

Female Empowerment and Agency: An Analysis of Amy Tan's *Rules for Virgins*

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Abstract:

This study focuses on Amy Tan's short story entitled *Rules for Virgins*. Set in 1910s Shanghai, the narrative follows Violet, a young woman navigating the complex social and cultural landscape of a high-end brothel, where her virginity and sexuality are about to be commercialized. Drawing on intersectional analysis, the article examines how gender intersects with patriarchy and its cultural norms to shape the main character's experiences, focusing on her ability to exercise control within a male-dominated context. By analyzing the mentorship dynamics between the courtesans, the exploitation of female bodies, the paper highlights the portrayal of female agency in a patriarchal social system designed to rule over. From there, it is possible to raise the following problem: How do the protagonists negotiate their sexual agency in a system that controls it? In other words, how do they not only actively exercise their choices, but also in ways that challenge power relations? Centered on this inquiry, the reflection focuses on studying how the narrative challenges traditional narratives of victimhood and control, exploring how meanings, roles and identities are constructed through social interactions based on the concept of symbolic interactionism.

Keywords: Empowerment, female agency, patriarchy, sexuality, virginity.

Introduction

The debate over the link between sexuality and the domination of women is multifaceted and complex, revolving around the notion of "Power," one of the most discussed concept in the fields of social sciences and literature. With the emergence of feminism and its different branches, scholars and theorists have offered various views that have come to reinforce the gender division and the dynamics of relationships between men and women. These opposing viewpoints highlight the ongoing tensions in understanding the intersection of sexuality, gender, and power. One example of this opposition is the one going on between biological essentialists and social constructionists. The former believe that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, and biologically determined while the latter rest on the belief that reality is socially constructed and emphasizes language as an important means by which we interpret experience (John D. Delamater and Janet S. Hyde, 1998, p. 10). The diversity of these perspectives or views reveals the complexity of the relationship between sexuality and male domination.

The present work is in line with that ongoing debate by exploring how sexuality is perceived, particularly in the literary patriarchal Chinese society in the early 1900s in *Rules for Virgins* (2011) by Amy Tan. Set in 1910s Shanghai, the narrative follows Violet, a young woman navigating the complex social and cultural landscape of a high-end brothel, where her virginity and sexuality are about to be commercialized. Throughout the narrative, Violet is given pieces of advice by an old courtesan so that she can "use [her] brain as cleverly as [she] uses her hips and mouth" (Tan, 2011, p. 8).

Titled "Female Empowerment and Agency: An Analysis of Amy Tan's *Rules for Virgins*," the work examines how gender intersects with patriarchy and its cultural norms to shape the main character's experiences, focusing on her ability to exercise control within a male-dominated context. By analyzing the mentorship dynamics between the courtesans, the exploitation of female bodies, the paper highlights the portrayal of female agency in a patriarchal social system designed to rule over. From there, it is possible to raise the following problem: How do the protagonists negotiate their sexual agency in a system that controls it? In other words, how do they not only actively exercise their choices, but also in ways that challenge power relations? To answer these questions, it seems essential to us to apply intersectional feminist and symbolic interactionism lenses to our analysis. These tools will help us show, on the one hand, the multiplicity of the oppression to which women are submitted to in the narrative and that individuals are active agents who have the ability to negotiate, redefine, and construct sexual meanings through their interactions, on the other. Simply said, our work will consist in bringing into dialogue the two components of power that are subjection and agency in Amy Tan's short story.

1. Gender, Patriarchy, and Power Dynamics in *Rules for Virgins*

Power is an omnipresent force that permeates every society worldwide, manifesting at professional, social and personal levels.

For Michel Foucault, power is not just something that institutions or individuals possess and exert over others; it is more dynamic, existing in every interaction and social relationships:

I would suggest rather (but these are hypotheses which will need exploring): (i) that power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network; (ii) that relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) for which they play at once a conditioning and a conditioned role; (iii)

that these relations don't take the sole form of prohibition and punishment, but are of multiple forms; (iv) that their interconnections delineate general conditions of domination, and this domination is organised into a more-or-less coherent and unitary strategic form. (Foucault, 1980, p. 142).

From this definition, we understand that power arises from an amalgamation of factors. These factors can be individual, systemic and have roots in social structures like class, gender, race, family and sexuality. The interplay between these structures, reflecting how the concept of power is negotiated, contested and exercised is termed power dynamics.

Amy Tan's *Rules for Virgins* (2012) illustrates this interplay, mainly between gender and patriarchy with its cultural norms or values. Indeed, even in the absence of men in the narrative setting, their authority remains overwhelming, particularly regarding their control of women's sexuality.

1.1. Patriarchy and Hierarchical Power Structures

In her masterpiece entitled *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), Patricia Walby argued that patriarchy¹ plays an important role in the analysis of gender inequality. For her, "patriarchy is essential to capture the depth, pervasiveness and interconnectedness of different aspects of women's subordination, and can be developed in such a way as to take account of the different forms of gender inequality over time, class and ethnic group (1990, p. 2). From this quote, it is understood that, as a comprehensive framework, patriarchy does not affect all women in the same way and intersects with other forms of social inequalities such as race, gender and even class to create specific experiences of oppression and privilege.

Rules for Virgins (2012) is a short story where patriarchy and gender intersect to have a clear control over the female characters' bodies and sexual life. Here, through its social norms and expectations, patriarchy regulates the lives of the women, but most importantly their sexuality to ensure male dominance. In so doing, Violet, the young virgin courtesan is taught to remain beautiful and pure, to be obedient and to preserve the reputation of her potential patrons once her virginity would be sold. These expectations function like mechanism of control in the narrative.

As far as beautifulness and purity are concerned, the main character is taught to work on her physical appearance "Don't let yourself become too thin... A fat courtesan holds no appeal, either (2012, p. 25), to be able to keep her virginity until the moment Madam, the brothel's owner, sells it to the best offer : "You will have favorites among the suitors for your bud: the charming ones, the handsome ones. I will try to nurture those. But the madam will choose whoever she feels is the best for your defloration, the one who offers the most (2012, p. 13).

As for obedience, this is seen through the many injunctions to comply with the rules for the sake of the brothel system: "Here, we don't go back and forth on the price. It is three dollars for a party, and it does not include riding on the stem. No argument... To entice a guest with your eyes, wait until the man stares at you (2012, pp 14-15). Abiding by the rules not only maintains the system but the longevity as a beautiful courtesan: "How you behave next week can set the course of your career (2012, p 8).

Finally, being a courtesan requires to be able to keep safe the suitors or patrons' reputation. Behaving so is one of the conditions to keep her best clients and her position in the house:

"Remember also that a grown man may have nostalgia for his ideal self. He was supposed to leave a legacy of high morals so his descendants would worship him for the lofty reputation he built. Few men are capable of preserving their ideal self... You must cultivate his sentimentality for moral glory and help him treasure his myth of who he was. And when you do, he will not be able to let you go for at least a season or two (2012, p 8).

As we can see, the high and rigid expectations placed upon women, the control of their bodies and freedom of choice are the manifestation of patriarchy in the short story. These multiple expectations work intimately together to maintain and preserve men's power over women, showing the hierarchical power structures in the narrative. Moreover, symbolic meanings are assigned to these women's behaviors, acts and relationships based on the expectations place upon them.

In his book *Symbolic interactionism Perspective and Method* (1969), Herbert Blumer reveals developed the concept of "symbolic interactionism that rests on three simple premises :

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world... Second, the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p. 13).

Here in the short story, in the context of the control of women's body and sexuality, virginity is not just a biological condition, but a symbolic status that carries value in the social and economic dynamics of the brothel. This meaning is created and reinforced through the interactions with male clients and the courtesans' mentors.

As a whole, patriarchy operates in the narrative of *Rules of Virgins* (2012) through the symbolic meanings assigned to gender roles, interactions, and sexuality. Social expectations around beautifulness and purity, obedience, virginity and the preservation of men's reputation are thus embedded in these power dynamics, which consequence is the sexual double standard and the marginalization of their pleasure.

¹ A system of social structures and practices used by men to dominate, oppress and exploit women (Walby, 1990, p. 20)

1.2. Sexual double standard and Marginalization of Female Pleasure

Sexual double standard and marginalization of female pleasure are the results of the pervasiveness of patriarchy in *Rules for Virgins* (2012). They are intricately present throughout the narrative as the scenes move on, reflecting the societal expectations and attitudes towards both concepts of gender and sexuality. Understood as the attitude consisting in “judging men and women differently for the same behavior” (Gómez-Berrocal et al., 2022, p. 1), sexual double standard is present in the short story.

Both men and women's sexual behaviors are judged differently in the narrative, even in the brothel system. While male characters can engage in promiscuity without facing significant social repercussions, female characters are scrutinized and labeled negatively for similar actions. This case is perceived in the setting of the short story by Amy Tan, particularly in the context of homosexuality in the brothel. The place is itself a protective place for men who have unusual sexual behavior. They can hide themselves and are not judged by the community or the society in general: “Others were homosexuals who pretended they were not, to hide their true nature from other businessmen. They didn't realize that some of those businessmen had the same secret” (2012, p. 17).

From this quote, we understand that being and openly assuming one's gay status can have potential repercussions even for men within both the social and the professional environments. The only way to avoid any consequence is to conceal their true identities. They pretend indeed to be heterosexuals to conform to the expectations of the patriarchal dominant principles, highlighting how heterosexual identities are privileged in the setting. Heteronormativity² plays a central role in the narrative as it exposes and reveals the sexual double standard at play in the discourse regarding men and women sexual behaviors.

Consequently, female characters in the narrative internalize this sexual double standard to the point that they are the regulators of their own sexual attitudes. The old seducer and courtesan, Magic Gourd, is a clear illustration in the narrative. While training Violet, she advises her to behave as a true woman who is sexually submissive to men when the time of her defloration comes: “When a man buys your defloration, he wants your innocence, some hesitation, and cries of pain as proof that he is the first... Over the next year, we will go through lovemaking possibilities that will convince your first suitor you are worth the price” (2012, p. 32). The internalization of this sexual double standard pushes the women to comply with the patriarchal principles put in place by the dominant group.

As far as the marginalization of female pleasure is concerned, it is materialized through two instances in the setting: focusing on males' sexual satisfaction and silencing females' sexual desires. Regarding the first instance which is the focus on males' sexual satisfaction, the narrative turns around it, reflecting the central position that men occupy in the Shanghai society of the early twentieth century. As a matter of fact, all the acts of the women are guided towards satisfying men's needs, wants and desires. This is clearly visible in the short story. In one scene, Magic Gourd teaches Violet how men are receptive to good treatment :

They enjoy adulation, but don't need praise all night long. You'll know who they are by how warmly I receive them. “Come sit here,” I'll say, “your favorite spot by the window. Eat this, it's your favorite snack. Drink this wine, it makes you hearty. Violet will sing you favorite song....Once a man is you patron, always wear your most expensive set (2012, pp. 17- 18).

The inevitable consequence of women tendency to always please men is surely the silencing of their sexual pleasure. Indeed, here again, men are the center of everything. Their sexual satisfaction is the motto: “In the boudoir [...], they'll place offering on your belly so that you might grant their stem a longer life. You may have to apply some herbs to get their stem to stand up, and the potions I have almost always work” (2012, pp. 17- 18). One can infer from this quote that, in the brothel system, women are compelled to suppress their needs to the profit of their male partners, reflecting the broader social and cultural principles viewing female sexuality as secondary.

From the above, we can see that patriarchy intersects with gender to create a form of domination or oppression that is specific to women working in the brothel system throughout the narrative of the short story by Amy Tan. The cultural, social and even societal expectations are the dynamics restricting women's agency in terms of relationships between men and women. This restriction tends to affect their well-being and ultimately undermines their emotional stability and physical well-being. However, it does not fully impede them to resist against this patriarchal system that limits the assertion of their true selves.

2. Towards Female Empowerment and Agency in the Narrative

In the long journey towards their empowerment³ and agency, female characters in *Rules for Virgins* (2012) are faced with series of obstacles that prevent them from leading fulfilled lives. Among these obstacles, the non-control of their own bodies, the injunctions to abide by the social and cultural norms and, most importantly, the silencing of their sexual pleasure to the detriment of men's satisfaction. These constraints play a big part in their social instability. However, while thoroughly examining the narrative, one can perceive that these women implicitly subvert the social and cultural expectations and the power dynamics at play in the short story. Moreover, the mutual support between these women help them to get back on track on the pathway to their overall empowerment and agency.

2.1. Subversion of Patriarchal Expectations

² Heteronormativity is the institutionalisation of the belief that only heterosexuality is normal, and only particular kinds of heterosexual relations are normal (Kate Hawkins et al, 2011, 4)

³ The process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability (Naila Kabeer, 2005, 1)

In their article titled *Subversion in Education: Common Misunderstandings and Myths* (2018), John Portelli and Ardavan Eizadirad discuss the role of subversion in the field of education. In so doing, they define this concept as “a form of resistance to abusive forms of power” (2018, p. 59). To some extent, subversion is different from other overt forms of resistance as it “occurs underground through subtle actions without explicitly naming its intentions within the public sphere (2018, *ibid*). In other words, unlike manifest resistance, subversion operates quietly, aiming to disrupt exploitative practices while remaining under the radar to avoid consequences. This is the case in *Rules for Virgins* (2012) where subversion is implicit but present through the challenging of traditional gender roles on the one hand and the resistance against societal, particularly class and wealth expectations on the other. As far as the challenging of traditional gender roles is concerned, this is perceived through two instances in the short story. The first one is related to the economic sphere. According to traditional gender roles “women and men have different experiences and are exposed to different signals about the economy” (D’ACUNTO Francesco et al, 2020, p. 1). In the narrative, the female characters are true economic agents contrary to traditional gender roles, which entitles men to be the only economic agents who are in charge of all the needs of the household. Indeed, the brothel system is symbolically the place where these women can act as active economic operators.

This is materialized by their search for the “Four Necessities” which are “jewelry, furniture, a seasonal contract with a stipend, and a comfortable retirement” (2012, p. 12). In order to achieve this, they have to behave as real businessmen : To gain the Four Necessities, you must be popular, desired by many suitors who give you costly gifts. You must be as clearheaded, firm, shrewd, and quick-thinking as a businessman. You offer no bargains, and you never accept anything less than what you are worth” (2012, p. 12). The above quotes implicitly reveal the agency of these women as their attitudes and behaviors completely challenge the patriarchal cultural norms which primarily considers women only as women, wives and daughters depending on male family members. In the setting, the courtesans are in search of their material and financial independence that will allow them greater autonomy and control over their lives. By controlling their income and carefully selecting clients, they exercise a level of agency typically denied to women.

As for the resistance against societal, particularly class and wealth expectations, it is materialized through the subtle subversion of power dynamics in the courtesans and the clients relationships on one side and the subversion of cultural expectations regarding respect on the other. In the narrative, the clients represent the class of men who detain the economic power while the courtesans represent the class of women in search of economic independence.

Subtly, the class of women, through manipulation and tricks, subvert this order in the brothel system. Here men are not the powerful class and the instructors, but women. The Boudoir, the bedroom of the courtesan, is the secret place where men’s weakness is revealed. The arts of seduction and manipulation appear to be excellent tools for the courtesans to position themselves as the ones leading the debates in the private sphere. On occasion, we have clients who wish to receive instruction. Most are inexperienced. Formerly devout monks, young boys whose fathers are clients of ours, or customers who wish to learn the skills of an expert lover to woo another man’s wife. If you come across these men, let me know. In fact, the initiation of young boys was a specialty of mine in my later years, and many of my former suitors would ask for me especially when they brought their sons. I am always moved to tears when these same young boys come back as grown men and say to me, “Magic Gourd, because of you, my wife and concubines are content.” Often they ask for a lesson, just for old times’ sake. So you should let me take care of any client like this. They are not as choosy about how old the courtesan is. What matters to them is gaining knowledge that will last a lifetime (2012, p. 24).

We clearly understand that the courtesans, in their private sphere that is the Boudoir, play various roles: the teacher, the matrimonial agent and the sexologist. In so doing, they subvert the cultural norms and redefine their social status on their own terms. By using their knowledge and expertise, they position themselves not merely as victims, but as real businesswomen in a world supposed to be dominated by men. All these show their resiliency and their capacity to subtly fight against any form of power. In that fight, mentorship, feminist mentoring and solidarity are of great importance.

2.2. Mentorship, Feminist Mentoring and solidarity

Mentoring has been defined as the “[...] help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking,” and also as a process of helping others learn (Tejinder Singh Bhogal and Srilatha Batliwala, 2021, p. 27). Contrarily to that definition, feminist mentoring refers to “the process of building empowering reciprocal relationships of solidarity, mutual learning and support that enable committed individuals and groups to better advance the larger goals of feminist social transformation, in their own specific work and contexts (2021, p. 31). From both definitions, one can perceive that feminist mentoring differs from conventional mentoring by emphasizing systemic change and collaborative relationships that respect both mentor and mentee.

The solidarity and mutual support among the mentor, Magic Gourd, and Violet, the mentee, is pervasive in *Rules for Virgins* (2012) in many different aspects, ranging from passing down experience to teaching her strategies for self-realization in a male-dominated society all the way through giving pieces of advice. Actually, Magic Gourd plays an important role in raising Violet’s consciousness in so far as she is her first support who knows well the work as courtesan: “You might be thinking, “What does my attendant, old Magic Gourd, know about romance?” When I was nineteen, I was one of the Top Ten Beauties of Shanghai. And not too many courtesans last until they are thirty-two. So you see, I know more than most (2012, p. 6).

The experience of the old courtesan serves as a guidance in the young courtesan’s empowerment in the narrative. Indeed, sharing

her own life lessons and experiences helps Violet be aware, on the one hand, of the power dynamics at play in the society, but also equips her with the skills that will enable her to survive in that fierce world designed to exploit her body and sexuality on the other hand. In a word, through passing down her personal experience, Magic Gourd's feminist mentoring serves as an empowerment tool that allows Violet to take control of her destiny in an exploitative patriarchal system.

Moreover, her pieces of advice teach Violet how to select and even attract the best suitors in the brothel system. In so doing, she is advised to attract "rich old men can be among the best suitors and patrons" (p. 17) and avoid "cheapskates" (p. 15), "tagalongs who are disreputable" (p. 16), "thieves and scoundrels" (p. 16), "tempting young men" (p. 16) and finally the most dangerous who is the "Lover of Blood-Curdling Screams [who] loves to give a woman pain" (p. 17). These advises are two folds: giving Violet the financial realization to "pay off her debt to Madam in three years" (p. 18) and encourage her to assert her agency.

Magic Gourd is not the only support in the narrative. Through solidarity, all the other courtesans use strategies to support each other and not fall in the traps put in place by men to make men submissive. One of these strategies is to build strong sisterhood⁴ outside reception days to avoid being drunk by manipulative men who give them wine to make them lose their lucidity:

I know that often happened in your mother's house. But do you know why? Why does the man not enjoy the wine himself? To stay clearheaded while gambling? No, he enjoys having a woman take the punishment for him. After all, a little cup of wine is not like a beating. But it weakens her a little, makes her drunk so she loses her calculating ways, especially in the boudoir. That's what they think, anyway. They don't know how cunning we are. When the beauty accepts the cup, the beauty next to her exchanges it for an empty one, then empties the wine into a vase. Have you ever wondered why there are so many vases and spittoons about the place? Do you now see why it is unwise to make enemies with the other beauties of the house? You should practice this sleight of hand many times. I don't want you drunk and sick. That would make a lasting impression of the worst kind.

Using hidden vases and spittoons, not only helps them be clearheaded, but avoid being raped and sexually exploited by men. The relationship between all these women underscores the importance of female solidarity and sisterhood in resisting patriarchal dominance. In the case of *Rules for Virgins* (2012), the support system between the women are crucial for empowering them to challenge oppressive structures collectively instead of facing them individually.

Overall, these two groups of women, the mentor and the female colleagues, play a pivotal role Violet's empowerment and agency in the short story by Amy Tan. Magic Gourd's mentorship empowers Violet by providing her with knowledge that is often withheld from women in their society. By sharing the complexities of being a courtesan, including how to maintain autonomy and protect oneself emotionally and financially, Magic Gourd brings up a sense of self-reliance in Violet. This empowerment through knowledge challenges the patriarchal narrative that women are dependent on men for their survival and success. As for sisterhood among the colleagues, it symbolically highlights a way of resisting the male-dominated environment of the brothel. By supporting one another, Magic Gourd and Violet develop resilience, which helps them confront the challenges posed by clients and societal expectations. Their shared understanding and support foster a sense of unity that allows them to maintain dignity and agency, even in difficult situations.

Conclusion

The objective of this article titled "Female Empowerment and Agency: An Analysis of Amy Tan's *Rules for Virgins*" was to analyze how the narrative challenges traditional narratives of victimhood and control in a patriarchal system. Upon conclusion of this study, it is clear that sexuality, despite being an instrument of women's domination and subordination, is also a symbol of their empowerment and agency. In order to show this, the paper was based on intersectionality and symbolic interactionism. On the one hand, intersectionality helps reveal that patriarchy intersects with gender, specifically through the symbolic meanings assigned to gender roles, to create a form of domination and oppression that is specific to these women working in the brothel system throughout the narrative of the short story by Amy Tan. The cultural, social and even societal expectations are the dynamics restricting their agency, undermining consequently their emotional stability and physical well-being. However, even if these women's agency appears to be restricted by men and their strict rules and principles in the public sphere, the intimate relationship between them is source of their empowerment both in the private and public spheres on the other hand. Through symbolic interactionism, a theory which "sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people" (Blumer, 1969, p. 15), the female characters body and sexuality appear to be sources of their social, economic and material empowerment. With their bodies and sexual lives, they are able to subvert the cultural norms, to redefine their social status on their own terms and to position themselves not merely as victims, but as real businesswomen in a world supposed to be dominated by men. Mentoring and solidarity play a central role in this positioning. As a matter of fact, the mutual support and sisterhood between these women help them confront the challenges posed by men and societal expectations. Their shared understanding and support nurture a sense of unity that allows them to maintain their dignity and their agency.

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⁴ A [belief](#) in or [feeling](#) of [unity](#) and [cooperation](#) among women (in Webster's New World College Dictionary, 2010)

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