finally came out of the family's curse. Her symptoms of Alzheimer was eased and she fell in love with Mr. Tang who translated her manuscript. It is the elimination of the identity

crisis that makes the mother and daughter understand each other, forgive their early mutual harm. The daughter Ruth also begins to write as an independent individual for her family and reconcile with her boyfriend.

## **5. Conclusion**

In summary, from the perspective of feminism criticism theory, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* shows how three generations of mothers and daughters, under the oppression of patriarchal society and American mainstream society, break the silence of patriarchal society through the constant awakening of self-subject consciousness, and finally understand the mother's past and restore the missing family history to build their identity by tracing their family names.

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