

## Negotiating Multiple Realities in *The Hundred Secret Senses*

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### Abstract

The concept of “multiple realities” is not a postmodern inquiry though scholars have made it popular in contemporary critical analysis of literature because of modern issues like Globalisation, Multiculturalism, Cross-culture, Mass Communication & Mass Media, etc. This concept dates back to antiquity when Plato wrote in his *The Republic* about the “Allegory of the Cave” and how human beings see things in different ways depending on how we are placed in time and space. He also posits his philosophy on the concept of the “Ideal” and “Real” (Plato, 380 B.C). Our sense of reality is analysed by many other philosophers. In the field of psychology and medicine as well, the concept of multiple realities becomes important to understand mental diseases like Schizophrenia, hysteria, delusions and so on. This paper attempts to make a cultural study of the multiple realities that are negotiated by the two main female characters in Amy Tan's novel *The Hundred Secret Senses* and the author's vision.

**Keywords:** Multiple realities, Ghosts, Reincarnation, Belief system, Negotiation.

*The Hundred Secret Senses* is Amy Tan's third novel. Like her first two novels, *The Hundred Secret Senses* is an international best seller. In addition to its powerful matrilineal discourse, another attraction that endows charm to her novel is her ability to weave a colourful 'tapestry' of ancient Chinese wisdom and beliefs which have been largely influenced by the two main Chinese religions, Confucianism and Taoism. The principles of these two religions spring from one of the world's oldest books of ancient Chinese philosophy, the *I Ching* or *Book of Change*. The *I Ching* is based on a belief in the unity of man and the surrounding universe. The universe is believed to be made up of two

opposite and complementary forces, *Yin* and *Yang*. *Yin* is the negative aspect- dark, passive, female. *Yang* consists of everything positive- light, active, male. According to ancient Chinese belief, every event results from the interaction between these two principles (Christie 1968).

There are biographical elements in the novels<sup>1</sup>. Whenever Tan is asked the reason why she writes, she always responds that she does so in order to understand how 'things happen' (Tan 2004, 11). Writing, for her, is an act of faith where memory and imagination blend together to give her a balanced view of life. Memory encapsulates her own experiences of growing up as a Chinese girl in

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<sup>1</sup>See Amy Tan's first two novels, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991).  
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American society. Imagination, according to her is, “empathy and compassion” (Bookreporter, n.d).

Tan grew up with two kinds of beliefs. One was that of 'faith'. Her father was a Baptist minister who taught her to believe in the 'Holy Ghost'. Her mother believed in fate-everything bad or good being a result of fate. Tottering precariously between these two kinds of beliefs Tan was always asking herself what to hope for and why things happened as they did. After both her brother and father succumbed to brain tumors, Tan found herself running between the two pillars of Christian faith and Chinese fate, desperately trying to find a balance which she found through 'writing' as she discovers in *The Opposite of Fate* (Tan 2004, 11).

Writing *The Hundred Secret Senses* is Tan's method of finding balance in her life. The two most important characters in this book- Kwan and Olivia- are her mother and herself. They may be portrayed as sisters in the book but they carry the beliefs and perceptions of Tan, the daughter, and Daisy, the mother. Tan's imagination was affected by her mother as much as Olivia's was by her sister Kwan. Much of the ambiguities that existed in their relationship at the beginning of the novel are resolved at the end. It is a reaching out for reconciliation between two opposing sets of perceptions and beliefs. Through her own experiences, Tan succeeds in imparting the message that there are realities of certain people for whom the miraculous is ordinary, appearances of ghosts are normal and reincarnation is a happening phenomenon. Tan does not seek to find any formula for human relationships but she writes to work

out a balance for characters in her novel who are pitted against the same predicaments as herself.

Because my childhood disturbed me, pained me, made me ask foolish questions. And the questions still echo. Why does my mother always talk about killing herself? Why did my father and brother have to die? If I die, can I be reborn into a happy family? Those early obsessions led to a belief that writing could be my salvation, providing me with the sort of freedom and danger, satisfaction and discomfort, truth and contradiction I can't find in anything else in life. I write to discover the past for myself, I don't write to change the future for others. And if others are moved by my work- if they love their mothers more, scold their daughters less, or divorce their husbands who were not positive role models- I'm often surprised, usually grateful to hear from kind readers. But I don't take either credit or blame for changing their lives for better or for worse. Writing, for me, is an act of faith, a hope that I will discover something remarkable about ordinary life, about myself. And if the writer and the reader discover the same thing, if they have that connection, the act of faith has resulted in an act of magic. To me, that's the mystery and the wonder of both life and fiction- the connection between two individuals who discover in the end that they are more the same than they are different.” (Tan 1991, 10)

Tan has no pretensions about being an expert on “China, Chinese culture, mahjong, the psychology of mothers and daughters, generation gaps, immigration, illegal aliens, assimilation, acculturation, racial tension, Tiananmen Square, the most favoured Nation Trade Agreements, human rights, Pacific Rim economies, the purported one million missing baby girls of china, the future of Hongkong after 1997, or, I am sorry to say, of Chinese cooking. Certainly I have personal opinions on many of these topics, but by no means do my sentiments and my world of make-believe make me an expert.” (Jamie Edwards in discussion with the author, 1996)

Thus, Tan warns the reader that it would be a mistake to read her novels as ethnographic. Tamara S. Wagner too recognises this mix of 'Occidentalism and orientalism' of Tan's characters in her essay- "Amy Tan is undoubtedly a Western writer, even though her subject matter, settings, and themes are concerned with the East, or more specifically, with the meeting of East and West, with cultural as well as ethnic hybridity..." The formation of her characters is that of an "American" multi-cultural identity within the framework of mother-daughter relations.

Likewise, *The Hundred Secret Senses* is not an ethnographic study on the cultural poetics of China but it is Tan's way of showing Olivia that her Chinese sister Kwan possesses an unassuming strength that calls for a self-sacrificing love and an understanding about life that might hold the answers to her doubts and fears.

Olivia Bishop, a commercial photographer, is the novel's primary narrator representing a western world view and Kwan, twelve years her senior, is her half-sister. Kwan is the storyteller in the novel. She is the abandoned daughter of her father's first marriage in China and she represents the Chinese world view. Jack Yee, Olivia's father, was a Chinese who had immigrated to America and married Olivia's mother, Louise Kenfield. Olivia, her mother and her two brothers were shocked to learn at her father's death bed that he had been keeping a secret from them and that they had a half-sister whom he had left behind in China. It was his last wish as a dying man that she should be brought back to America to live with her family. This young girl, abandoned many years ago was Kwan. The ghost of her

mother acted as the mediator, telling her husband to take care of his daughter:

Eleven years later, while he was dying in the hospital, the ghost of his first wife appeared at the foot of his bed. 'Claim back your daughter,' she warned, 'or suffer the consequences after death!' (Tan 1995, 6)

Kwan's arrival in America announces the coming of a whole set of new beliefs and perceptions contrary to what Olivia had grown up with. Chapter 1 of Part I of the novel opens with the title, "The Girl with *Yin* Eyes'. The girl here refers to Kwan. *Yin* eyes means eyes that can see 'spirits' or in Olivia's version, 'Ghosts' of dead people. Coincidentally, it is a ghost (that of her mother) who initiates Kwan's entry and with her comes stories about, and conversations with, ghosts of dead people who are a natural part of her life:

My sister Kwan believes she has yin eyes. She sees those who have died and now dwell in the world of yin, ghosts who leave the mists just to visit her kitchen on Balboa Street in San Francisco. (Tan 1995, 3)

Olivia was only seven when Kwan started narrating her secret- her ability to see ghosts and talk to them. However, this little girl had grown up with the belief that ghosts were not friendly people with whom one talked. Ghosts, according to what she had learned, were terrible spirits who haunted people and took away their souls. Hence, she rejected Kwan's story about the "Many, many good friends" that she could see in the bedroom and reported to her parents. Her parents, in typical American reaction, took Kwan to a mental asylum to be treated. However, the doctors at the hospital managed only to distort her body through the shock treatments. When she came back home, she looked "as if she'd been given

a crew cut with a hand-push lawn mower. It was as bad as seeing an animal run over on the street, wondering what it once had been” (Tan 1995, 14). They could not exorcise her ghosts because that would always remain part of her belief system, her culture. The shock treatments merely released all her ghosts in the sense that her yin eyes were no longer a secret. She could talk freely with everyone about her ghosts as if she was narrating an incident that happened at the grocer's shop. Nonetheless, Kwan had stories to tell about the hospital. She had her own perception of the mental patients in the hospital. She revealed to Olivia that the 'insane' patients so labeled by the Americans were actually possessed by terrible 'ghosts'. Thirty years after that she is still talking to ghosts:

“All that shock treatment.... No more yin-talking! They do this to me, hah, still I don't change. See? I stay strong.” (Tan 1995,15)

Kwan's 'eccentricity' or 'wackiness' continues to affect people around her, especially Olivia. By a twist of fate, Olivia becomes the most important person in Kwan's life. In other words, she is adopted by Kwan as the little sister towards whom she assumes her greatest duty. Consequently, they do spend much time together and Olivia's life begins to change despite a lot of resistance. She becomes the heir of Kwan's 'weirdness'.

Among her weird abilities, the weirdest is her ability to diagnose ailments in people. Mere handshakes with strangers are enough to tell her whether they had suffered a broken bone, “even if it healed many years before” (Tan 1995, 16). She can tell by looking at a person whether one has “arthritis, tendinitis, bursitis, sciatica- she's really good with all the

musculoskeletal stuff- maladies that she calls 'burning bones', 'fever arms', 'sour joints', 'snaky leg'...” (Tan 1995, 16) Her extraordinary ability is reminiscent of witch-doctors and quacks in the actual world of primitive societies where such abilities were sought after then but is now waved away as rubbish. This kind of belief system in its cultural context is normal but the moment it is extracted from its culture of origin and placed in a new cultural context, consulting such mystical people is perceived as macabre, bizarre, strange, unacceptable and sometimes even funny. Olivia's family has been exposed to Kwan's 'weird' abilities and they know firsthand what she could do but they are not willing to admit it. It is easier for them to ignore her abilities: “No one in our family talks about Kwan's unusual abilities” (Tan 1995, 17). On the other hand, for Kwan, her weirdness is an indicator of her perception and impression of the world.

The most astonishing trait in Kwan, besides her *Yin* eyes, is her transmutation. She assumes the role of multiple characters who exist in different space and time. She owns each of her stories while Olivia disowns them as figments of her wild imagination augmented by the shock treatments she had received. To be able to achieve this multiplicity, Tan's plot is unconventional and her narrative demands the reader's utmost sincerity to be able to navigate the forked paths of the narrative. Kwan of the present is a down- to- earth, simple Chinese immigrant, with her share of idiosyncrasies, living an ordinary life in America. But by a touch of magic she flies off to another world, becomes another personality with ease. Kwan narrates

these multiple stories about herself to Olivia during bedtime. Olivia is compelled to listen even as she drifts off to sleep.

At one time she is Kwan, the happily settled Chinese-American lady of the 1960s. At one time she is 'Nunumu', the one-eyed Hakka girl of the 1860s. Nunumu removes the reader from the present to the past to a place called Thistle Mountain, just south of Changmian. This is a totally different space and time where women worked as hard as men:

We were Hakka, Guest People- hnh! -meaning, guests not invited to stay in any good place too long. So we lived in one of many Hakka round houses in a poor part of the mountains, where you must farm on cliff and stand like a goat and unearth two wheelbarrows of rocks before you can grow one handful of rice. (Tan 1995, 26-27)

Tan sets part of this story about Nunumu in *The Hundred Secret Senses* at the time of the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) during the Ching Dynasty, a turmoil which exacted 30 million lives and was one of the most important rebellions of the nineteenth century with its decisive break with many traditional ideas such as foot binding, Confucianism and its idea of selective adoption of Western technology and institutions (Michael, Franz. 1971)<sup>3</sup>.

Tan also borrows from the history of Hakka people and the Buddhist teaching of reincarnation. Hong Xiuquan and most of his followers were Hakkanese. The feuding between the Hakka ("guest people") and the Punti ("Local Cantonese") leads to the eruption of the Taiping Rebellion, which served to construct Hakka identity through history.

Another time, at the end of the novel, Kwan turns out to be somebody else. Her 'body' had drowned a long time ago when she was very young but her spirit had taken over the body of Buncake, Grand Auntie Du Lili's (or Du Yun) daughter. The childhood stories of Kwan (as Pancake) and Buncake take us to another world that describes the domestic life of China in sharp contrast to the eco-political story of Nunumu.

Olivia inherits all these mixed stories of Kwan. She struggles hard not to see the world the way Kwan sees it. Yet she could see the ghosts "chatting about the good old days" or "scratching [the] dog's neck." They looked so much alive. These ghosts became a part of their life as if Kwan's 'feelings' had escaped and entered her body. There was a particular time when Olivia felt an "emotional

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<sup>2</sup>Hakka people are migratory tribes of ethnic Han people who originated from Central china. Their ancestors exiled themselves from foreign rulers such as the Mongols in the Yuan Dynasty. They moved from Henan to the Guangdong and Fujian provinces in southern china around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, Hakka have often lived separately from the local population and in the past there have been conflicts, occasionally violent, between the Hakka and the local groups. Because they were latecomers to the area, Hakka set up homes in often undesirable mountainous regions and were subject to attack from bandits and marauders. Hakka women never practiced foot binding and were known for their physical strength, intelligence and hard labour. Distinctions between men and women were erased in their struggle to eke out a living from a land that nobody wanted and no vegetation wanted to grow.

<sup>3</sup>The leader, Hong Xiuquan, was influenced by the revivalist tradition of England and Scotland, the United States, Germany and Sweden. The Taiping rebellion was guided by a vision obtained in Hong Xiuquan's illness; in a state of delirious ecstasy, he revealed that he was the younger brother of Jesus, and son of God, mandated to eradicate the evils of Manchus and Confucianism. Much of this history is extracted by Tan, whose tale unfolds in a place called Thistle Mountain (Zing Shan), the Taiping stronghold in Guangxi. (FU, Internet History Sourcebooks)

symbiosis” with a little ghost who was sitting on Kwan's bed. She did not understand the incident at first but later on, during her visit to China, she links it with the story of Pancake and Bancake. This linking of different space and time foregrounds the mystical connection between Kwan and Olivia, crossing the borders of generation and culture. Kwan had commented at one time that Olivia and she “are connected by a cosmic Chinese umbilical cord that's given [them] the same inborn traits, personal motives, fate, and luck.”(Tan 1995, 19) Kwan acts like the fairy godmother in the Cinderella story to Olivia and she opens Olivia's mind to other possible worlds besides the world of her physical location. The end result is that Olivia rubs off some of the secret sense from Kwan which enables her to see life in different shades.

Ghosts cannot be merely a figment of Kwan's imagination. Neither are they 'created' for 'ethnic' identity alone. They are not a form of escapism too. Tan is actually depicting a belief system she grew up with. She recounts, like Kwan, incidents where voices of dead friends have given her advices about her career. There were times when she heard doors slamming, invisible people whistling the tones of 'jeopardy' and the TV turning itself on in the middle of the night to a favourite channel of her dead father.

Tan's use of ghosts is explained in different ways by different critics. According to Ken-fang Lee, ghosts in *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* represent translation of “cultural memory” and the exorcism of the “haunting past”. Ghosts act as the means of “exorcising” the past and establishing a cultural identity in the

present. Lee sees the necessity for Kwan to 'imagine the “I” and locate her “here” to constitute her own identity on new American soil.'(Lee2004,106)

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, ghosts turn out to be embodiments of multiple realities. They are a projection of one's fears or what one desires to feel and believe. For instance, during the séance conducted by Kwan, Simon believes in the appearance of the ghost of her dead girlfriend Elza. He nods and takes in whatever Kwan tells him about Elza requesting him to forget her and go on with his new life. Surprisingly, in spite of the knowledge that she had contrived this session with Elza's ghost, Olivia too sees the ghost but in a different way. She sees Elza pleading to Simon not to be forgotten:

“...her feelings were not what came out of Kwan's well-meaning mouth. She was pleading, crying, saying over and over again: 'Simon, don't forget me. Wait for me. I'm coming back.'”(Tan 1995, 96)

What is Tan's concern about this phenomenon where two people see the ghost of the same person in two different ways? Obviously she intends to prove that it is what one holds in one's heart that one sees. Olivia's fears and doubts projected themselves into feelings displayed by Elza's ghost. Hence she could see only what her heart willed her to see:

Yet over these last seventeen years, I've come to know that the heart has a will of its own, no matter what you wish, no matter how often you pull out the roots of your worst fears. Like ivy, they creep back, latching on to the chambers in your heart, leeching out the safety of your soul, then slithering through your veins and out your pores. (Tan 1995, 96)

The principal conflict in the relationship of Kwan and Olivia emerges out of different world views. They are constantly arguing

over concepts like “secret sense” which Kwan tries to explain but Olivia finds difficult to understand. While the knowledge of senses as explained by science is of the five senses, Kwan talks about a hundred secret senses. This is a literary technique of defamiliarizing the familiar traditional notion of the five senses so that many doors to other “senses” are opened. Thus Tan successfully alters the readers knowledge of senses and impels a more complex reading of senses. Defamiliarization of the five senses shows us that the world is not simply a physical place; man is not simply a physical body:

'What do you mean, secret sense?'

'Ah! I already tell you so many time! You don't listen? Secret sense not really secret. We just call secret because everyone has, only forgotten. Same kind of sense like ant feet, elephant trunk, dog nose, cat whisker, whale ear, bat wing, clam shell, snake tongue, little hair on flower. Many things, but mix up together.'

'You mean instinct.'

'Stink? Maybe sometimes stinky-'

'Not stink, instinct. It's kind of knowledge you're born with. Like...well, Bubba, the way he digs in the dirt.'

'Yes! Why you let dog do that! This is not sense, just nonsense, mess up you flower pot!'

'I was just making a – ah, forget it. What's a secret sense?'

'How can I say? Memory, seeing, hearing, feeling, all come out together, then you know something true in your heart.' (Tan 1995, 91)

Kwan belongs to the Eastern world where life is governed by extrasensory and supernatural elements while Olivia belongs to the Western world where 'cause' and 'effect' is the general law of life. Olivia has internalized a certain way of trying to make sense of events in life by seeing them as if they are linked in a chain,

one leading to the other. Her normal way of looking at things is from the standpoint of cause and effect. Scottish philosopher David Hume points out that this is only a 'useful' working method, not an 'absolute' truth. Western society has raised the cause and effect link to the status of a dominant general law, and in doing so has often excluded other points of view. Events such as chance or coincidence, which cannot be explained by a logical cause and effect sequence, are all too easily dismissed by many people as bizarre, strange or incomprehensible.

Eastern thinking does not fall into this pattern of thought. What the Western world cannot understand is dismissed or ignored, whereas, people from the East place them within their everyday lives with plausible explanations and give such 'weird' events a space of their own which is intricately linked to their daily activities. Precisely, Kwan's negotiations with American way of life are not totally without their share of insults and abuses. She is ridiculed by everyone especially her peers. Throughout her childhood in America, Kwan is treated either as 'unwanted' or a 'misfit'. She is the butt of ridicule of all her school-mates. They laugh at her English and call her a 'dumb Chink'. There is a particular incident where Kwan tries to understand the word 'retard' because that's what the neighbourhood kids call her. Olivia explains to her sister that 'retard' means “a stupid person who doesn't understand anything.... Like saying the wrong things at the wrong time” (Tan 1995, 39) and not knowing when one is laughed at. Kwan realizes that such negotiations cannot be carried out smoothly by simply trying to understand the literal

meanings of words like 'retard'. She recognizes that a higher sacrifice is needed to balance the two worlds.

Tan's loyalty to alternative realities is evident from Kwan's contemplation about the same word 'retard' in connection to Miss Banner, who she once thought was retarded. Miss Banner faced similar difficulties adapting to Chinese culture and language. It was Kwan who taught her. During their first meeting, "her speech was like a baby's!" (Tan 1995, 39) The motif of reincarnation is a vehicle that brings a perspective that is the reverse of the dominant perspective— that of how Chinese viewed the American imperialists. Kwan is the reincarnation of Nunumu or Miss Moo, Olivia is the reincarnated figure of Miss Banner, and Simon is the reborn mix-breed Johnson. On one side there is a different time frame and situation where Kwan is viewed as weird and strange and even 'retarded'. However, with a new narrative, the tables are turned. Like a shot into the past in a time machine, Tan presents another time frame and a different story where Miss Banner is viewed as 'retarded'. In both cases, the word 'retard' has been misused. In actuality, both Kwan and Miss Banner are equally sane. However, they are projected as retarded because of difficulties in communication. When one thinks in one language and speaks in another, meaning gets misplaced. Tan's wonderful insight into the complexities of being in-between two languages is revealed in the story about Miss Banner narrated by Kwan in two ways – the fantastic and the realistic. Both are very true and they illustrate two ways of telling a story.

Some of the crucial questions raised by Tan in *The Hundred Secret Senses* are - What is

normal and what is not? Who is weird or retarded and who is not? Are ghosts real or fantasy? Are we pushing our senses too far away to the edge that only reason can occupy the central space? Is the formula of cause and effect an absolute truth for understanding life? Which is more important, reasoning or feeling? Is it possible for two Chinese and American half-sisters to acquire wholeness? Is it true that one's perception of the world and how one function in it depends a great deal on the language one uses? Are circumstances a matter of fate? How can one find balance in life depending on what one believes?

There are many questions still asked by the world as to the realm of other realities beyond the physical. The word 'magic' is always 'suspect'. Is it contrived? Is it really happening? The profession of magicians and occultists hangs midair between incredibility and credulity. Psychologist Lawrence Leshan puts forward the theory that two kinds of reality- Sensory and Clairvoyant- exist. Both are "equally real", according to him, and these realities complement and shade into each other "like the colors of a spectrum". Leshan also suggests that it is also for gifted mystics and poets to move into the clairvoyant reality while most ordinary people who conduct their lives at the other end of the spectrum find it difficult to comprehend the other side of the spectrum (Holryod 1991). Tan, in this novel is creating an alternative reality or a third space out of the physical and spiritual, which is an in-between reality of the two extreme ones. This in-between reality gives a better comprehension of the mystery around a



modern world especially in a place like America where the 'Melting Pot' phenomena is clearly visible. In a society where people of different cultural backgrounds co-exist, sharing the same space and time, they carry within themselves disparate multiple realities propelled by different sociological and cultural imaginations.

The growing attention being paid to Eastern philosophies and writings are both an indication of dissatisfaction with the mechanistic laws of Western thinking, and a realization that there are other ways of looking at life. This is exactly what Olivia also recognizes at middle-age that perhaps Kwan is not 'wacky'; she only possesses a different perception from all of them:

Every once in a while, I wonder how things might have been between Kwan and me if she'd been more normal. Then again who's to say what's normal? Maybe in another country Kwan would be considered ordinary. Maybe in some parts of China, Hongkong or Taiwan she'd be revered. Maybe there's a place in the world where everyone has a sister with yin eyes."(Tan 1995, 17)

There are various incidents and events in life that seem to have a meaning when pieced together as jigsaw puzzles. But rational people discard them as chance or coincidence. Grown-up Olivia tries to logically explain away all these mysterious incidents as figments of her imagination because, as she grew older, she was slowly and consciously pushing away the boundaries of that reality which tried to defeat her feeling of "self-importance".

Tan's concerns can be explained through psychologist Carl Gustav Jung's study of "synchronicity" which describes incidents that seem to be connected by 'time' and 'meaning',

but not by 'cause' and 'effect'. The magical delves into what the reason discards as chance or coincidence; whatever is fantastic, marvelous or fabulous. With his tremendous knowledge, experience, and diligence to the task of discovering the meaning of synchronistic events, Jung worked towards the idea of physics and psychology coming together under a 'common concept that would be a unifying key to the forces at work in the physical and psychical worlds". According to Jung, the deepest structure of the human mind is the collective unconscious (Jung 1934). This is made up from archetypes, which are not derived from personal experiences but are inherited. They are 'distilled memories' that come from the common experience of mankind. For Jung, the separateness of the objective and subjective world is suspect. Is the world revealed by our normal senses the whole of reality?

In Newsweek, Laura Shapiro calls Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* "a novel wonderfully like a hologram" (Shapiro 1996, 91) which enables us to look at Kwan as a Chinese in America and Miss Nelly Banner as an American in china. If the hologram is turned one way, there is a conglomeration of all the principles of *Yin*- dark, passive, irrational, implicit, ghosts, traitor, etc. If it is turned the other way, the principles of yang and its representations are brought out clearly. The two sides are extreme opposites but they are also complementary.

If the Chinese believe that all events in the universe result from an interaction between yin and yang principles, Tan's vision is that 'Love' rises out of the interaction and assimilation of these two principles. She has created the character of Kwan to fulfill this

vision. Kwan herself is a hologram. She stands between the *yin* and *yang* principles. She is both dark and light. She is ordinary and at the same time imbued with extraordinary powers. She is the character whose imaginative quality is capable of multiple realities. She is powerful, not because she is *yin* or *yang*, but because she is both. Olivia is at first incapable of perceiving both *yin* and *yang* at the same time. The world is first *yang* for her “because I’m not Chinese like Kwan. To me *yin* isn’t *yang* and *yang* isn’t *yin*. I can’t accept two contradictory stories as the whole truth” (Tan 1995, 223) She cannot perceive that life is combination of so many realities; of good and bad; dark and light; *yin* and *yang*. That is why she is disturbed by questions, always in doubt.

The image of Kwan- “...one side of [her] head...bald like a melon, the other side hairy like a coconut” (Tan 1995, 14) with a *yin-yang* head, half of her hair torn out of her head by her “dead people” for betraying them is her initiation into another reality different from the one she had left behind. The electrical shocks she received as part of her treatment filled her body with negative and positive charges. Whenever she brushed her hair “whole strands would crackle and rise with angry static, popping like the filaments of light bulbs burning out.” (Tan 1995, 15) she couldn’t stand within three feet of a television set without its hissing back. She had to ground the radio by placing it against her thigh. She couldn’t wear any kind of watch. Although not technically trained, she could pinpoint in a second the source of a fault in a circuit. Besides, she could diagnose ailments. She acquires the character of a paradox- both loyal and traitor, both positive and negative.

Surprisingly, Kwan, the weird Chinese girl seems to possess some ready answers to what loyalty means:

It’s like this. If you ask someone to cut off his hand to save you from flying off with the roof, he immediately cuts off both his hands to show he is more than glad to do so. (Tan 1995, 12)

What is certainly evident from the beginning of this novel is Tan’s concern about love and values connected to this such as loyalty, “heartsickness”, promises, forgiveness and secrets. Kwan’s loyalty to Olivia impels her to fix Olivia’s broken marriage. She believes it is her duty to bring Simon and Olivia together because that would fulfill her promise in the earlier life. According to Eastern culture bonds of familial ties are very strong:

To Kwan, there are no boundaries among family. Everything is open for gruesome and exhaustive dissection- how much you spent on your vacation, what’s wrong with your complexion, the reason you look as doomed as a fish in a restaurant tank. (Tan 1995, 20)

Kwan, like Nunumu is self-effacing, selfless, loyal, patient, loving and possesses all the qualities that stood against Olivia’s self-importance. On the other hand, Olivia was selfish, a traitor to Kwan’s unconditional love and someone who in her relationship with others also wanted “more”. According to Kwan, the Western “sense of importance” (Tan 1995, 43) which Miss Banner possessed caused ‘trouble’ between Nunumu and herself. As a child, Olivia was always disturbed by the question of “love”. The announcement that Kwan was arriving to become a member of the family left her wondering how this would affect her mother’s love for her:

Although I was a lonely kid, I would have preferred a new turtle or even a doll, not someone who would

compete for my mother's already divided attention and force me to share the meager souvenirs of her love. In recalling this, I know that my mother loved me- but not absolutely. When I compared the amount of time she spent with others- even total strangers- I felt myself sliding further down the ranks of favorites, getting bumped and bruised. She always had plenty of room in her life for dates with men or lunch with her so- called gal pals. With me, she was unreliable. Promises to take me to the movies or the public pool were easily erased with excuses or forgetfulness, or worse, sneaky variations of what was said and what was meant. (Tan 1995, 7)

There was something in her- a void- that kept demanding for more love. Perhaps, the situation of being left fatherless, at a young age, besides the distracted attentions of her mother left her thirsting for love. Perhaps there is a void within every individual felt more powerfully in times of deep disappointment. Whatever the reasons, Olivia kept asking such questions like- "How is it that as a child I knew I should have been loved more? Is everyone born with a bottomless emotional reservoir?" (Tan 1995, 7) Even the cause of her divorce from Simon Bishop, her husband of 17 years is her thirst to fill that void:

After seventeen years together, when I finally realized I needed more in my life, Simon seemed to want less. Sure I loved him- too much. And he loved me, only not enough. I just want someone who thinks I'm number one in his life. I'm not willing to accept emotional scraps anymore. (Tan 1995, 22)

In the beginning of the story, when Olivia is still a kid, Kwan explains to her the meanings of love and loyalty. Love is deeper than distributing Valentine Day cards to each person in the class. Loyalty is staying true to one's family in hard times. Ironically, when Kwan confides in Olivia by revealing the secret that she has yin eyes, Olivia promises

not to disclose her secret. But the next morning, she reports to her mother. Even though Olivia had showed disloyalty, Kwan never asked her why she had been betrayed. Over the years, Kwan had gone out of her way to embrace Olivia as her little sister. Yet Olivia did nothing to acknowledge her love and loyalty. Instead she had "yelled at her, told her she embarrassed [her]" (Tan 1995, 20). Surprisingly, Kwan never took it to heart. She seems incapable of assuming that Olivia might not love her in the same way as she does. Even when Olivia lashes out at her she simply pats her arm, smiles and laughs and "the wound she bears heals itself instantly. Whereas [Olivia feels] guilty forever." (Tan 1995, 20) Basically Kwan's loyalty is stronger than Olivia. A glaring example of the dichotomy between Kwan and Olivia's feelings for each other is implicit in Kwan's birthday party home video that she urges Olivia to watch. Watching her own actions objectively as a spectator to a stage play is an eye opener for Olivia: "I see a close-up of myself....the camera is heartlessly objective....I look like a zombie." (Tan 1995, 122) Notwithstanding the fact that she had just had a fight with Simon before the birthday party, Olivia recognizes her selfishness in stark contrast to Kwan's selflessness in the family drama unfolding before her: "The video camera whirs. Kwan's face freezes into a grin, as if she's waiting for a flash to go off. She squeezes me tight, forcing me to be even closer to her, then murmurs in a voice full of wonder. 'Libby-ah, my sister, so special, so good to me.'" (Tan 1995, 123)

Kwan's love for Olivia is limitless, unconditional, larger than life which is a

reflection of her larger than life belief system. Running parallel to her loyalty as Nunumu for Miss Banner, she believes that Simon, Olivia's estranged husband, is the reincarnation of Johnson. Thus she takes upon herself the responsibility of bringing Olivia and Simon together. As Ken-Fang Lee remarks, "Kwan particularly feels responsible for Olivia and Simon's marriage, which, in her mind, is the fulfillment of the tragic love between Miss Banner and Johnson." Olivia is irritated by this idea. She doesn't want Kwan to interfere, her primary reason being that she is herself responsible for the divorce because she believes she had schemed her way into Simon's heart through manipulation:

No wonder she sees my impending divorce as a personal and professional failure on her part. She still believes she was our spiritual mei-po, our cosmic matchmaker. And I'm hardly in the position to tell her that she wasn't. I was the one who asked her to convince Simon we were destined to be together, linked by the necessity of fate." (Tan 1995, 58)

While Simon is at ease and undisturbed by the kind of questions and doubts that haunt Olivia, she reveals all the signs of dissatisfaction. She admits the positive aspects of their marriage but craves for more. Simon's love for her is interpreted as physical passion. For her, it was a marriage of "partners", not "soul mates". The failure to articulate what she wanted out of life, her relationships is a clear indication of her inability to look at the different dimensions of life. Especially for a sensitive person like Olivia, the pure physical, material dimension does not satisfy her sense of being. Ironically, her quest for something substantial seems to elude her, fuelling her frustration and reducing her to hysteria in all her confrontations with Simon:

I felt stuck in the bottom of a wishing well. I was desperate to shout what I wanted, but I didn't know what that was. I knew only what it wasn't. (Tan 1995, 114)

This inability to determine what she actually wants out of her marriage proves destructive because Simon could not apprehend her negative attitude towards him. Whatever he tries to do in order to appease Olivia does not satisfy her and her attacks get more vicious until she shouts out in desperation that she wants a divorce. Simon cannot be blamed for the disintegration of their marriage for the one reason that he fails to recognize what Olivia is searching for. The battle inside Olivia is greater than the battle between the two. The misunderstandings that threaten the couple are manifestations of Olivia's inability to articulate what is "better" or "important" for them. It is not sufficient to acknowledge that a couple should be "important" to each other or that they should have "dreams" together. It is necessary to know what kind of dreams to aspire for and how important they should be to each other. Frustratingly, Olivia is clueless. She has no answer to Simon's query of "What kind of dreams?" All that she acknowledges is, "I want to be important to you. I want you to be important to me.... I want us to have dreams together." (Tan 1995, 115)

Kwan is a soothing palm to Olivia's frayed nerves; the epitome of self-contentment. She is content with the leftover love that Olivia has to offer her. Yet, this magnanimous character wants only the best for Olivia and thinks only the best of her "favorite best sister". It is Kwan who tells Olivia that she had been dwelling too much on the material, calculative aspect of love; comparing herself to Elza;

weighing her qualities and merits against Elza's; trying to simulate her likes and dislikes to bring her side of the scale at par with her rival, while in her imagination, Simon stands as the omnipotent judge waiting to choose the better one. Kwan explains that there is a spiritual dimension to love: "think he love you less, she more- no!- why you think like this, always compare love? Love not like money..." (Tan 1995, 128)

After her break-up, in her state of loneliness, Kwan's wisdom finally gets absorbed. Kwan's interpretation of love is in sharp contrast to that of Olivia's who believes that it is "a trick on the brain, the adrenal glands releasing endorphins. It floods the cells that transmit worry and better sense, drowns them with biochemical bliss." (Tan 1995, 251-252) Olivia's interpretation is scientific; that of biological causes and effect; a limited perspective compared to the spiritual perspective of Kwan. Kwan's is deeper, more complex and certainly more fulfilling. However, Olivia begins to see 'love' the way Kwan sees it:

And then I think about Kwan, how misplaced her love for me is. I never go out of my way to do anything for her unless it's motivated by emotional coercion on her part and guilt on mine. I never call her out of the blue to say, 'Kwan, how about going to dinner or a movie, just the two of us?' I never take any pleasure in simply being nice to her. Yet there she is, always hinting about our going together to Disneyland or Reno or China. I bat away her suggestions as though they were annoying little flies, saying I hate gambling, or that Southern California is definitely not on my list of place to visit in the future. I ignore the fact that Kwan merely wants to spend more time with me, that I am her greatest joy. Oh God, does she hurt the way I do now? I'm no better than my mother! – careless about love. I can't believe how oblivious I've been to my own cruelty." (Tan 1995, 138-139)

This is the period of epiphany in Olivia's life. The divorce has done one good turn for it has given her enough diversion from Simon and her dissatisfactory marriage to focus on Kwan and her values concerning love, friendship and family. She realizes that her fears were a result of her own insecurities and not fear of becoming like Kwan: "What mortifies Olivia in truth is not Kwan, however, but the fear of yielding to her true, primary senses rule. Her love for Simon is tainted by the unquiet presence of the ghost of Elza, the young girl Simon had been in love with before he married Olivia. Because of her skepticism and intellectual dissection of facts, Olivia misinterprets reality, fails to see true love and, as a result, magnifies the ghost-like creatures that her imagination generates. She is too imbedded in her personal anxieties and suspicions to discover the truth in her life." (Lee 2004, 105) A trip back to their childhood and froth reveals how important she is to Kwan; that she is loved without any expectations; that she is Kwan's "greatest joy". Perhaps she is that important to Simon too. Maybe she is Simon's source of joy. Could it be that the doubts in her marriage are of her own making being "careless about love", making others doubt with her own insecurity, being haunted by ghosts of her own imagination?

Weight down emotionally and mentally with these questions, Olivia takes a trip to China with Kwan and Simon, where she finally finds resolution for her troubled heart. Kwan explains that the "hundred secret senses" is not a language of ghosts as Olivia construes but the "Language of love. Not just honey-sweetheart kind love. Any kind love, mother-baby, auntie-niece, friend-friend, sister-sister, stranger-stranger." (Tan 1995, 192) The concept of

reincarnation reinforces the love between people who meet as strangers and fall in love. If one believes that one's spouse is a loved one from one's previous life, then it gives one another chance to undo or fulfill one's regrets. This is what Olivia learns to imbibe:

'What am I afraid of? That I might believe the story is true- that I made a promise and kept it, that life repeats itself, that our hopes endure, that we get another chance? What's so terrible about that?'" (Tan 1995, 290).

If embracing Kwan's belief system could bring more fulfillment to her life, Olivia decides that she needn't fear anything. Holding Kwan's hand in the dark cave, where they believe that Simon had been lost, Olivia remembers, as in a dream, the final moments of her previous life as Miss Banner:

I shake my head, but then recall what I always thought was a dream: spears flashing by firelight, the grains of the stone wall. Once again, I can see it, feel it, the chest-tightening dread. I can hear the snorting of horses, their hooves stamping impatiently as a rough rope falls upon my shoulder blades, then scratches around my neck." (Tan 1995, 303)

The boundaries of time and space, the realistic and the mystical, the physical and the spiritual, collapse. Tan achieves the "truth of fiction" as Zhang calls it in order to enable Olivia to balance light with dark. She too, like Kwan, gains the confidence that she would be able to see what she believed in. She rushed to the place where the Ghost Merchant's House had been to establish the truth of her newfound confidence. Believing that she would be able to find the duck eggs, she dug at the place where Kwan had told her she had buried them. She found the eggs at last and hugged them against her chest as she felt all her worry dissipating from her.

Kwan has proven once again the validity of her previous lifetime. The music box that she digs out is concrete proof that she had been speaking the truth. Olivia is astounded and at first she tries to find other logical explanations to the "tarnished locket", the "bunched glove", the date of publication of the journal- "1855", but finally gives up. Olivia had maintained enough skepticism to use as an antidote to Kwan's stories but with all the facts established before her own eyes, she couldn't "dismiss something larger [she] knew about Kwan: that it isn't in her nature to lie." (Tan 1995, 288) Even as she is about to disappear into the caves forever, Kwan resolves Olivia's greatest fear about living behind the shadow of Elza. She reassures Olivia that the ghost of Elza that she saw during the mock séance was not through her use of the secret senses:

"Libby-ah! This not secret sense. This your own sense doubt. Sense worry. This nonsense! You see your own ghost self begins Simon, please hear me, see me, love me.... Elsie not saying that. Two lifetime ago, you her daughter. Why she want you have misery life? No she help you...." (Tan 1995, 309)

The language of love embodies peace and forgiveness. It should not evoke anger or jealousy. It is like a mother's unconditional love for daughter. Throwing all reason beyond the extreme, Kwan announces that in another lifetime Elza had been Olivia's mother. This announcement is a shocking surprise that is stretching Olivia's as well as any reader's imagination too far but Olivia is consoled:

I listen, stunned. Elza was my mother? Whether that was true or not, I feel lighthearted, giddy, a needless load of resentment removed, and with it a garbage pile of fears and doubts. (Tan 1995, 309)

In this novel, Tan is suggesting a new theory on love- intangible, mysterious- having its

connection, not with reason but with that which cannot be explained, merely felt. The universe is one big soul filled with love. This is an alternative explanation for the mystical side of life which shouldn't be ignored. Rather it should be studied deeply because, invisible, inexpressible though it may be, it plays a greater role in how things happen in our lives. Putting the principles of yin and yang, it is clearly perceived that Tan has created a work of art. Love comes out of the combination of yin and yang- both "happy and sad" (Tan 1995, 67) as Kwan says to Olivia. After Kwan and Olivia visit China, Olivia is able to come to a compromise between yin and yang. She is able to come to terms with the fact that there are certain questions in life that have no answers. She also comes to believe like Kwan that life is both 'sad' and 'happy': "Happy and sad sometimes come from the same thing, did you know this?" (Tan 1995, 67) Indeed life is a combination and assimilation of all possibilities. Unless one understands this, one will never understand life; one will always be trapped within that small world of seeking more and demanding more and never finding it. To come out of this trap is to use the hundred secret senses, which as Kwan explains is not really a secret, simply a faculty that man has lost because he had ceased to use it. It is a sense that is at harmony with the various elements of the universe: "Using the hundred secret senses is to use "mind and heart together", not just mind or just heart but both together: "Olivia feel[s] as if the membrane separating the two halves of [her] life has finally been shed."(Tan 1995, 205) She finally succeeds in finding the balance between the binary oppositions of the yin/yang of her own life and comes to understand that one "cannot just balance

checkbook" but "Must balance life too" (Tan 1995, 23) as Kwan advises her in the beginning of the story. The inadequacy of Olivia's empirical senses is supplemented by the Chinese wisdom of spirituality. Olivia at last confesses:

Now I'm looking at the heavens again. This is the same sky Simon is now seeing, that we have seen all our lives, together and apart. The same sky that Kwan sees, that all her ghosts saw, Miss Banner. Only now I no longer feel it is a vacuum for hopes or a backdrop for fears. I see what is so simple, so obvious. It holds up the stars, the planets, the moons, all of life, for eternity. I can always find it, it will always find me. It is continuous, light with dark, dark within light. It promises nothing but to be constant and mysterious, frightening and miraculous. (Tan 1995, 361-362)

In an interview Tan comments that one's philosophy of life determines how one deals with ideas, emotions and desires. She brings an illustration of one's "religious point of view". In a hugely crowded world marked by political, economic, religious, cultural and geographical boundaries, different people have different beliefs about "life and death, and karma and reincarnation, and damnation and salvation, or nothing. These beliefs affect how [they] act in the here and now." Tan grew up in a home of contradictions- her mother's Chinese sense of the inevitability of fate and her father's Christian faith. When she was younger she was tossed to and fro between these two belief systems, getting jarred at times in the process. Tan realized only later in life how important it is to establish one's own philosophy; to hold on to one's own tested belief system."It's extremely important in how you perceive the world and your place in the world and what happens in the world. Is it luck? Is it fate? Is it coincidence? Is there a

pattern to history? Do things repeat themselves? What in human nature is inherited versus self-determined? All of those things are so important in how you deal with your successes, your failures, with love, with loss.” (Hall of Arts 1996)

Olivia too is a confused woman who doesn't have a strong foothold on many issues concerning life. Kwan, at first, only adds to her confusion. But as Olivia matures, the larger than life stories of Kwan, her inexplicable hundred secret senses fit in comfortably like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that Olivia had been searching for throughout her life. Out of the scattered, random scraps of emotions, values and ideas, slowly emerges a belief system that is her own. Kwan simply provides the framework. It is up to Olivia to sort them out and fit them in place. This is Kwan's legacy to Olivia in the same way that this is also Tan's legacy to the readers. “I think it's nice to start off with the framework of what that philosophy might encompass. Nobody can tell you what it is. It's uniquely your own and you put things in the basket that you want: the questions you want, the things that are important, the values, the ideas, the emotions. It's a wonderful way to observe life, because so much of life is not simply getting from step to step, but it's the things you discover about yourself and others around you and your relationships.” (Hall of Arts 1996)

The “truth” is in one's heart; one's 'sense' about the world. One has to see the truth by and for oneself. Someone else cannot do it for

one. Thus Olivia has to sense for herself concepts like love, honour and courage in order to understand herself and the world as well as the people who mattered to her. She has to feel them in her heart not go searching for them in something external to herself. After all, the truth is in the heart.

I think Kwan intended to show me the world is not a place but the vastness of the soul. And the soul is nothing more than love, limitless, endless, all that moves us toward knowing what is true. I once thought love was supposed to be nothing but bliss. I now know it is also worry and grief, hope and trust. And believing in ghosts- that's believing that love never dies. If people we love die, then they are lost only to our ordinary senses. If we remember, we can find them anytime with our hundred secret senses. (Tan 1995, 320-321)

This limitlessness of love is Kwan's legacy handed down to Olivia. Olivia now believes that love never dies. The love between Miss Banner and Yiban continues to live in the love between her and Simon. Kwan is gone but with her hundred secret senses she can find Kwan in her daughter. The baby that she delivers nine months after Kwan's disappearance is a strong suggestion of Kwan reincarnated as Olivia's daughter. Someone that Olivia had regarded as her mother, someone she had learnt to love is no more but she continues to live. Kwan is lost only to her ordinary senses. Her hundred secret senses tell her that she continues to live in her daughter and that she has been granted another chance to love Kwan the way she had loved her: “I lift my baby into my arms. And we dance, joy spilling from sorrow.” (Tan 1995, 321)



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