

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 2 February 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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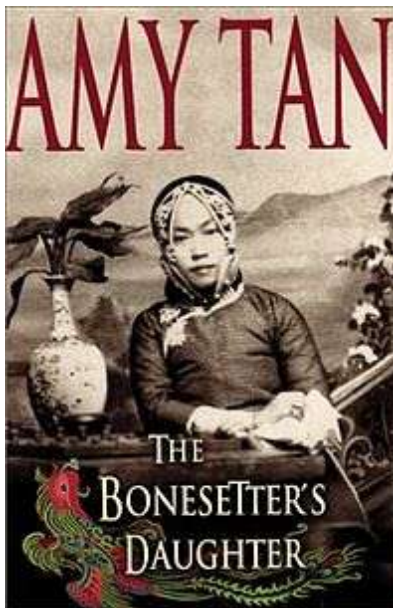
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The Bonesetter's Daughter - An overview

Lakshmi Priya, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate



Spiritual Sustenance in Times of Alienation and Hardship

The Bonesetter's Daughter is written by Amy Tan, the best among Asian American writers. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* unfolds in five linked themes, that is, ghosts, ghost writing, nature, bones, and memory. The novel investigates as to how the spirit of Gu Liu Xin, the

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Chinese grandmother, plays a critical role in developing the psychological integrity of Ruth, the American born Chinese granddaughter.

The story also tells us as to how Gu Liu Xin's ghost helps to guide LuLing, her daughter and Ruth's mother, out of the hazardous situation in China. It also tells us as to how Gu Liu Xin's spirit sustains LuLing in times of alienation and hardship in America. The novel indicates that the womanist spirit of audacity is generational and trans-visible, passing from mothers to daughters or from woman to woman.

A Saga of Three Generations

The title, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, indicates that the story is about the life of Gu Liu Xin, the daughter of a bonesetter; the novel is a saga of the three generations of women, that is Ruth the American born Chinese daughter, LuLing the immigrant Chinese mother, and Gu Liu Xin alias Precious Auntie and Bao Bamu, the Chinese grandmother. The spirit of the dead grandmother guides both the plot development and the central theme of the story, reclaiming the silenced voice of women.

The Structure of the Novel

The main body of this story consists of three parts. The story in the first part is situated in present America and narrated by Ruth, the American-born Chinese granddaughter. It recounts Ruth's identity and the tension between Ruth and the mother, LuLing. When the story opens, Ruth is a ghost writer in her forties, who works at home and takes care of Art, her American partner, and Art's two daughters from his former marriage.

Mother-Daughter Tension

Nothing seems wrong on the surface in terms of her family life and career. The delicate mother-daughter tension between Ruth and LuLing keeps lingering. Flashing back to her childhood and adolescence, Ruth comes to realize that the mother-daughter relationship is rooted in her identity crisis-living as both American and Chinese. Her Chinese mother's silence and frustrations of living in a foreign country and the miscommunication between her mother and herself. More important, just as LuLing is losing her memory, Ruth recovers her mother's autobiography that is representative of the past memories written in Chinese.

LuLing's Autobiography

The second part is the English translation of LuLing's autobiography. This part delineates both the stories of LuLing and her mother, Precious Auntie. A misunderstanding develops between LuLing and Precious Auntie. LuLing does not learn the truth and how important her mother means to her until Precious Auntie commits suicide in order to save LuLing from a potentially unhappy marriage. After the death of Precious Auntie, LuLing experiences a number of turbulences in the backdrop of Japanese Chinese war and the Chinese civil war.

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Whatever happens, LuLing never stops seeking consonance with her mother who teaches her knowledge, wisdom, love, bravery, and the family art of calligraphy. In the process of LuLing's growth into maturity, Precious Auntie becomes familiar and very close to LuLing. Indeed, LuLing survives every important phase of her life by living on the knowledge and heritage her mother has left to her. In impressing Precious Auntie's spirit LuLing and Precious Auntie become one.

Life in Migration - Struggle to Go Back to Roots

The third part of the story goes back to the present America, which is the epilogue. In this part, Ruth resumes her role as a story teller. The suspense built up in the first part of the fiction is finally given a conclusion here. Both conflicts, namely the strained mother-daughter relationship between LuLing and Ruth, as well as the vague one between Ruth and Art, are resolved. Once Ruth learns the truth of her mother's and grandmother's life-stories, she begins to identify herself with her Chinese ancestry.

While Ruth is being back to her Chinese roots, she becomes more visible for her American partner, Art. Art's recognition of Ruth's presence rekindles his love for her and relieves Ruth's anxiety. However, the vague relationship between Ruth and Art can be seen as subtext to the mother-daughter relationship and reconciliation. Overall, the story is developed on two major parallels, the one between Ruth and her mother, LuLing, and the one between LuLing and her mother, precious Auntie. The two parallel run with the medium of Gu liu Xin's ghost.

The Women Characters

The women characters of the story are LuLing, Ruth (LuLing's daughter), Precious Auntie (LuLing's mother), Gao Ling (LuLing's sister).

LuLing

LuLing plays a vital role as a daughter to Precious Auntie and a responsible mother to Ruth. LuLing explains about her childhood memories that made her life change from an innocent girl to a smart girl. She explains as to how she was very close to Precious Auntie from the day she was born. LuLing learns many things in life through Precious Auntie by growing up in her care. Precious Auntie was not only a nursemaid for her, but was also a tutor who Precious Auntie was so close to her that Lu Ling becomes helpless without her. "I thought the words "Precious Auntie" were the same as what others mint by "Ma". I could not bear to be separated from my nursemaid for even one moment." (BSD 180)

But there is a shift in LuLing's attitude during adolescence, when she considers "Ma" as her real mother understands the difference between a mother and a nursemaid. LuLing admires Precious Auntie for the dexterity in her work. Yet, according to her, Precious Auntie is only a servant, a woman who held no great position in her household, a person no one liked.

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I began to increase my respect for mother. I sought her favour. I believed favour was the same as love. Favour made me feel important, more content. After all, mother was the number-one-ranking lady of the house. She decided what we ate, what colors we should wear, how much pocket money we received for those times she allowed us to go to the market. (BSD 181)

As LuLing's transition into adolescence begins to take place, the reader also witnesses a transition in attitude. Eager to please her mother, she agrees to marry Chang's son. She also evolves from an innocent girl to a selfish young woman when she tells Chang about Peking Man. "I felt I had grown up at last and she had lost power over me. It was as if the old I was looking at the new me, admiring how much I had changed." (BSD 191)

However, only when Precious Auntie commits suicide Lu Ling realizes her mistake. Her transition from ignorance to awareness that Precious Auntie was her mother fills her with guilt. "And then I realized: Her face, her hope, her knowledge, her sadness- they were mine. Then I cried and cried glutting my heart with joy and self-pity." (BSD 237)

LuLing then begins to think of Precious Auntie more as a mother than as a nurse maid. She comes to know the actual cause of the marriage. Chang wants to know the secret of dragon bones and the way to it. If his son marries LuLing, she will be a help to him. LuLing refuses the marriage and feels proud that she has done the right act. This makes LuLing change from a young woman who is pampered at her mother's place to a miserable wretch who is shown no love and affection. It is Precious Auntie's death that leads to this transition in her. Her 'ma' later shows open aversion for her. "In times of family misfortune', she began in a sharp voice, 'personal sadness is selfish. Still, I am sad to tell you we are sending you to an Orphanage.' I was stunned, but I did not cry. I said nothing." (BSD 226)

LuLing understands her position and status only after the death of Precious Auntie. LuLing is sent to an orphanage, where she experiences the transition in her life from a careless, irresponsible girl to a responsible young woman. The orphanage is a part of the Christian Monastery; Where Lu ling experiences a cultural transition. The song that they are taught at the orphanage makes this evident. "We can study, we can learn, we can marry whom we choose. We can work, we can earn, and fate is all we lose." (BSD 231)

LuLing learns to be more responsible as she has go both roles to fulfil in the orphanage, - the role of a student and a tutor. Along with cultural transition comes LuLing's religious transition. She changes from Buddhism to Christianity. LuLing outlines her own transition in the following lines: "After we finished with those statuses, there were no more idols to be changed to angels. By then, I too had changed, from a tutor to the teacher, from lonely girl to one who was in love with Teacher's Pan's son." (BSD 241)

Gao Ling's Life

Closely linked to LuLing's life is Gao Ling's life. She evolves from the privileged daughter of a household to the daughter-in-law of Chang, who undergoes torture and mental

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anguish. Her next transition is a life of simplicity and independence at the orphanage. But while she offers comfort and support to LuLing at the beginning, it is LuLing who comforts Gao Ling as the LuLing's marriage meets with a tragic denouement at the death of her husband, Kai Jing. LuLing's evolution into a strong-willed woman is evident when she uses her wit and acumen to escape from the Japanese. LuLing and Gao Ling shift to Hong Kong and then to America. From a tutor LuLing becomes an artist and becomes Mrs. Young. Unlike Precious Auntie she resolves to live and not indulge in self-torture. "I sailed for America, a land without curses or ghost. By the time I landed, I was five years younger. Yet I felt no old."(BSD 296)

Here the word 'old' becomes synonymous with maturity and a better understanding of the world. Edwin young, takes care of her, and gives her more importance as a woman. Her transition to motherhood is attained with the birth of Ruth. Only when LuLing becomes a mother, she realizes how a mother is always misunderstood hated. Sometimes like Precious Auntie, she thinks that her death would drive sense into Ruth. "Why I have daughter like you? Why I live? Why I don't die long time go?" LuLing was huffing and shorting."(BSD 140)

LuLing is annoyed with the habits of Ruth as she grows older. She is more Americanized and that leads to a cultural conflict. "You wish I dead? You wish no mother tell you what to do? Okay may be I die soon!" (BSD 49)

Gradually, LuLing's guilt presses her on leading to a transition from remembrance to oblivion. She suffers from Dementia, unable to recollect anything except those incidents concerning her mother her daughter and her sister Gao Ling. But her Dementia enables her to become closer to Ruth.

She evolves into a more caring and loving personality. Towards the end, her daughter 'Ruth' takes care of her and makes her realize that she is more important to her than anybody else. In short, what is evident about LuLing is beneath her confusion-seized talk. Her only concern is for her daughter's life, she wants her daughter to be happy and successful in life. Towards the end, Tan portrays her as a happy, contented woman who sees a new companion in Mr. Tang.

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