Ob/Subjectivity of Testimonial Narratives in Amy Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*

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Abstract

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub establish the theory of testimony in the work they co-authored: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. They define testimony and testimonial narratives within the context of trauma and memory studies. Dominick La Capra in his groundbreaking book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, considers testimony as a genre-in-the making, which provides a “purely documentary knowledge” (86) since it is a source of facts, of reliable information about the past (ibid). Moreover, La Capra compares survivors who testify on trauma to “living archives”. Accordingly, the trauma survivors construct a testimonial discourse that is objective from the perspective of ‘reliable information’ and ‘documentary knowledge’, yet subjective since they are survivors of extremely excruciating experiences. In Amy Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* three female characters are traumatized: the Chinese grandmother, the mother and the American-born daughter. They are able—though belatedly—to retrieve and reconstruct experiences they witnessed and thought they had forgotten. In addition, their testimonies—included in the novel—provide consistent information about past historical/personal events, such as the Sino-Japanese War, of 1937, World War Two and the war between the Communists and the Kuomintang, which led to the victory of Mao Tse Dung and his followers in 1949.

Survivors in resistance narratives reconstruct traumatic experiences from their own perspective; for this reason LaCapra postulates that

survivor testimony, including the interviewing process, is in certain ways a new, necessarily *problematic* genre-in-the making with implications for oral history (…)

Historians have not yet worked out altogether acceptable ways of “using” testimonies, and their task is further complicated by the at times marked differences between the conditions and experiences of victims as well as their responses to them. (110 italics added)

Consequently, though testimony remains—at least in the beginning—a problematic genre-in-the making, I advance the argument that for historians testimonial narratives is objective yet complex however; the dilemma is elucidated by trauma theorists.
In “Education and Crisis or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” Shoshana Felman defines our era as “the age of testimony” (17) and limits the meaning of testimony to our relation with trauma. Testimony is composed of “bits and pieces of a memory that have been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance” (16). So these occurrences or traumatic events resist integration into the survivor’s intellectual faculty or “remembrance”; however, when they are communicated, in written or oral testimonies, language acquires a clinical/healing dimension. Felman further contends that testimony is “a sort of signature,” for survivors reach self-knowledge during the process of testifying. “Self-knowledge is neither a given before testimony nor a residual substantial knowledge consequential to it. In itself, this knowledge does not exist, it can only happen through the testimony; it cannot be separated from it. It can only unfold itself in the process of testifying.” (53 italics in the original)

Survivors’ testimonies are both their written and oral narratives in which they retrieve and reproduce traumatic experiences witnessed in the past, in China; which continue to have an impact on their present life. In this article I shall examine the written testimonies of three female survivors. Both the traumatized mothers and daughters testify to multiple personal traumas and manage to appropriate a traumatic past, through comprehending it first, then reintegrating it into the present. The three female characters in The Bonesetter’s Daughter: Gu Liu Xin, Luling and Ruth. I will discuss testimonial accounts not as a genre but as the narrative discourse uttered by the traumatized subjects such as Ruth’s ghostwriting, Luling’s autobiography and Precious Auntie’s manuscript; The novel offers a model of testimony and is structured around different layers of testifying. Indeed testimonial novels “combin[e] testimony with narrative strategies,” (3) maintains Linda J Craft in her analysis of Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America. She specifies that testimony is either religious narrative or legal evidence at war (189) and identifies the types of testimonial
novels¹ and a set of their characteristics. Though Craft studies the theory of testimonial novels as set in Central American and which arose in the 1970’s, her theory may be smoothly applied to Tan’s, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. The first characteristic of testimonial discourse is the presence of a powerful woman who takes up the first person narrator and is a symbol of resistance (185). This woman protagonist additionally recreates popular culture, “popular folk traditions as legends” handed down through generations orally find their way into the texts” (186).

Indeed in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, three female subjects have experienced, separately and in varying degrees traumatic experiences of war, abuse and suicides. They take up narration of their personal histories and prove to be strong, heroic and defiant women. Moreover this testimonial novel rewrites the myth of the skeleton woman and rights the bone story. Hence Tan revisits Chinese myths. The penultimate characteristic of testimonial discourse is that “[wi]th, humor, and irony have a place in all the narratives to deconstruct the discourses of power and to engage the readers” (186). The novel relates the trauma of three female subjects spanning three generations and two continents. The first subject is Precious Auntie. Her body materially testifies to her traumas. Her muteness and soreness are caused by her attempt to commit suicide which left her with a disfigured face. The traumatic experiences she lived are inscribed on her body. She “became a widow and an orphan on the same day” (180). Then she raises her own daughter in the guise of her maid and not as a mother. After her suicide, her daughter experiences another history of traumatic experiences till she immigrates to the United States.

The last trait of the testimonial novel as established by Craft is that “writers have suffered marginalization and testify to being displaced and disenfranchised. To some extent each of them records events he or she has personally experienced as an eyewitness and in which he or she has felt personally or politically persecuted” (187). This characteristic implies that the

¹ She identifies three types of testimonial novels: Pure Testimony, Novelized Testimony and Pseudo-Testimony
testimonial novel integrates autobiographical and testimonial discourses. Thereupon, The Bonesetter’s Daughter fictionalizes the life experiences lived by Tan’s grandmother. While the novelist and her own mother have experienced marginalization and cultural displacement as Chinese and Amerasian subjects in Euro-centric America. The novel relies on testimony to translate trauma and give voice to the victim (Precious Auntie) and the survivors (Luling and Ruth). For this I consider the three testimonies as reliable sources of recovery and an archive of personal history. “Testimony is a form of remembering” declares Lawrence L.Langer, adding that “the faculty of memory functions in the present to recall a personal history vexed by traumas that thwart smooth-flowing chronicles” (2-3). In line with this reading, Dominick La Capra views testimonies as “significant in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with—or denying and repressing—the past” (86-7). Thus, the two theorists foreground the role of memory in remembering the past which will lead either to recovery or denial. Besides they both relate testimony to the personal history of the testifier.

Consequently the testimonial discourse encompasses a literary representation of the bonesetter’s history from a different female perspective. And the testimonies function as archives of history. Though testimonies uncover sufferings they “Record the archive of tragedies in our Chinese family and communities(...)Such an archive does not narrate history solely in a formal, objective, or factual manner; rather, it tries to recover the fragments of the everyday marginalized subjects who intimately inhabit history, with their bodies and minds, hearts and spirits” summarizes Wendy Ho (16). The same idea is maintained by Lacapra who concurs that testimony givers are “both living archives and more or other than living archives” (92).

Accordingly, testimonial novels in recording the tragedies of the family and the clan are “resistance narratives” (Craft 7) that produce a subjective, unofficial and fictional history.
They confront official discourse critically and harshly, offering a rewriting of that discourse” (ibid). In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, there are three written testimonies; one may ask what are the interests of the three testimonial discourses? And how do they confront official discourse in rewriting history? As a testimonial novel, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is based on the characters’ struggle to achieve power and assert their identity. Luling and Precious Auntie’s texts are written in Chinese yet translated into English, a language accessible to the American-born granddaughter. In their Chinese versions, the two texts remain unreliable testimonies while the survivors would be voiceless. However, it is through the technique of translation that the narrator empowers the female characters. Besides, the element of oral performance is transferred to paper as the stories are first written by the Chinese mother and grandmother then translated by Mr. Tang. The translation unearths the life experiences of the two female characters, asserts their voices and highlights the factors that shape their identity.

The novel is a tripartite novel composed of three parts. The first is headed by a pre-narrative entitled ‘Truth’ written by the mother; she starts “[t]hese are the things I know are true” (1). After that she introduces herself, two husbands, and her daughter and recalls stories told by Precious Auntie. In this pre-narrative, Luling complains repeatedly that “there is one name I cannot remember” (ibid); yet she will remember it in the last chapter in the first gallery of the Asian art museum when she is standing in front of an oracle bone.

The first part of the novel is written by Ruth and it covers six untitled chapters about her childhood, her tense relationship with her mother and her struggles in Euro-centric America. Likewise the third part is untitled and contains three chapters that introduce Mr. Tang the translator, his love story with Luling, the latter’s story in an assisted-living residence after being diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. It covers also the reconciliation between Ruth and her partner and Ruth and her mother. The second part constitutes the longest and most intricate testimonial discourse. It not only exposes the personal history of Luling and her
mother but also records the Sino-Japanese war, the Civil War in China between the Communists and the Nationalists, and the discovery of Peking Man. This middle testimony encompasses seven chapters in which narration alternates between two Chinese female characters, as Luling has incorporated her mother’s autobiography in hers. All the chapters are entitled with symbolic titles: ‘Heart’ refers to the village of the Liu clan: Immortal Heart, where they had lived for six centuries. The second chapter ‘change’ stands for Luling when she “became an evil person” (184). Then Ghost, the third chapter introduces Precious Auntie’s testimony: “I was born the daughter of the famous bonesetter from the mouth of the mountain” (218). She further records the traditions of bonesetting, discloses the tragedy of her mother’s death and recounts her love affair with Baby Uncle. The fourth chapter, “Destiny,” reflects Luling’s life in the orphanage after her mother’s death and her search for her discarded body. Then in “effortless,” Luling marries her first husband Kai Jung the geologist who is forced to join the communists. The remaining chapters “Character” and “Fragrance” end the testimony with Lulling’s escape from the war to Hong Kong then to Peking. The last chapter delineates her difficult life after War World Two, waiting to be sponsored to sail to the United States of America.

On account of this, Lulling’s testimony or resistance narrative produces differences in the discursive construction of Chinese American identity. The female experiences of traumatization pre-immigration are unvoiced yet worsened by the Western patriarchal culture. Just like their silence imposed by a need to survive; and hide their ages, parallel lives in China previous marriages and children; is deepened by language barriers. The immigrant Chinese female character becomes accordingly a living ghost. Such representations and stereotypes are thwarted in testimonial novels that adopt and integrate a displaced cultural heritage in the immigrant life through the oral tradition. Orality in The Bonesetter’s Daughter is presented through the mother’s stories. Luling and Precious Auntie are raised in an oral culture and they
transmit values, knowledge and history through talk story. Though the grandmother is mute, she communicates with her daughter, teaching her through tale telling. We read “Precious Auntie said (...) told me that” (165). She “taught me to be naughty just like her. She taught me to be curious just like her. She taught me to be spoiled” (173). She interacts with the listeners using gestures and facial expressions. Her daughter reports that “Precious Auntie talked with inky hands” (170), “she scolded with her moving hands (...) her hands sliced the air” (186). Thus in the case of Precious Auntie talking transcends muteness and storytelling is a prerequisite for survival. Like this grandmother, the immigrant mothers cross linguistic barriers as they read little or no English and the daughters cannot read Chinese; the mothers talk stories in a combination of English and Chinese.

Luling testifies that Precious Auntie:

had no voice, just gasps and wheezes, the snorts of a ragged wind. She told me things with grimaces and groans, dancing eyebrows and darting eyes. She wrote about the world on my carry-around chalkboard. She also made pictures with her blackened hands. Hand-talk, face-talk, and chalk-talk were the languages I grew up with, soundless and strong(2)

In this testimony, the narrator formulates the relationship between muteness, telling and writing. Her mother breaks the silence—to which they are socialized in feudal Confucian China—and talks stories “about the world”. Moreover, she initiates her daughter to writing metaphorically on her “carry-around chalkboard”—which the latter will perform with Ruth when she gives her the sand tray; setting a different form of talk story: writing-story .Then there is writing and translating-story with another dyad of mother-daughter in the United States, Luling and Ruth. Tan incorporates oral stories that function as testimonies but in written form. First Precious Auntie writes a manuscript that she hands to Lulling; that is to say
unable to tell her personal history and reveal her true identity she writes. However, Luling discovers the truth only after her suicide. The second written testimony is Lullng’s. In it she writes her life story and tells her mother’s. Here the element of translation is introduced through the character of Mr. Tang who will act as a counselor and therapist to Luling. He translates the two written testimonies which constitute “the magic thread to mend a torn-up quilt” and Ruth deems “it’s wonderful and sad at the same time” (322).

After reading the translated stories/testimonies Ruth discovers that her grandmother had a name, a family to whom she and her mother belong (364). From this, Luling’s stories are analogous to a testimony that represents and rewrites the history of the bonesetter’s clan, the Liu. It also exposes the trauma lived by the last bonesetter who is a female doctor. Ruth describes the translated testimony in a nice metaphor of “magic thread” that repairs a “torn up quilt”; it is as if the bonesetter’s history is as old and valuable as a “torn up quilt”. Their heritage and existence are about to fall into oblivion if it were not for Luling’s testimony that will repair it. Besides the narrator qualifies the thread as a “magic thread,” attributing thus a supernatural dimension to the testimony that works miracles.

Through storytelling, Amy Tan combines two cultures, two nations and multiple generations separated by space, time and languages, considers Huntley (18). She provides the reader with a myriad of distinctive stories that stimulate reflection. Through her stories, the female subject is represented in such a way as to transcend the traditional means of communication and invent a female strategy that translates her resistance and willingness to survive such as “sand tray” “chalk talk” “face talk” “carry around chalk board”. Through self-exploration both the mother’s and daughter’s stories are unique and different. But together the stories, views Wendy Ho, represent a facet of the history of the Chinese Diaspora which is the traumatic
displacement (239). In the stories, setting continuously—though non-linear—switch from feudal China to modern China where the rich landlords live under a western influence, to China towns in the United States of America. Consequently the Chinese mothers experienced a “traumatic displacement” intensified by an inability to integrate their Chinese cultural heritage in their new lives. And they end up working class women struggling to raise angry, rebellious daughters.

Voice in this testimonial novel is that of the mother, grandmother and granddaughter, and all the story tellers are “as distinctive as fingerprints,” (Tan, Fate 349) for “it tells a story only that voice can tell. The voice is not merely the language, the prose style, the imaginary. It is that ineffable combination of things that create a triangulated relationship among narrator, reader and fictional world” (ibid 353/4). Tan here limits voice to the storyteller, the reader/listener and the imaginary fictional world. Thus the content of the story is the focus of the teller and listener; ‘the imaginary fictional world’ is the subjective regained content of the testimony while the listener is the objective component of the relationship.
Works Cited


