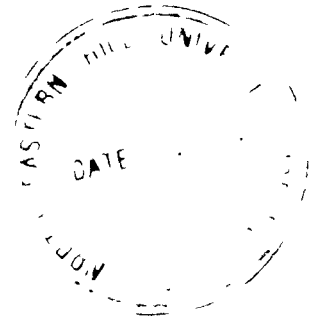


**SPEAKING THROUGH ANCESTORS:  
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN  
AMY TAN'S NOVELS**

**Abstract**

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Thesis

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Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California on February 19, 1952. She grew up in Fresno, Oakland, Berkeley, and the suburbs of the San Francisco Bay Area. Her father was educated in Beijing and immigrated to America in 1947 and became a Baptist minister, and her mother, forced to leave behind three children from a previous marriage, immigrated to the U.S. in 1949 shortly after the communists took control of China. Her father and older brother died from brain tumours when she was fourteen, and soon after this tragedy, Amy, her mother, and her younger brother moved to Europe, where Amy graduated from high school in Montreux, Switzerland in 1969. She received a bachelor's degree with a double major in English and Linguistics, as well as an MA in linguistics. After graduating from college, she worked as a language development consultant to programmes serving disabled children and as a freelance business writer for big-name corporations.

In 1985, Tan wrote the story "Rules of the Game" for a writing workshop, and the story was incorporated into *The Joy Luck Club* as part of Waverly Jong's story. *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) was her first work of fiction, and it was in the *New York Times* bestseller list for longer than any other book in that year. It was a finalist for the National Reviewers Award for fiction and the Commonwealth Club Gold Award, and it won the L.A. Times Book Award in 1989. Her other novels, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1996), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) have also appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. She has also written essays and two children's books, *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994) and *The Moon Lady* (1992).

### **Introduction: Mothers and Daughters in Literature**

Scholars and the general public alike have questioned the overwhelming success of Tan's novels and have attributed her overnight phenomenon to her ability to

appeal to both the general public who read her for sheer pleasure, and the scholarly group who find in her work the suggestion of a matrilineal discourse. In addition to this matrilineal discourse, another attraction that endows charm to her novels is her talent of weaving in the colourful 'tapestry' of ancient Chinese wisdom and beliefs which have been largely influenced by the two main Chinese religions, Confucianism and Taoism.

Tan's novels deal with an ethnic group living in situations of diasporic dispersal- Chinese in America. The primary theme of most ethnic and post-colonial writers is dwelling on the struggle of ethnic groups to end longstanding practices of racist mistreatment from local ethnic majorities in America. Tan avoids dwelling on this theme and distances herself from delineating multi-relationships. Instead she weaves her entire narrative on mother-daughter relationships (except *Saving Fish from Drowning*). She takes serious note of the conflicts and obstructions, the misconceptions and misunderstandings in mother-daughter relationships confronting Chinese mothers who settle in America, try to pick up a new language and raise their daughters in a society entirely different from what they had been brought up in. Simultaneously, she brings into relief the predicament of the daughter who grows up struggling between two cultures. Tan uses incidents and facts from her own life, her parents' lives and her grandparents' lives and interweaves them into her stories. Her books are a form of expression, telling about personal relationships among her characters, reminiscent of her own.

In the literature of mothers and daughters, the mother has always been portrayed as the "other woman" in relation to the "other child". It is only in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries that women writers have taken up the challenge of representing the "other woman" as "mother" and the "other child" as "daughter". In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, we find a mother who "attempts to speak for herself even while she knows that her story is unspeakable."<sup>1</sup> Here, the "other woman" is given a voice

and a plot of her own. In Tan's novels, the woman emerges as both mother and ancestor fused together and the child as both mother and daughter. She writes the story of mother-daughter relations from the perspective of the woman ancestor who was brought up under the traditional culture of China and Confucius' teaching, as well as from the American daughter's perspective. The ancestor's tale is one of untold hardship and bereavement; all the painful constrictions suffered under a strong patriarchy and pervading superstitions. However powerless the woman as ancestor has been, Tan portrays the woman as mother to be the bearer of strength and courage who defies all the restrictions of society to assume the role of a torch bearer for her daughter. She becomes a force so great that she enters her daughter's bones and mind. The daughter, like the mother, is powerful too. However she does not know the power she wields until her mother makes her aware of it. Tan's novels begin with the daughter's mixed feelings about existing in America with a Chinese mother. When the questions become too many and the relationship reaches breaking point, the mother is compelled to break her silence. Her stories from the other side of the world are revealed which unravel all the misunderstandings and misconceptions between the mother and the daughter. Tan's instrument of bridging the gap between the mother and daughter is the ancestor.

### **Chapter I: Chinese Mothers and American Daughters**

The first chapter looks into the ambivalent relationship between Chinese mothers and American daughters in Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. This novel portrays four Chinese-American mothers and their four daughters and their struggle for identity and understanding. The mothers are Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-ying St. Claire and their daughters are Jing-mei "June" Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong and Lena St. Claire. The journey is a long and tiring one, moving backward in time to the childhood of the mothers and daughters and forward to their

present lives. These shifts in time from past to present and present to past as well as the double-conscious narratives of mothers and daughters necessarily brings out a common theme, the universal mother-daughter bond in two different cultures. The mothers and daughters have to negotiate the differences in culture and identity to accept and understand each other.

Tan says that the problematic mother-daughter bond is present in all cultures but they occur in different ways in different cultures. The dominant impression is that in Chinese culture the bond can never be broken. The focus of intensity in *The Joy Luck Club* is a delineation of the various issues that jeopardize the mother-daughter relationships through her personal experiences. As Tan comments in her interview with Mickey Pearlman, *The Joy Luck Club* is not a sociological message about cultures but a recreation of her own childhood memories and experiences and an attempt to understand why the notion of never being independent from her own mother had terrified her to such an extent that she went to extremes to sever the bond, the same way her daughter-characters try to loosen the connection.<sup>2</sup>

Talking about mother-daughter relationships in general and that of Chinese-Americans in particular, Tan refers to “the metaphor of the umbilical cord... which gets stretched over time; whether it is the mother or daughter who severs it or tries to pull it tighter, which is both individual and cultural. In a Chinese family the mother pulls very tightly on the [chord] to a point where [the daughter asks], ‘Why can’t I know about such and such?’ and the [mother answers], ‘Because I haven’t put it in your mind yet.’ The notion that your mother puts everything in your mind – the blank slate theory – is part of Chinese culture.”<sup>3</sup> Presumably, her belief in this notion has impelled her to dedicate *The Joy Luck Club* to her mother and the memory of her mother’s mother: “You asked me once what I would remember. This, and much more”. (JLC, p. 9)

American mothers are more willing to give certain freedoms to their daughters so that they can learn independence and responsibility to the extent that the daughter herself becomes an independent being when she becomes a mother. The question of possession does not come in here. But for the Chinese mothers, the daughters are extensions of their mothers. The mothers may wish for a better life for their daughters but not at the cost of severing the umbilical cord. Had the daughters been born and brought up in China like the mothers, they would not go against this rule. But being born and brought up in America, their concept about mothers' control over daughters is quite different.

*The Joy Luck Club* is one such novel where the mother is included not as a mere presence but as a powerful ancestor who asserts her selfhood to give identity to her daughter. The mother is capable of breaking free of the hold of tradition by telling new stories. The way the stories of Tan's mothers encompass the daughters' stories reveal how strong and powerful the mothers are. Tan has endowed more power and strength to the mothers in form and content. She has bestowed greater weight on the impact of past generations on the present, in which the eight stories of the daughters are enveloped by those of the mothers', implies that the older generation may still hold a key to resolving the problems of the young.

Uprooted from their own culture and country the mothers have only one thing left to hand over to their daughters in order to hold on to their roots; a connecting trait – a power that defies fate; achieves 'joy' and triumphs against all odds. For the Chinese this power lives within the hearts of the mothers. The daughters should really know the mothers in every sense of the word to instill that power in their own hearts and hand it down to their daughters.

In all the sixteen stories of mothers and daughters, there is a cry from the mothers, ringing loudly and firmly, and that is the cry to be "found". At the end of the

novel, June holds her long-lost Chinese half-sisters in an embrace, symbolizing a “resurrection and vindication of their dead mother”. Bonnie Braedlin calls this a rewriting of earlier feminist concepts of daughters constantly at war with their mothers. Tan is inscribing a mother-daughter relationship within an ‘Eastern philosophy of “both/and” to a Western predicament of either (daughter)/or (mother)’<sup>4</sup> and attempting to show that mothers and daughters need not always be engaged in a tug-of-war. There is a plane where, in spite of all the factors that contribute to the conflict in the mother-daughter relationship, the two generations can stand side by side and look towards the future.

## **Chapter II: Woman as Ancestor**

Amy tan’s second novel, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, is an ambitious venture into recreating myth in order to salvage a woman’s worth. Tan has revised the myth of ‘The Kitchen God’ both to inscribe the suffering and pain of Winnie, the Chinese ancestress, and to look at the wife as ‘subject’ rather than ‘object’. In the actual myth, the Kitchen God was once a simpleton who thought that he was justified in selling his wife to another man when he could no longer sustain his living. In Tan’s revised myth, the Kitchen God was a man whose infidelity is justified because he is a man. In both the versions, our impression of the wife’s value is miniscule. However, she tries to save the husband- the former from poverty and the latter from being burnt alive. Both wives’ attempts fail and the husbands die. In the traditional version, the husband is rewarded for his ‘goodness’ and ‘honesty’ and in Tan’s version, he is made into a deity for his ‘courage’ in admitting his faults. In both versions, the wife’s story is absent. She is not given the space to narrate what she went through either as a sold-off wife or as a betrayed wife. This is how the woman is viewed in the myth. Like *The Joy Luck Club*,

*The Kitchen God's Wife* is also a novel where Tan explores the mother-daughter relationship based on this myth of the 'Kitchen God'.

The narrative belongs to two characters- the mother, Winnie, and the daughter, Pearl, both talking alternately in the first person. Winnie is a Chinese immigrant who had lived a greater part of her life in China. Now, she lived in Chinatown, San Francisco. Pearl, the daughter, lived in San Jose, a hundred miles away from her mother with her Caucasian husband Phil Brandt, a doctor, and their two daughters Cleo and Tessa. She worked as a speech and language clinician with the local school district.

*The Kitchen God's Wife* is a bold attempt to show the mother's role in retrieving the initial position- from devalued woman to a powerful and venerated deity as in the myths of ancient literature. It seems hard to imagine but there has been a time in ancient history and literature when women were considered important enough to be bestowed the title of goddesses or "cultic celebrant" and "daughters were valued as much as sons." Accounts of unusually close mother-daughter relationships appear in some of the earliest literature of the Ancient Near East. At times, the divine mother-child relationship predominates, and where the child is female, the nature of the bond between mother and daughter is pictured as incomparably intense.<sup>5</sup>

Later on, polytheistic belief was superseded by monotheistic belief. The "patriarchal" society was replaced by the Bible which preached worship of one God and men were ascribed a special and closer relation to God than women. Women were identified closely with their normal bodily functions and sexuality rather than to their spiritual powers:

However, within the parameters of the moral and spiritual universe of monotheism, while women are shown as recipients of divine judgement and grace, they also are often described, in comparison to men, as less capable of moral judgement and more tied to the material than the moral or spiritual aspects of existence. At times, female sexuality symbolizes the community's idolatry or is shown as endangering the pursuit of

righteousness by men.... This ambivalence toward women is carried over into views of their importance as mothers.<sup>6</sup>

In subsequent literature, the Greeks repressed the “awe for the mother-goddess” and forcefully turned the once powerful goddesses “into molds.” Professors Ida H. Washington and Carol E. W. Tobol suggest that the myth of rape and seduction of goddesses (such as Persephone, Leda, or Europa) was one of the “principal ways the Greek invaders dealt with their predecessors’ goddesses, thereby bringing about their ‘death’ as protecting, powerful deities.”<sup>7</sup> Since then women have been oppressed and suppressed by a patriarchal world. Bonds between mothers and their daughters have been severed to a certain extent. Women are made orphans like Winnie. They are abandoned by their mothers. They no longer grow under the protection and guidance of their wiser, older ancestors.

Tan draws us closer to the predicament of the devalued Chinese woman through Winnie, who was married off at a young age to the evil and vicious Wen Fu, and had to endure the loss of her children and her husband’s abuse and infidelities during the upheaval of the Japanese invasion. Nothing prepared her for the monster that her husband would turn out to be but her Chinese society had conditioned her to face the sexual exploitation and humiliation that her husband resorted to every night. She had been taught by her mother-in-law to be dutiful to a terrible husband: “So this is what my mother-in-law taught me: To protect my husband so he would protect me. To fear him and think this was respect. To make him a proper hot soup, which was ready to serve only when I had scalded my little finger testing it,” (KGW, p. 207).

In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Winnie Louie replaces the Kitchen God with the goddess Lady Sorrowfree because the Kitchen God is determined by her to be an unfit god for her daughter’s altar, as well as the altar of her heart. The Kitchen God is unfit because he became a god despite his mistreatment of his good wife. Looking at him

smiling down at Winnie's unhappiness reminded her of Wen Fu. She "took his picture out of the frame" and threw it over the stove. She watched the fire eating up his smug, smiling face and in her mind she could hear the Kitchen God's Wife shouting, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" A porcelain figure is taken from a storeroom where she has been placed as a "mistake" and is made into a goddess for Pearl, Lady Sorrowfree. Now Winnie can celebrate Lady Sorrowfree:

I heard she once had many hardships in her life.... But her smile is genuine, wise, and innocent at the same time. And her hand, see how she just raised it? That means she is just about to speak, or maybe she is telling you to speak. She is ready to listen. She understands English. You could tell her everything.... But sometimes, when you are afraid, you can talk to her. She will listen. She will wash away everything sad with her tears. She will use her stick to chase away everything bad. See her name: Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world. (KGW, p. 532)

She will be like Lady Sorrowfree, teaching her daughter to achieve happiness over bitterness, having no regrets. The mother's history must be told but not repeated. "This gift of lady Sorrowfree is symbolic of their bonding; this goddess has all the characteristics of the nurturing, caring, listening mother. Her imperfections lie in her creation; experiences make her. She has none of the characteristics of the Kitchen God."<sup>8</sup>

### **Chapter III: Ancestor's Ghosts**

Tan offers us an apparent re-working of the theme of mother-daughter bond by shifting her attention slightly and choosing the theme of sister-hood in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, her third novel. However, we are captured by the same conflict between the Chinese ancestor and the young Chinese-American daughter. Kwan's voice and presence is that of the ancestral mother.

Olivia Bishop, a commercial photographer, is the novel's primary narrator representing the Chinese-American daughter and Kwan, twelve years her senior, is her

half-sister. Kwan is the product of her father's first marriage in China and she represents the Chinese ancestor. Jack Yee, Olivia's father, was a Chinese who had immigrated to America. Olivia's mother, Louise Kenfield was born in Moscow but moved to San Francisco and got married. Olivia, her mother and her two brothers were shocked to learn at her father's death-bed that they had a half-sister that 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!' (HSS, p. 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. Coincidentally, it is a ghost (that of her mother) who initiates her 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." (HSS, p.3)

Kwan is the most eccentric among Tan's characters. She also assumes the role of multiple characters. 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 takes us away from the present to the past to a place called Thistle Mountain, just south of Changmian.

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.

Kwan of the present is a down- to- earth, ordinary 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. She keeps appearing and disappearing and the disturbing fact is that this magical atmosphere prevails in all her three worlds.

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 "cultural memory" and 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.'<sup>9</sup> In *Senses*, ghosts turn out to be more than representations of "identity". They are a projection of what one feels and believes.

From the interviews Tan has given on different occasions to different interviewers, we don't see her talking about magical realism *per se* but that is a technique she has applied in the portrayal of Kwan and in depicting spirits- the *yin* people- in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. She has circumscribed the interplay of human emotions within two worlds by invoking "spirits" and "ghosts".

According to Magdalena Delicka, magical realism is "a mode which crosses the borders between two different forms of reasoning. The very term 'magical realism' already suggests a binary opposition between two separate discourses: the realistic and the magical."<sup>10</sup> The premise of 'magical realism' is defamiliarization- to make the familiar unfamiliar and vice-versa; to create different ways of looking at the world.

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

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? Which is more important, reasoning or feeling? Is it possible for a Chinese ancestress and an American daughter 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?

In *Newsweek*, Laura Shapiro calls Tan’s *Hundred secret senses* “a novel wonderfully like a hologram”<sup>11</sup> 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 who has witnessed two realities, that of the Western rational reality and that of the Eastern magical reality. 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” (HSS, p.223) She cannot perceive that life is a paradox, both *yin* and *yang*. That is why she is always disturbed by questions, always in doubt.

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* in a hologram titled “Love”, it is clearly perceived that Tan has created a work of art. After all, it is love that endures; that makes the world go round. This hologram of love encompasses what she believes. Love comes out of the combination of *yin* and *yang*- both “happy and sad” (HSS, p. 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?” (HSS, p. 67) In short, life is a paradox. 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 sense is to use “mind and heart together”, not just mind or just heart but both together. It is when she has imbibed these senses or ‘vibes’ according to her American

language that she enters the world of paradox: “Olivia feel[s] as if the membrane separating the two halves of [her] life has finally been shed.”(HSS, p. 205) She finally succeeds in finding the balance between the binary oppositions of the *yin/yang* hologram of her own life and comes to understand that one “cannot just balance checkbook” but “Must balance life too” (HSS, p. 23) as Kwan advises her in the beginning of the story

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 realize 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. (HSS, p. 320-321)

#### **Chapter IV: Ancestor’s Voice**

In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Amy Tan re-writes the story of mother-daughter relations from the perspective of the mother through the written word. In the preceding books, stories are passed down from ancestor to daughter through oral story-telling. But in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the power of the written word is closely linked to salvaging memory. Luling Young, the representative ancestor is capable of retaining her memory anymore due to Alzheimer. Day by day, the words on the pages of her memory are erased. The written words act as the saviour. Thankfully, she had

descended from a family of ink-makers, learning calligraphy from early childhood and was taught to write by a voiceless mother.



In an interview with Dylan Foley, Tan remarks that she was inspired to write *The Bonesetter's Daughter* because she was “all tied up in a mix of emotions” where “the whole idea of existence- the loss of one’s memory” especially that of her ancestor was so disturbing. Whatever memory she had of her grandmother was the memory of her mother’s memory of her own mother. Her grandmother existed in a “memory of a memory”. Thus, writing *The Bonesetter's Daughter* was a form of “ancestor worship”. Ancestor worship, according to Tan, was an important part of Chinese culture, not in the sense that they were made into deities, but that they continued to live in the hearts of people as long as they were remembered. For the Chinese it is very important to remember one’s ancestors, to do rituals. For Tan, writing about her ancestors was her way of performing ritual.<sup>12</sup>

Tan looks beyond the traditional worship of male ancestors and takes a bold leap by worshipping the female ancestor- from daughter to mother to grandmother. Traditionally, an ancestress could intercede on behalf of women desiring children only and more importance was attached to male ancestors. The portraits or photographs of the female ancestors were generally ‘stuck in trunks or forgotten.’(BSD, p.5) In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan restores the Goddess of mercy from her tertiary role among the Chinese gods and places her in an important position where her compassionate power and understanding strength can be bestowed upon all the women who look up to her for mercy: “...the Goddess of Mercy, her face smooth, free of worry. Her black eyes looked into mine. Only she listened to the woes and wishes of women.” (BSD, p. 4)

By looking afresh at the concept of ancestress worship, Tan is re-visioning the myths and beliefs that we take to be basic. At the beginning of the story there is a

persistent nudging from the voiceless mother to the daughter to 'never' forget her own mother's name. Sadly, the daughter does not take her mother's plea to heart and she forgets her 'family name'. The importance of claiming back that name comes to her only when her mother is on the verge of losing her memory. She recognizes the importance of her mother's story; how it will act as the antidote to all her fears and misconceptions about life; how remembering her mother's name will make sense of her own life.

Ruth's role in the novel is to lend voice to her ancestors through three generations "to speak for her mother, translating for her mother, translating for other people."<sup>13</sup> Just as Precious Auntie, Ruth's grandmother in the novel, was unable to say who she really was, Tan's mother kept her past away from her own daughter, unable to tell her even her real name. Precious Auntie's voicelessness was her mother's voicelessness too. Silence and voice constitute a dominant motif in the novel. Precious Auntie speaks through sign language: "She 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.... Hand-talk, face-talk, and chalk-talk were the languages I grew up with, soundless and strong." (BSD, p. 2) Ruth's mother, who is a Chinese immigrant, finds her acquisition of English very limited. People don't understand her very often or they simply ignored her because of her 'fractured' English. Most of the time Ruth has to act as her mother's interpreter: "By the time she was ten, Ruth was the English speaking "Mrs LuLing Young" on the telephone, the one who made appointments for the doctor, the one who wrote to the bank." (BSD, p. 50)

Ruth's muteness is a metaphor of the passive role she has assumed in her relationship with her mother; the silence that emerges out of their everyday battles; the loss of LuLing's memory; Ruth's inability to translate her mother's story from Chinese

to English. In the first three novels, Tan's ancestors tell their stories orally. They follow the traditional Chinese narration. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* breaks through the barrier of traditional oral storytelling and gives voice to the characters through the written word. Precious Auntie communicates through writing on a chalkboard. In spite of her inability to talk, she still had a chalkboard-voice. In times of excruciatingly painful silences between her and her mother, Ruth expresses herself in a diary, venting her anger, scribbling words that she would not dare speak out loudly. LuLing finds herself getting disoriented and confused with the onset of Alzheimer and she pens down her secrets in a manuscript for her daughter. This is suggestive of the empowerment of Tan's characters. They are rescued from eternal silences through the written word, which is another powerful form of 'voice' for all of Tan's characters in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Through the process of storytelling, memory assumes utmost importance, since without the power of remembering the past, the characters are incapable of telling their stories, revealing their secrets. Added to this 'remembering' comes the written word which remains even after the narrator is long gone and memory has left the owner of the stories.

For Tan, knowing her mother was the link to finding herself in the world, understanding her own self, discovering what was in her bones and finding a balance in the world. When loss of memory threatens the loss of this story, she had to muster her will to change that fate through the written word. Thus, for Tan, ancestor-worship, recording memories and telling stories, voicing one's secrets are all part of the healing process. Such acts answer the questions that had been haunting her from her childhood; questions about the binary oppositions of memory/loss, silence/voice, faith/fate and mother/daughter:

I look at the photograph of my grandmother. Together we write stories of things that were and shouldn't have been, or could have been, or might still be. We know the past can be changed. We can choose what

we should believe. We can choose what we should remember. That is what frees us, this choice, frees us to hope that we can redeem these same memories for the little girl who became my mother.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion: Mother and Daughter Claiming a Shared Future**

In the 1960s there was a need for Chinese Americans to emphasize on their ethnic origins in order to establish their ethnic identity and promote political solidarity and cultural nationalism. Their main concern was to establish their own identity and a peaceful co-existence. Life, especially for the first generation Chinese Americans was replete with risks and suspense. As Tan has portrayed in her characters, the mothers are depressed women who live in fear of the past. Their high-strung temperaments get on the nerves of the daughters. The daughters reciprocate with anger. Thus the two generations of women find themselves alienated from each other. Consequently, as an attempt to resolve such issues, Chinese American writers were keen on political and cultural solidarity; oneness with the mainstream Americans. They strongly believed, at this point, that establishing an ethnic identity for themselves would enable them to achieve this oneness. In the 1980s, writings by Chinese Americans turned to claiming America as opposed to seeking ethnic identity. Like the daughters in Tan's novels, the younger generation try their best to reject their mothers' views and avoid listening to their stories. The desire to be recognized as American was, as King-Kok Cheung says in his review of *Asian American Literary Studies*, achieved at the expense of losing their own identity: "The obsessive desire to claim America has induced a certain cultural amnesia regarding the country of ancestral origins." (p. 6)

A development that tries to find a middle path between the search for identity and the opposition of one's ethnic culture can be found in the writings of Amy Tan who believes in claiming one's ancestral origin without totally rejecting the culture of one's adopted country in order to establish order and understanding in one's life. Tan herself

has commented in an interview with Jay Macdonald that writing is a search for a philosophical middle ground between ‘faith’ and ‘fate’ – to find out what works for her- ‘faith’ or ‘fate’. In the process, she has deconstructed and reconstructed myths to circumscribe both the dominant culture and the receding culture. By creating an in-between myth she can locate her in-between existence in America as a Chinese American. In *The Joy Luck Club*, all four vignettes are myths that clearly explain the strained relationship of the mothers and daughters. *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is based on the myth of the ‘Kitchen God’ which is replaced by ‘Lady Sorrowfree’. In *The Hundred Secret Senses* too she builds a myth upon Kwans ‘Secret senses’ which is in stark contrast to the physical senses. Finally, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* reverberates around the myth of the ‘silent woman’ who finally finds her most powerful weapon in the written word. The new Chinese American mythology is a powerful tool for the Chinese American daughter to negotiate her ancestor’s culture with her own and thereby find a common platform where they can stand together and look towards the future. Tan also envisions a new theory on love which is devoid of expectations but is self-effacing and committed to loyalty. Transference of this kind of love ensures that ambivalences in the mother-daughter relationships are erased.

#### END NOTES

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**SPEAKING THROUGH ANCESTORS:  
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN  
AMY TAN'S NOVELS**

**LANURENLA**

**Submitted in fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY  
SHILLONG-793022**

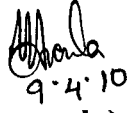
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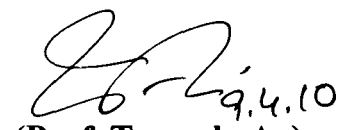
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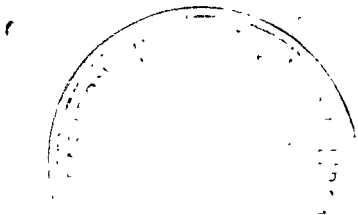
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the 9<sup>th</sup> April, 2010.

**LANURENLA**

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Honest, moving, and beautifully courageous. Amy Tan shows us China, Chinese-American women and their families, and the mystery of the mother-daughter bond in ways that we have not experienced before. (A tribute to Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* by Alice Walker)

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California on February 19, 1952.

She grew up in Fresno, Oakland, Berkeley, and the suburbs of the San Francisco Bay Area. Her father was educated in Beijing and immigrated to America in 1947 and became a Baptist minister, and her mother, forced to leave behind three children from a previous marriage, immigrated to the U.S. in 1949 shortly after the communists took control of China. Her father and older brother died from brain tumours when she was fourteen, and soon after this tragedy, Amy, her mother, and her younger brother moved to Europe, where Amy graduated from high school in Montreux, Switzerland, in 1969.

From 1969 to 1976, Tan attended five colleges: Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon, where she met her husband, Lou DeMattei; San Jose College, San Jose State University, from which she received a bachelor's degree with a double major in English and Linguistics, as well as an MA in linguistics; UC Santa Cruz; and UC Berkeley. After graduating from college, she worked as a language development

consultant to programmes serving disabled children and as a freelance business writer for big-name corporations.

In 1985, Tan wrote the story “Rules of the Game” for a writing workshop, and the story was incorporated into *The Joy Luck Club* as part of Waverly Jong’s story. *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) was her first work of fiction, and it was in the *New York Times* bestseller list for longer than any other book in that year. It was a finalist for the National Review’s Award for fiction and the Commonwealth Club Gold Award, and it won the L.A. Times Book Award in 1989. Her other books, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1996), *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001), and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) have also appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. She has also written essays compiled in *The Opposite of Fate* (2003) and two children’s books, *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *The Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994).

She was a co-producer and co-screenwriter of the film version of *The Joy Luck Club*, and her essays and stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. Her work has been translated into more than twenty five different languages. Her books are assigned reading in many high schools and colleges. *The Joy Luck Club* was selected for the literature portion of the 1992-93 Academic Decathlon, a national scholastic competition for high school students.

Scholars and the general public alike have marvelled at the overwhelming success of Tan's novels and have attributed her overnight phenomenon to her ability to appeal to both the general public who read her for sheer pleasure, and the scholarly group who find in her work the suggestion of a matrilineal discourse: "One of the most obvious reasons for the success of [Tan's novels] is the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in these books. This subject matter places them squarely in a tradition of matrilineal discourse that has, as a part of the feminist movement, been gathering momentum in the United States over the last ten to fifteen years."<sup>1</sup> All first four of Tan's books encapsulate what has been identified as characteristic of the "literature of matrilineage" in Nan Bauer Maglin's schema<sup>2</sup>:

1. the recognition by the daughter that her voice is not entirely her own;
2. the importance of trying to really see one's mother in spite of or beyond the blindness and skewed vision that growing up together causes;
3. the amazement and humility about the strength of our mothers;
4. the need to recite one's matrilineage, to find a ritual to get back there and preserve it;
5. and still, the anger and despair about the pain and the silence borne and handed on from mother to daughter.

In addition to this matrilineal discourse, another attraction that endows charm to her novels is her talent of weaving in the 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.

In addition to being a writer, Tan is a member of a "vintage garage" rock 'n roll band called the Rock Bottom Remainers. Other members include Stephen King, Robert Fulghum, Dave Barry, Ridley Pearson and Matt Groening. A video of their performance in Anaheim was produced by BMD Records. The band co-wrote their adventures in a book entitled *Mid-Life Confidential: The Rock Bottom Remainers Tour America with Three Chords and an Attitude*.

Tan's novels deal with an ethnic group living in situations of diasporic dispersal- Chinese in America. The primary theme of most early ethnic and post-colonial writers is the struggle of ethnic groups to

end longstanding practices of racist mistreatment from local ethnic majorities in America. Tan avoids dwelling on this theme and distances herself from delineating multi-relationships. Instead, she weaves her entire narrative on mother-daughter relationships (except *Saving Fish from Drowning*, for which reason this novel is not included as part of the thesis). She takes serious note of the conflicts and obstructions, the misconceptions and misunderstandings in mother-daughter relationships confronting Chinese mothers who settle in America, try to pick up a new language and raise their daughters in a society entirely different from what they had been brought up in. Simultaneously, she brings into relief the predicament of the daughter who grows up struggling between two cultures.

Tan uses incidents and facts from her own life, her parents' and grandparents' lives and interweaves them into her stories. Her novels are a form of expression, telling about personal relationships among her characters, reminiscent of her own. For example, June's mother leaving her twin daughters behind when the Japanese attacked Kweilin in *The Joy Luck Club* as did Tan's mother when the Communists took over. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Pearl's father who was a minister died of stomach cancer when Pearl was fourteen, not very unlike Tan's situation. Some of the events in Winnie's life in China are based on Tan's mother's marriage to a "bad man", the death of her children, and her encounter with Tan's

father: "...it is as close to the truth as I can imagine. It is my mother's story in the most important of ways to me: her passion, her will, her hope, the innocence she never really lost."<sup>3</sup>

Whenever Tan is asked the reason why she writes, she always responds that she does so in order to understand how 'things happen'.<sup>4</sup> Writing, for her, is an act of faith where memory and imagination blend together to give her a balanced view of life. 'Memory' represents the stories of herself, her mother and her mother's mother. Fortunately for her and unfortunately for her mother and grandmother, both the latter had lived through very unhappy experiences in their lives. Tan's grandmother had witnessed her own mother commit suicide. Her mother, Daisy, suffered from bouts of depression and hysteria, frequently threatening to kill herself. Consequently, her memories are an unnatural and confusing mixture of death, sadness, anxiety, loss and pain.

In her memory of herself and her mother Tan remembers their sessions with an Ouija board after the death of her brother and father. Her mother wanted her to communicate with the deceased and Tan recalls the chilling experience when "A flower would snap from its stem as if in answer to an important question. A sound would be heard in the distance- first by my mother, then by me- seemingly the voice of a crying mother. And once the board rose in the air several inches, my fingers still attached to it, then crashed to the floor. That is what I remember, although logic

tells me it was the result of either hysteria or peanut butter stuck to my fingertips.”<sup>5</sup>

Imagination, on the other hand, represents that magical window in her mind which feels and sees the stories of other people. “Much of imagination”, according to Tan, “is empathy and compassion”.<sup>6</sup> When one has compassion, one can “imagine fully another person’s life”. When memory and imagination come together like the symphony of an orchestra, magical things happen and Tan no longer has to ask why things happen but simply turn around and change fate, the way she has done through her writing.

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 tumours, 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*.<sup>7</sup>

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 novel 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 are resolved in this novel. 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.

The autobiographical elements are more dominant in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Tan has herself asserted that this fourth novel is a "mirror of her own life". The woman on the cover of the novel (2001) is a photograph of her grandmother taken when she was 17 years old in 1905. Tan's mother had been scarred around the face from a childhood accident like Precious Auntie in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Ruth's mother suffered from Alzheimer's as did Tan's mother.

There was, in her own words, "a certain quality of speechlessness" in all the women of her family. Her grandmother was unable to speak about her despair until she killed herself. She was born in China and when her husband died, she was taken into another family, raped and forced to become a concubine. She committed suicide after the baby that resulted was born. Tan's own mother suffered from speechlessness

manifested in a different manner. She wasn't able to tell the terrible stories from her abusive first marriage until much later. She had gone through an abusive first marriage in China.

Tan herself lost her speech after the trauma that she went through when one of her best friends and roommate was murdered in a brutal way. She had to go through the process of identifying the body and cleaning up the apartment. This happened around her birthday and as a result, she suffered from a week's speechlessness around this time for ten years. This is similar to Ruth's speechlessness in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. According to Tan, this speechlessness is not peculiar to her family alone: "There is a certain quality of speechlessness that all women have, even very modern women today in a country such as the United States, women who feel that they have lost their voice."<sup>8</sup>

Though Tan's books contain elements of her past and deal with Chinese-American mothers and daughters, any mother or daughter reading her can relate to the relationship she discusses. There is the universal problem of communicating properly with one's mother or daughter. There exists a gap whereby the daughter thinks that the mother is too old-fashioned, strict, nosy and paranoid at times, while the mother thinks that her daughter is headstrong, disrespectful and short-sighted. Tan recalls her own relationship with her mother in her book of musings: "The most hateful words I have ever said to another human being were to

my mother. I was sixteen at the time. They rose from the storm in my chest and I let them fall in a fury of hailstones: "I hate you. I wish I were dead....""<sup>9</sup>

Men play secondary roles in all her novels. Even when she does not talk about mothers and daughters as in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, women are the primary characters. When asked if she saw general differences between male and female writers, Tan answered with the analogy of a movie camera: "Men pan the whole scene and describe a wide panorama; their world is always larger, but the sense of intimacy is not there. In my fiction and that of many women, the focus starts close-up, then the world pans out."<sup>10</sup> Tan also states that "when men are close-in, their observations are cerebral, almost opinions-- in men, the mind is connected to the brain. In women the mind is connected to the heart, which influences the way they think."<sup>11</sup> Being a woman herself, possessing the attributes she has described above, it is only natural that she reflects on female characters. She has also confessed in many interviews that she wanted to write about those things closest to her heart; her life. She was not representing anything or trying to bring out any issues through her works. She wanted to write about her mother and her grandmother and bring back those memories as a process of soul-searching.

This is true of many African American and Chinese American women writers. Maxine Hong Kingston generated this literary fervour among Asian American women writers with her bestselling novel, *The Woman Warrior*. While many questions about culture, identity, gender, oriental fantasy arise in such writings, the most important issue that challenges the reader is that of the female expression about herself and her memories. Susan Koppelman also observes that most women writers frame their narrative around the relationship between a mother and a daughter: “Women of every race, ethnicity...write stories about mothers and daughters, and the similarities among the stories are greater than the differences because what we share as women, at least in terms of this primary relationship, is more than whatever else divides us.”<sup>12</sup> While talking about the role of men and women in Asian American writing, Elaine H. Kim opines that the placement of men in secondary roles is “in keeping with the modern feminist call for the examination of female self and subjectivity.”<sup>13</sup> In the conventional plot structure male characters are central and women function as objects or obstacles. The opposite occurs in the writings of these women. Jung Chang, popularly known for her novel, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, also chronicles the lives of her mother and her maternal grandmother. In an interview with Simon and Shuster, she points out that Chinese women are capable of extraordinary spirit, strength and endurance, not because they are Chinese

but because they have been subjected to long-term injustice and subjugation:

There are good and bad women in any culture and race. Neither weakness nor strength is unique to any nation. It is just that in China, centuries of horrible injustice against women have forced them to be extra strong. They have to be to survive. There have been books about the strength of Chinese women, but mainly I want to show the world how they FIGHT, for their family, for their children, for a better society, as well as for themselves. I want my readers to see how women in China never stop trying to take their lives into their own hands.<sup>14</sup>

In the critical literature of mothers and daughters, the mother has always been portrayed as the “other” woman in relation to the “other” daughter. Even when there were stories of mothers and daughters, as far back as the beginning of history, critical literature has been occupied with patriarchy. It is only in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries that women writers have taken up the challenge of representing the “other” woman as “mother” and the “other” daughter as “daughter”. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, we find a mother who “attempts to speak for herself even while she knows that her story is unspeakable.”<sup>15</sup> Here, the “other” woman is given a voice and a plot of her own. In Tan’s novels, the woman emerges as both mother and ancestor fused together and the daughter as both mother and daughter. She writes the story of mother-daughter relations from the perspective of the woman ancestor who was brought up under the traditional culture of China and Confucius’ teaching, as well as from the American daughter’s perspective. The

ancestor's tale is one of untold hardship and turmoil suffered under a society that was harshly patriarchal and strongly superstitious. However powerless the woman as ancestor has been, Tan portrays the woman as mother to be the bearer of strength and courage who defies all the restrictions of society to assume the role of a torch bearer for her daughter. She becomes a force so great that she enters her daughter's bones and mind. The daughter, like the mother, is powerful too. However she does not know the power she wields until her mother makes her aware of it. Tan's novels begin with the daughter's mixed feelings about existing in America with a Chinese mother. When the tensions developing between mother and daughter reaches breaking point, the mother is compelled to break her silence. Her stories from the other side of the world unravel all the misunderstandings and misconceptions between the mother and the daughter. Tan employs the ancestor figure to bridge the gap between the mother and daughter.

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the motif of "the murdered child, a daughter, returning from the other side to question the mother."<sup>16</sup> The mother is allowed to tell her tale, "to attempt to explain her incomprehensible act."<sup>17</sup> Tan's ancestor too reveals her secret to occasion the narrative. The ancestor's story makes it possible for the daughter to understand her own mother. Unknown to both mother and daughter, this untold story was the cause of their ambivalent relationship. What had

remained so long a secret opens the door to a new level of understanding which had been denied them and which had been threatening their relationship. Now the daughter can understand why her mother was always so critical of her husband, her friends, and herself.

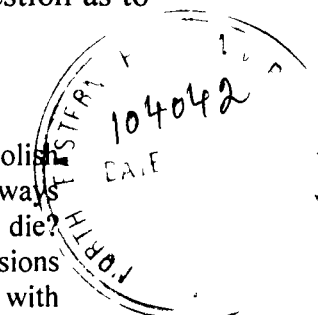
Tan re-writes the story of mother-daughter relationships from the perspective of both mothers and daughters. In each of her novels, the daughter speaks first, revealing the ambivalent relationship which threatens to suffocate the daughter. However, when the mother starts to speak, all sympathy is with her. Her unspeakable past, so full of secrets and lies, are explained. The daughter finally understands why her mother had acted in an overbearing way and the daughter's final words at the end of the story exhibits an understanding that stretches across continents and generations of women. The ancestor breaks the silence which had been antagonising both generations, and finally mother and daughter reconcile with each other in memory, speech and the written word.

Tan is ever conscious of the fact that readers may interpret her work as being representational but she believes that a reader should not interpret everything in a book as necessarily serving as a model or being representational of a particular culture. In an interview she says that whatever mention she has made about culture or immigrant experience is just 'part of the tapestry'. It was never her intention to be considered as an Asian American writer who writes about Asian Americans. If ever, she

has to be categorised, she would want to be called an American writer: “If I had to give myself any sort of label, I would have to say I am an American writer. I am Chinese by racial heritage.... but I believe that what I write is American fiction by virtue of the fact that I live in this country and my emotional sensibilities, assumptions and obsessions are largely American...I think Chinese Americans are part of America.”<sup>18</sup> Her reason for writing is subjective: “I want to write about how I’ve evolved as a person through the history of my family”. She says that she does not write difficult or complicated books because she has no intention of digging a “hole” and filling it with “symbols”. The crucial question as to why she writes is answered this way:

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.”<sup>19</sup>

She 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.”<sup>20</sup> 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...”<sup>21</sup> The formation of her characters is that of an “American” multi-cultural identity within the framework of mother-daughter relations.

This thesis traces the mother-daughter relationship of Tan’s Chinese American characters in adherence to Nan Bauer Maglin’s schema. The novels included in the purview of this thesis is *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, hereafter cited as *JLC*, *KGW*, *HSS*, and *BSD* respectively following quotations from any one of these novels. *The Joy Luck Club* echoes “the importance of trying to really see one’s mother in

spite of or beyond the blindness and skewed vision that growing up together causes". When the American daughter, June, who had always had apprehensions about her mother's past, is finally united with her long lost Chinese sisters in China and then she is able to accept her mother: "Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish."<sup>22</sup> *The Kitchen God's Wife* reverberates with "the anger and despair about the pain and the silence borne and handed on from mother to daughter." Tan invokes the power of the sympathetic goddess "Lady Sorrowfree" to mitigate the pain and despair of Winnie, the Chinese mother, so that her American daughter may not despair or remain silent anymore. Likewise, *The Hundred Secret Senses* is Tan's way of showing the daughter, Olivia that her Chinese ancestor, 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. *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, which in Tan's own words is her most "personal" novel because of the autobiographical elements, emphasises, yet again, on "the need to recite one's matrilineage; to find a ritual to get back there and preserve it." The daughter's (Ruth) ritual for tracing her roots and preserving it is *writing*.

This thesis studies how the Chinese ancestor acts as the catalyst, the intrusive element in an otherwise traditionally realistic mode of narration and portraying reality; how the ancestor subverts the empirical

and rational world of the daughter and in the end the daughter achieves solace in a space between the fantastic and the real, the spiritual and the physical, the senses and reason, *yin* and *yang*. This new or in-between space that the ancestor creates for the daughter straightens the distorted vision that the daughter had towards her mother. By creating this space the ancestor enables the daughter to understand her Chinese American identity and establishes a stronger bond between mother and daughter through mutual negotiation that takes place between the mother's Chinese heritage and the daughter's American experience.

#### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wong, Sau-Ling Cynthia. " 'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," in *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, edited by David Palumbo-Liu, University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 174-210.

<sup>2</sup> Maglin, Nan Bauer. " 'Don't Never Forget the Bridge You Crossed Over on': The Literature of Matrilineage" p.258 in Eds., Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner, in Introduction to *The Lost Tradition, Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York. 1980, p.258.

<sup>3</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*, Harper Perennial, 2003, p.211.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.Bookreporter.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*, Harper Perennial, 2004, p.11.

<sup>8</sup> Foley, Dylan, Interview, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*, Harper Perennial, 2003, p.218.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Mickey Pearlman, p.19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Koppelman, Susan. Intro to *Between Mothers and Daughters: Stories across a Generation*. The Feminist Press, The City University of New York, 1985, p.xv.

<sup>13</sup> Kim, Elaine H. "Such Opposite Creatures": Men and Women in Asian American Literature, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol.xxix, no.1, Winter 1990, p.70.

<sup>14</sup> Jung, Chang. In an interview published as a release in *News from Simon & Schuster*, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Hirsh, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1989, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>18</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*. Harper Perennial, 2003, p.310.

<sup>19</sup> Tan, Amy, "Why I Write" in *Literary Cavalcade*. New York: Mar 1991. Vol.51. Iss. 6; p.10.

<sup>20</sup> Edwards, Jami. Interview, *Bookreporter.com*, 1996-2005.

<sup>21</sup> Wagner, Tamara S. "A Barrage of Ethnic Comparisons": Occidental Stereotypes in Amy Tan's Novels. *Critique*. Washington, Summer 2004, Vol.45, Iss.4; p.435, 11 pgs. [Http://proquest.Umi.com](http://proquest.Umi.com).

<sup>22</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, September 1991, p.288.

## Chapter II

### CHINESE MOTHERS AND AMERICAN DAUGHTERS: *The Joy Luck Club (1989)*

*The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai for a foolish sum. This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose, and now look! – it is too beautiful to eat.*

*Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of Li wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: “In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband’s belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan – a creature that became more than what was hoped for.”*

*But when she arrived in the new country, the immigration officials pulled her swan away from her, leaving the woman fluttering her arms and with only one swan feather for a memory. And then she had to fill out so many forms she forgot why she had come and what she had left behind.*

*Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, “This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.” And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English.*

(Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, p.17)

Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* portrays four Chinese-American mothers and their four daughters and their struggle for identity and understanding. The mothers are Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-ying St. Claire and their daughters are Jing-mei “June” Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong and Lena St. Claire. The journey is a historical one, moving backward in time to the childhood of the mothers

and daughters and forward to their present lives. These shifts in time from past to present and present to past as well as the multiple narratives of mothers and daughters brings out a common theme, the universal mother-daughter bond in two different cultures. The mothers and daughters have to negotiate the differences in culture and identity to accept or understand each other.

Tan's own experience of being caught between two countries and two cultures has enabled her to capture the familiar conflict between mothers and daughters in an unfamiliar context- that of Chinese immigrants in America in a powerful and authentic narrative: "Her insights into the complexities of being a hyphenated American, connected by blood and bonds to another culture and country"<sup>1</sup> has provided Tan the material to produce a book that raises issues on the ambivalent relationship between the mothers, who are all first generation immigrants from mainland China, speaking very little English and remaining cultural aliens in their adopted country, and the daughters who are all born and educated in America, some even married to 'foreigners'.<sup>2</sup>

Carole Angier has accused Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* of being 'over-schematic' and 'over-significant' which is bound to give the reader 'indigestion' because when one has finished the novel, it leaves one with a feeling "as if you've eaten too many Chinese fortune cookies, or read too many American Mother's Day cards...."<sup>3</sup> Angier also talks about

imbalances in the stories allotted to the different mothers and daughters and finally makes the insinuation that Tan has exhausted herself in her first novel by heaping in too much.

However, the important thing to be noted here is that this so-called 'over-doing' is neither authorial 'manipulation' nor a lack of discretion but a very natural experience shared by an author, who herself walks the 'tight-rope' between two opposing (East versus West) cultures. Walter Shear, while analyzing the mother-daughter relationship in his essay, posits the argument by saying that Amy Tan, by using the intermingling perspectives of both mothers and daughters has solved the problem of what critics describe as a basic problem for a Chinese-American woman: "being simultaneously insider (a person who identifies strongly with her cultural group) and outsider (deviant and rebel against that tradition), she cannot figure out from which perspective to speak."<sup>4</sup>

The novel is organized into four sections. 'Feathers From a Thousand *LI* Away', the first section, consists of four stories. Along with the first story, which is the central link throughout the novel, the last three stories also focus on the lives of mothers as daughters. Childhood memories are narrated by the mothers giving us a picture as to what it meant to be a woman in mainland China. Their stories embody loss and struggle, courage and survival.

An-Mei-Hsu watches her own mother, a concubine, commit suicide. Her mother was once a respectable woman married to a scholar. One year after her husband's death, she went to Hangchow to visit the "Six Harmonies Pagoda". Her husband had been devoted to the six virtues of Buddhism enshrined in this pagoda. So she had gone to observe the rituals of "right harmony of body, thoughts and speech, to refrain from giving opinions, and to shun wealth" (*JLC*, p.236). This day turned out to be the beginning of her miserable life. As she sat on the boat in her white widow's dress, she was noticed by Wu Tsing, a rich merchant and his "Second Wife". Wu Tsing already had three wives. But none of them had borne him a son. He was in search of another wife who could bear him one. According to Chinese belief, only a son could perform the ancestral rite and ensure spiritual eternity for the father. Thus, An-Mei's mother was lured by the second wife to her home, where she was raped by Wu Tsing. The next morning, the second wife complained to the neighbours that a shameless widow had "enchanted" her husband into bed. A Chinese widow was worthless in many aspects in her society. So she could not accuse the rich woman of lying. When Wu Tsing asked her to be his third concubine, "to bear him a son", she had no other choice. She was banned from her own family forever. Three years later, she gave birth to a son who was claimed by the second wife as her own.

An-Mei Hsu realized why her mother was unhappy in spite of the wealth that surrounded her. Wu Tsing was not the man she loved. Her own son had been forcefully taken away from her. She spoke about her unhappiness to her daughter, “Do you see how shameful my life is? ... Do you see how I have no position? .... You can see now, a fourth wife is no less than a fifth wife, *yi tai*, the wife of a scholar. Your mother was not always Fourth Wife, *Sz Tai!*” (*JLC*, p. 229) Consumed by this misery she committed suicide because, in the China of her times, “suicide [was] the only way a woman [could] escape a marriage and gain revenge, to come back as a ghost....” (*JLC*, p. 234)

Lindo Jong, another mother in the novel, runs away from a suffocating marriage and immigrates to the U.S. under the pretext of being a theology student. The village match-maker came to her house when she was just two years old and said, “An earth horse for an earth sheep. This is the best marriage combination.” (*JLC*, p. 50) That was how she became betrothed to Huang Taitai’s son who was even younger than she was. She had no choice. She saw her future husband for the first time when she was eight or nine. Her life took a complete turn when she was twelve. There was a flood in the village. Lindo’s family was reduced to utter poverty. The entire family left the village leaving her behind with the Huangs, her husband’s family. Her life with the Huangs was far from happy. She was constantly badgered in different ways by her mother-in-

law because she remained childless. The truth was that her husband had no desire for her. By inventing some lies and putting the blame for her barrenness on a pregnant servant girl she escaped from the family and fled to America, but not before she had faced her own losses and disappointments. Memories of her own mother came to her mind as she recapitulated the sad moments in her past: “I was so much like my mother.... She did not see how my face changed over the years. How my mouth began to droop. How I began to worry but still did not lose my hair.” (*JLC*, p. 257)

Suyuan Woo, the third mother, escapes the Japanese invasion of Kweilin with two babies on her back. She sewed on money and jewelry into the lining of her dress so that she could “barter rides” on the road. But the trucks did not stop because of fear. The road was filled with people fleeing from the invasion. Suyuan Woo’s shoulders ached as the load of the two babies took their toll on her. Blisters grew on her palms and began to bleed from holding two leather suitcases. As she went on she began dropping the suitcases, the bags of wheat flour and rice, and kept on walking. Dysentery caught up with her. She was “delirious with pain and fever”. With no more strength to go on she abandoned the babies on the side of the road with jewelry and money stuffed under their shirts. Then she took out her family photo, wrote the names of the babies along with her address, and placing it near them she left: “And without looking

back, she walked down the road, stumbling and crying, thinking only of this one last hope that her daughters would be found by a kindhearted person who would care for them. She would not allow herself to imagine anything else.” (*JLC*, p. 283)

She walked aimlessly in her delirious state and she could not remember when she fainted, or how she was found. She was rescued by some American Missionaries. This was where she met her second husband. Suyuan Woo never lost hope of finding her babies. She and her husband searched in China for many years with no results. Even after they immigrated to America, she kept writing to friends and relatives in Shanghai and Kweilin. After many years, a schoolmate in Shanghai gave her notice that she had located the two sisters. Suyuan died before she could embrace her babies abandoned long time ago but her unvanquished spirit of hope and courage finally culminated in her three daughters coming together:

My sisters and I stand, arms around each other, laughing and wiping the tears from each other’s eyes.... The gray-green surface changes to the bright colours of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at once. And although we don’t speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish. (*JLC*, p. 288)

Ying-Ying St. Clair, the fourth mother, is abandoned by a rich husband, goes to live with poor relatives for ten years, then meets a white American visiting China and settles with him in California. Right from childhood she was “wild and stubborn”. She remembers how her mother

used to scold her because of her unruly ways: “I often unraveled my hair and wore it loose. My mother would look at my wild tangles and scold me: “Aii-ya, Ying-Ying, you are like the lady ghosts at the bottom of the lake.” She belonged to a very rich family. She had nothing to worry about because she was the daughter of “her father’s wife” unlike her other sisters who were the daughters of their father’s “concubines”. Even then she was destined to go through a course similar to the other three mothers.

Ying-Ying met a man who would pull away all her childhood happiness. Soon after they were married her husband’s business trips became more frequent and longer. Later she learnt that he had left her for an opera singer. Filled with hatred she aborted the baby that she was carrying: “I became abandoned goods....at eighteen the prettiness drained from my cheeks.... I thought of throwing myself in the lake like the other ladies of shame. ...the baby I killed because I came to hate this man so much.” (*JLC*, p. 248)

She left her mother-in-law’s house and lived in the country outside of Shanghai with a cousin’s family for ten years, doing “nothing”. After languishing for so many years she decided to become a shop girl. During this time she met Clifford St. Claire, “a large, pale American” (*JLC*, p. 250). Even though Ying-Ying did not go through an experience as painful as Suyuan Woo’s, she believed that she had lost her “Tiger” spirit. By the

time she married again, she was no longer the spirited *lihai* (“wild and stubborn”):

I let myself become a wounded animal. I let the hunter come to me and turn me into a tiger ghost. I willingly gave up my *chi*. The spirit that caused so much pain. Now I was a tiger that neither pounced nor lay waiting between the trees. I became an unseen spirit.” (*JLC*, p. 251)

In all these stories the mothers revoke their past from a ‘Thousand *LI* Away’, the period in their lives when their personalities were molded, giving the readers a better sense of their “true” selves. In the beginning the daughters view their mothers in a different light. They are ignorant about their true nature. Finally, when the mothers recall their childhoods, the daughters come to understand why their mothers often act or react in strange ways.

All four sections open with a “fabricated” myth as Catherine Romagnolo calls them. The opening myth of ‘Feathers from a Thousand *LI* Away’ foregrounds the ideological implications of a search for beginnings. The metaphor of duck turning into goose implies an idealized dream that the mother carried to America-“This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose, and now look! - it is too beautiful to eat” (*JLC*, p.17). Her dream was to give birth to a daughter- an extension of herself-who would be free from the war-torn patriarchal society she was leaving behind; a society where a woman’s “worth is measured by the loudness of her husband’s

belch” (*JLC*, p.17). Her daughter would suffer none of the ravages of war; would be treated as equal with men; would speak perfect American English; would never know what sorrow was.

Throughout her life in China she had experienced Chinese objectivity towards women and she wished for the ideal American subjectivity for her daughter. Looking back at her past life in China, she remembered how women were treated as objects without voices of their own. Whereas, in America, women as she believed were treated as independent individuals who could pursue their own dreams and make choices in life. However, when she reached America, the immigration officers muddled up her identity to such an extent that she “forgot why she had come and what she had left behind” (*JLC*, p.17). Thus she is stripped of her past, her idealized hopes for her daughter in the United States, and excluded from an ‘American national identity’ as the beginning narrative suggests and the mother is still waiting “for the day she could tell her daughter this [her origins and a mother’s good intentions] in perfect American English” (*JLC*, p.17).<sup>5</sup> The fact that the mother never achieves her aim of telling her daughter her dreams in perfect American English implies her inability to merge into “an American” identity. Added to her loss of origins, she is incapable of transferring her dreams to her daughter who is almost drowning in the

other culture “speaking only English and swallowing more coca-cola than sorrow” (*JLC*, p.17).

Charlotte Painter construes the following observation from the myth of the first section:

Perhaps in no other immigrant culture is [the universal mother-daughter] bond more strongly felt than in the Chinese, where it becomes double-knotted with the unrealistic expectations of what the “gold mountain” country might offer a new generation. The mothers in these stories expect more of their daughters than they can ever realize, their ambitions for them are lavish beyond all hope, the judgement they bring to bear extreme and punishing to both themselves and their children. The consequence is almost always an alienation filled with an estranged, anguished love.<sup>1</sup>

But why is Tan anxious to search for origins and beginnings? Perhaps the answer lies in the single swan feather the mother saved for her daughter – the memory of salvaged **hope, honour, love, courage and strength** - which could be transferred to the daughter, to fight her own modern problems. The mother can transfer these values only by instilling the wisdom of the past on her daughter. To fulfill this she has to undergo the pain of remembering. Each mother, therefore, takes recourse to the harrowing process of remembering and story-telling: “Through the sharing of personal experiences, a reconciliation between mothers and daughters is reached. The daughters realize that their mothers have always had their best intentions at heart.”<sup>2</sup>

*“Do not ride your bicycle around the corner,” the mother had told the daughter when she was seven.*

*“Why not!” protested the girl.*

*"Because then I cannot see you and you will fall down and cry and I will not hear you."*

*"How do you know I will fall?" whined the girl.*

*"It is in a book, The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates, all the bad things that can happen to you outside the protection of this house."*

*"I don't believe you. Let me see the book."*

*"It is written in Chinese. You cannot understand it. That is why you must listen to me."*

*"What are they then?" the girl demanded. "Tell me the twenty-six bad things."*

*But the mother sat knitting in silence.*

*"What twenty-six!" shouted the girl.*

*The mother still did not answer her.*

*"You can't tell me because you don't know! You don't know anything!" And the girl ran outside, jumped on her bicycle, and in her hurry to get away, she fell before she even reached the corner. (JLC, p.87)*

The second section, "The Twenty Six Malignant Gates" (a Chinese book spelling out the various hazards-26 of them- awaiting hapless infants), is more or less about the daughters' childhood, and the four vignettes trace the growth and development of their personalities as they wrestle with their mothers' conflicting beliefs that daughters should grow up with the same discipline and obedience that they grew up with back in China. In this section Tan explores the difficulties of growing up as a Chinese-American. The daughters rebel against their mothers who desire to merge American circumstances with Chinese values. The mother warns her daughter by quoting from an old Chinese book: "Do not ride your bicycle around the corner." The daughter replies, "You can't tell me because you don't know! You don't know anything!" (JLC, p. 87) The

daughters want to be Americans and not Chinese daughters, and thus try to reject their heritage. We witness a precarious situation where the daughters are standing at the “midpoint of a see-saw. If they inch in one direction, they are traditional Chinese; if they inch in the other, they are Americans. Theirs is an ongoing quest for balance between the past and the future.”<sup>8</sup> The problem emphasized here is the lack of communication and understanding between mothers and daughters. Thus mother-daughter conflicts run throughout this section.

*“Wah!” cried the mother upon seeing the mirrored armoire in the master suite of her daughter’s new condominium. “You can’t put mirrors at the foot of the bed. All your marriage happiness will bounce back and turn the opposite way.”*

*“Well, that’s the only place it fits, so that’s where it stays,” said the daughter, irritated that her mother saw bad omens in everything. She had heard these warnings all her life.*

*The mother frowned, reaching into her twice used Macy’s bag. “Hunh, lucky I can fix it for you, then.” And she pulled out the gilt-edged mirror she had bought at the Price Club last week. It was her housewarming present. She leaned it against the headboard, on top of the two pillows.*

*“You hang it here,” said the mother pointing to the wall above. “This mirror sees that mirror – haule! – multiply your peach-blossom luck.”*

*“What is peach-blossom luck?”*

*The mother smiled mischief in her eyes. “It is in here,” she said, pointing to the mirror. “Look inside. Tell me, am I not right? In this mirror is my future grandchild, already sitting on my lap next spring.”*

*And the daughter looked – and haule! There it was: her own reflection looking back at her. (JLC, p. 147)*

The third section gives an account of the daughters’ adult lives. It is ironically named “American Translation” because when the mothers

give advice regarding their daughters' problems, "You cannot put mirrors at the foot of the bed. All your marriage happiness will bounce back and turn the opposite way" the daughters either take the advice to mean something other than what the mothers had intended, or they simply ignore it. They reply with irritation, "Well that's the only place it fits so that's where it stays."(*JLC*, p. 147) At the end of each vignette in this section, the daughters, finally heeding their mothers' advice and exhortations, realize that their mothers had been right about everything all along. Rose Hsu Jordan comes to this realization and says, "Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing." (*JLC*, p. 191) There is the general tendency to assume that the western beliefs and broad attitude is the best but Tan is telling us that such beliefs and attitudes have their demerits and loopholes as well.

*"O! Hwai dungsyi" – You bad little thing – said the woman teasing her baby granddaughter. "Is Buddha teaching you to laugh for no reason?" As the baby continued to gurgle, the woman felt a deep wish stirring in her heart.*

*"Even if I could live forever," she said to the baby, "I still don't know which way I would teach you. I was once so free and innocent. I too laughed for no reason.*

*“But later I threw away my foolish innocence to protect myself. And then I taught my daughter, your mother, to shed her innocence so she would not be hurt as well.*

*“Hwai dungsyi, was this kind of thinking wrong? If I now recognize evil in other people, is it not because I have become evil too? If I see someone has a suspicious nose, have I not smelled the same bad things?”*

*The baby laughed, listening to her grandmother’s laments.*

*“O!O! You say you are laughing because you have already lived forever, over and over again? You say you are Syi Wang Mu, Queen Mother of the Western Skies, now come back to give me the answer! Good, good, I am listening....*

*“Thank you, Little Queen. Then you must teach my daughter this same lesson. How to lose your innocence but not your hope. How to laugh forever.” (JLC, p.213)*

The fourth and final section concludes the novel with the mothers’ stories of their lives in America. The title, “Queen Mother of the Western Skies”, signifies that the maternal ancestors are the Queen Mothers of the Westernized daughters, and that they are the mystical wise ones whom their daughters should have heeded. Here, the mothers conclude their stories and the daughters finally realize the pain, heartaches, and happiness of their forbears and that they should have revered their mothers from the beginning as the traditional Chinese would have revered the Queen Mother. As the myth in the beginning of the section suggests, the mothers watch as their daughters grow, feeling the desire to protect them, to teach them ‘how to lose your innocence but not your hope: How to laugh forever’ (JLC, p.213). In this section each daughter comes to understand that her mother’s perseverance and strength should be absorbed to solve her problems. The past has lessons to teach.

The structural pattern of the novel appears to be haphazard. The vignettes offer multiple perspectives at the first reading, demanding us to sort out the different mothers' and daughters' narratives by turning back the pages again and again. Stephen Souris refers to this as "the decentered, multiple monologue mode" or "intra-monologue dialogicity". But a further reading shows how Tan has developed a chain of consciousness linked to each other to reveal her main concern about the mother-daughter bond through generations. It is in our childhood that much of our mother's value systems and personality are imbibed. And we can never be totally free of our mother's influence even as we mature into adulthood. Our mothers are in us and we pass on this same consciousness to our children. However much June tries to pull away from being raised the Chinese way- "to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat [her] own bitterness," (*JLC*, p.215) - there is always the realization that her mother is in her "bones": "And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way." (*JLC*, p.215) Thus for Tan, matrilineage, a much neglected concept for many generations, foreshadows mother-daughter relationships. As we journey through the four sections in the novel with the four myths, we clearly see Tan's

delineation of the matrilineal bond through three generations. The first myth starts with the maternal ancestor crossing boundaries to reach America. The second myth portrays the Chinese mother admonishing the American daughter for not listening to her. The third myth reveals expectations of a future granddaughter by the Chinese mother. The fourth myth shows the Chinese grandmother holding her American granddaughter in her arms and cooing to her as the baby laughs because “she [has] already lived forever, over and over again....” Hence the matrilineal bond lives on irrespective of generational boundaries and cultural gaps. The four myths are like photographs in a family album with images of a daughter becoming a woman, a mother and a grandmother and, finally, an ancestor. It is a never ending process. The more we flip through the pages of the album, the more we see the images of matrilineage “over and over again.”

Tan says that the problematic mother-daughter bond is present in all cultures but they occur in different ways in different cultures. The dominant impression is that in Chinese culture the bond can never be broken. Reconciling to this feeling Tan structures her novel in such a way that the chain remains unbroken in spite of the many issues that tug from opposite ends. The focus of intensity in *The Joy Luck Club* is a delineation of the various issues that jeopardize the mother-daughter relationships through her personal experiences. As Tan comments in her

interview with Mickey Pearlman, *The Joy Luck Club* is not a sociological message about cultures but a recreation of her own childhood memories and experiences and an attempt to understand why the notion of never being independent from her own mother had terrified her to such an extent that she went to extremes to sever the bond, the same way her daughter-characters try to loosen the connection.<sup>9</sup>

Talking about mother-daughter relationships in general and that of Chinese-Americans in particular, Tan refers to “the metaphor of the umbilical cord... which gets stretched over time; whether it is the mother or daughter who severs it or tries to pull it tighter, which is both individual and cultural. In a Chinese family the mother pulls very tightly on the [cord] to a point where [the daughter asks], ‘Why can’t I know about such and such?’ and the [mother answers], ‘Because I haven’t put it in your mind yet.’ The notion that your mother puts everything in your mind – the blank slate theory – is part of Chinese culture.”<sup>10</sup> Presumably, her belief in this notion has impelled her to dedicate *The Joy Luck Club* to her mother and the memory of her mother’s mother: “You asked me once what I would remember. This, and much more”. (*JLC*, p. 9)

As Tan has observed, American mothers are more willing to give certain freedoms to their daughters so that they can learn independence and responsibility to the extent that the daughter herself becomes an independent being when she becomes a mother. The question of

possession does not come in here. But for the Chinese mothers, the daughters are extensions of their mothers. The mothers may wish for a better life for their daughters but not at the cost of severing the umbilical cord. Had the daughters been born and brought up in China like the mothers, they would not go against this rule. But being born and brought up in America, their concept about mothers' control over daughters is quite different.

Marianne Hirsch's study of women's fiction from the eighteenth century through postmodernism reveals the predominance of the daughter's narrative over the mother's:

It is the woman as daughter who occupies the centre of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation. The woman as mother remains in the position of other, and the emergence of feminine-daughterly subjectivity rests and depends on that continued and repressed process of othering the mother.... Daughter and mother are separated and forever trapped by the institution, the function of motherhood. They are forever kept apart by the text's daughterly perspective and signature: the mother is excluded from the discourse by the daughter who owns it.<sup>11</sup>

However, in the recent writings of African American and Asian American women we discover a narrative shared by both mother and daughter. *The Joy Luck Club* is one such novel where the mother is included not as a mere presence but as a powerful ancestor who asserts her selfhood to give identity to her daughter. The mother is capable of breaking free of the hold of tradition by telling new stories. This double-

voice narrative, according to Hirsch, is the only way to imagine a form of consciousness and of creating subjectivity:

The story of female development, both on fiction and theory, needs to be written in the voice of mothers as well as in that of daughters. It needs to ease mystifying maternal stories, to cease making them the objects of a "sustained quest." Only in combining both voices, in finding a double voice that would yield a multiple female consciousness, can we begin to envision ways to "live afresh."<sup>12</sup>

The way the stories of Tan's mothers encompass the daughters' stories reveal how strong and powerful the mothers are. Tan has ascribed more power and strength to the mothers in form and content. She has bestowed greater weight on the impact of past generations on the present, in which the four stories of the daughters are enveloped by those of the mothers', implies that the older generation may still hold a key to resolving the problems of the young. The Joy Luck Club organized by Suyuan Woo during the Japanese invasion of China can be taken as a "deliberate defiance of the darkness of current events." It is also a "determination to hope in the face of constantly altering social situations and continually shifting rules."<sup>13</sup> The fact that the Joy Luck Club continues with the mah-jongg game, years later, in San Francisco, even after the death of its organizer is symbolic. 'The Club, and the friendships it reflects, endured. It expanded to include the women's spouses; it became the clearing house for news about their children. Eventually all money won or lost was shared in common, an emergency bank on which

any member could draw. Joy Luck remained their stable centre despite the turbulence of immigration and social change; and when Suyuan dies, June is invited to take her mother's place.... [on "The East...where things begin...the direction from which the sun rises, where the wind comes from" (*JLC*, p.33)]<sup>14</sup> It demonstrates a kind of courage that could withstand the whip of 'fate' as the mothers termed life's situations:

I thought up Joy Luck on a summer night that was so hot even the moths fainted to the ground, their wings were so heavy with the damp heat. Every place was so crowded there was no room for fresh air. Unbearable smells from the sewers rose up to my second-story window and the stink had nowhere else to go but into my nose. At all hours of the night and day, I heard screaming sounds. I didn't know if it was a peasant slitting the throat of a runaway pig or an officer beating a half-dead peasant for lying in his way on the sidewalk. (*JLC*, p.23)

Under such conditions when 'hope' was their 'only joy' Suyuan and her three women friends gambled at mah-jongg every week hoping to be 'lucky'; telling outrageous stories that made them laugh 'to death' and feasted on mock banquets, making onlookers wonder whether they "were possessed by demons – to celebrate when even within [their] own families [they] had lost generations, had lost homes and fortunes, and were separated, husband from wife, brother from sister, daughter from mother" (*JLC*, p.24). But this was not an act of insanity. Rather it was an invincible and an invisible spirit of **courage, strength** and **hope** that impelled them to move on in spite of their miseries, for "to despair was to

wish back for something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable.” (*JLC*, p.24)

Jing-Mei could not understand how much the Joy Luck Club meant to her mother or how much courage her mother carried in her petite form dressed up in funny traditional Chinese attire:

She and Auntie An-Mei were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties. In those days, before my mother told me her Kweilin story, I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war. (*JLC*, p.28)

Scarlet Cheng discusses in her essay, “Your Mother is in Your Bones” that the daughters who are born in Chinese ghettos of California, grow up feeling ashamed of their non-mainstream backgrounds and eccentric mothers. This has happened mainly because of the split in historical, geographical and cultural experience. But Tan shows us how hard the mother tries to transfer her invisible spirit to her daughter. When she “sulked in silence for an hour” (*JLC*, p.25) after being refused a transistor radio, her mother finally came out with a secret she had carried deep within her for many years – the abandonment of her twin baby daughters as she ran for her life to Chungking from the Japanese. The pain of remembering this loss was great but the mother knew that this was the only way her daughter would reconcile to her refusal: “Why do you think you are missing something you never had?” speaks volumes

about her mother's strength. An-Mei possessed the courage not to miss her lost babies while the daughter was sulking for hours for something she did not possess in the first place and would certainly not miss having it.

This is Tan's way of affirming her belief that transference cannot take place without disclosure. The past has to be revealed in the present without any distortion in order to bring harmony into the mother-daughter relationship. Without actually forcing the daughter to go back in time and space to the mother's culture, Tan is visiting the past to create a "positive recuperation of residual cultural alternatives" as Terry Dehay calls minority women's new act of creation. He says that Third World Women are looking back in order to locate lost ancestors and free them from "the confines of museums by reclaiming their histories."<sup>15</sup> These writers have a common strategy of "interrupting the surface of the traditional linear narrative to allow for the entry of a multiplicity of voices and perspectives."<sup>16</sup> He further makes reference to Adrienne Rich's essay, "When We Dead Awaken", where she defines this dialectical process, as 're-vision': an 'act of survival'. In analyzing the narrative of *The Joy Luck Club*, Dehay states that Tan makes use of the mother-daughter relationship to explore the link between language and tradition, memory and culture:

The mothers' voices, the oral storytelling, almost intrude on the written narrative, uncontrolled but supplying meaning and cultural associations that are missing in the other memories. The cultural memory comes almost unconsciously through the mothers' storytelling, a type of recessive cultural resource that the mothers ironically attempt to counter in the messages to the daughters."<sup>17</sup>

Thus minority women writers like Tan disrupt the traditional narrative flow by remembering their past and inserting multiple voices and stories with the hope that it will contribute to an understanding of the structure of society and its influence on relationships. Out of this act of "re-visioning" fresh connections with the past are created, which can supply an alternative culture or cultures to stand in opposition to the dominant culture, which has historically both absorbed and repressed them. Out of this act of "re-visioning" in *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan has created new meanings in the mother-daughter relationships.

Suyuan Woo is dead without having been able to tell her daughter one more secret of hers, and that is, she still hoped that she would find her abandoned babies one day. Symbolically she had left behind the mah-jongg Joy Luck Club. Now it was Jing-Mei's turn to occupy the seat vacated by her mother. Her mother's long cherished wish is revealed to her. She must find what had been lost. It is now up to her to meet her two half-sisters and tell them about her mother, the mother they did not know; her kindness, her smartness, her dutiful nature to family; her hopes, things that mattered to her. Ironically, Jing-Mei realizes that she knew nothing about her mother: "What will I say? What can I tell them about my

mother? I don't know anything. She was my mother.”(*JLC*, p.40) These questions from a daughter about her own mother shock the aunties. In Jing-Mei they recognize their own daughters, all as ignorant, “unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that ‘joy’ and ‘luck’ do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds “joy luck” is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation.”(*JLC*, p.41)

Uprooted from their own culture and country the mothers have only one thing left to hand over to their daughters in order to hold on to their roots; a connecting trait – a power that defies fate; achieves ‘joy’ and triumphs against all odds. For the Chinese this power lives within the hearts of the mothers. The daughters should really know the mothers in every sense of the word to instill that power in their own hearts and hand it down to their daughters.

Though America is the place they live in physically, their inter-relationships exist on another cultural plane that is neither the recessive culture nor the dominating one, the mother leaning towards the former and the daughter towards the latter:

American society has tended toward the ideals of the self-sufficient, self-reliant individual who is the master of his or her fate and chooses his or her own destiny. High value is placed on the ability to stand on your own two feet, or pull yourself up by your own bootstraps or do your own thing. In contrast, Asian philosophies tend toward an acknowledgement that individuals become what they are because of the efforts of many things and many people. They are the products of their relationship to nature and other people. Thus heavy emphasis is placed on the nature of the relationship among people, generally with the aim of maintaining harmony through proper conduct and attitudes.<sup>18</sup>

Even Suyuan believed at one point that her determined efforts would mold her daughter into the talented and successful daughter of her dreams. She prodded Jing-Mei to do her best. With a touch of humour Tan tells us how the mother first tried to make a Shirley Temple of her daughter: “At first my mother thought I could be a Chinese Shirley Temple. We’d watch Shirley’s old movies on TV as though they were training films.” (*JLC*, p. 134) When that idea backfired, she started with the capitals of the countries of the world because she had read a story about “a three-year-old boy who knew the capitals of all the states and even most of the European countries” (*JLC*, p. 134) Jing-Mei failed to live up to her mother’s ideal a second time. After that her mother put up a number of tests to determine what kind of child prodigy her daughter would become, “The tests got harder- multiplying numbers in my head, finding the queen of hearts in a deck of cards, trying to stand on my head without using my hands, predicting the daily temperatures in Los Angeles, New York, and London.” Next, she saw a child playing the

piano on TV. The next day she had arranged for a deaf music tutor to teach her daughter piano lessons. The daughter's reaction was that of resistance: "And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me—because I had never seen that side of me before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts. Willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not." (JLC, p. 134)

The inculcation of the American ideals of independence made Jing-Mei misunderstand her mother's actions as highhandedness; to want to force her to be something she did not want to be. So, though she possessed the natural talent to play the piano, she deliberately failed her mother. She made a mess of "Pleading Child" from Schumann's *Scenes from Childhood* in the talent show organized for children.

And I started to play.... So it was a surprise to me when I hit the first wrong note and I realized something didn't sound quite right. And then I hit another and another followed that. A chill started at the top of my head and began to trickle down. Yet I couldn't stop playing as though my hands were bewitched. I kept thinking my fingers would adjust themselves back, like a train switching to the right track. I played this strange jumble through two repeats, the sour notes staying with me all the way to the end. (JLC, p.139)

Like that performance, Suyuan Woo and Jing-Mei Woo had started off on the wrong note, frustrating the mother's effort to mold her daughter's character and pass on the benefits of her accumulated wisdom

and experience. The mother believes that her persistent efforts are necessary to bring out the best in her daughter. But for the daughter, the mother becomes an object of 'confrontation'. She assumes that her mother is too demanding and refuses to obey her, "“You want me to be someone that I am not! .... I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!”" (*JLC*, p.142)

Shear also talks about the conflict between mothers and daughters among Chinese-American communities as a diasporic experience where “the daughters tend to perceive cultural blanks, the absence of clear and definite answers to the problems of family, whereas the mothers tend to fill in too much, often to provide those kinds of cultural answers and principles that seem to empower them to make strong domestic demands on their daughters.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than accepting her mother's wishes, the daughter goes to extremes to shatter all her hopes by confronting her and shouting at her, “Then I wish I'd never been born!” “I wish I were dead! Like them.” Jing-Mei's reference to her half-sisters as 'dead', something Suyuan had never admitted to herself was the final straw for the mother: “her face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless”(*JLC*, p.142). This quarrel not only brought back painful memories but also the difficulties that lay in the effort of sustaining the hope of recovering her babies lost a long time ago

in another country. Most of all, it made the mother realize that making a genius out of her daughter, who did not understand her best intentions, was futile.

In spite of all the disappointments Jing-Mei had caused her, the mother's heart was too full of love and hope to hold any grudges. She gifted Jing-Mei with two gifts, one, the piano that had created so much tension between them, and the other, "Life's Importance", a jade pendant on a gold chain. The former was gifted as a 'sign of forgiveness' while the latter signaled her worth as a woman. During her lifetime, Jing-Mei "never found a way to ask her [mother] why she had hoped for something so large that failure was inevitable. And even worse, [she] never asked her what frightened [her] the most: Why had she given up hope?"(JLC, p.143) Later on she recognises that her mother never gave up hope. She had silently contacted people to find her twin babies and she still hoped that one day Jing-Mei would be united with her elder sisters and be "Perfectly Contented" with the best quality that her mother hoped for. Now it is the daughter who will fulfill her mother's "Never Forgotten" wish by going to China to meet her long lost sisters. The final section of *The Joy Luck Club* recounts Jing-Mei's trip to China, her "return to her mother and a re-visioning of herself as a result.

According to Dehay, the narrative of this novel "weaves immediate impressions of China with memories of the mother, with Jing-Mei's

father's story of Suyuan's past, and finally with the meeting of the sisters, into a coherent whole through which Jing-Mei discovers her own Chinese self. In discovering the pieces of her mother's past and in beginning to understand her as a complete person, she also discovers her Chinese nature, which she had attempted to erase as she imbibed the American culture."<sup>20</sup> The mother's unvanquished spirit navigated the daughter's journey towards the achievement of this 'coherent whole' which includes the other three daughters as well.

In An-Mei-Hsu's story, the theme of love and honour is repeated and presented from a slightly different angle. Throughout her childhood, An-Mei was constantly reprimanded for something she was innocent of – her mother's betrayal of family and the shame she had brought upon the family members by leaving home to become a concubine. Her grandmother had warned her never to say her name because "To say her name is to spit on your father's grave" (*JLC*, p.43). Her "auntie" told her that her mother had become a *ni*, a traitor to their ancestors. She was a ghost and she was "so beneath others that even the devil must look down to see her" (*JLC*, p.44). From all these warnings An-Mei-Hsu learnt that to lose her face was like "dropping your necklace down a well. The only way you can get it back is to fall in after it" (*JLC*, p.44). Back in China, a woman's social and filial obligations were considered an inescapable fate. There was no choice for the woman as An-Mei says, "I know this,

because I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness" (*JLC*, p.215).

However, it was her mother who made her understand 'love' and 'honour'. When she saw her mother cutting a piece of meat from her arm to cook a magic potion to try to cure her own mother, An-Mei-Hsu came to learn about her mother's love and learnt to love her as well: "Even though I was young, I could see the pain of the flesh and the worth of the pain" (*JLC*, p.48). This was a demonstration of the profound biological, psychological, social and cultural relationship between mother and daughter which is deeper than skin, much deeper than flesh. It is inside the bones. Despite the demands of a patriarchal system and the various ways that threaten to sever the bond, the umbilical cord connects them to each other. And one will find the other at the end until their spirits become one:

This is how a daughter honours her mother. It is *shou* deep it is in your bones. The pain of the flesh is nothing. The pain you must forget. Because sometimes that is the only way to remember what is in your bones. You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother before her, until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh. (*JLC*, p.48)

Rooted deep inside her teaching of love and honour was an indomitable spirit of hope demonstrated in her story 'Half and Half'. An-Mei had believed in God's will for many years until something happened. One day, the whole family had gone to the beach to catch ocean perch. There were nine of them- the parents, three daughters and four sons. The

youngest, Bing, was only four, “easily excitable and easily bored and irritable.” The other brothers did not allow him to play with them so he wandered down the beach. Rose was entrusted to keep an eye on him so she followed him and called out to him every now and then. As evening approached Bing decided to walk over to his father along the reef. Rose shouted out to him to stay away from the water but soon she was distracted by her other brothers playfully thrashing and kicking in the sand. That moment of confusion and excitement was the moment of An-Mei’s despair. Only Rose saw what actually happened but she was helpless:

I look up and see Bing walking alone to the edge of the reef. In the confusion of the fight, nobody notices. I am the only one who sees what Bing is doing.... His little body is moving so quickly, as if he spotted something wonderful by the water’s edge. And I think, he’s going to fall in. I’m expecting it. And just as I think this, his feet are already in the air, in a moment of balance, before he splashes into the sea and disappears without leaving so much as a ripple in the water.”  
(*JLC*, p.125)

An-Mei’s reaction to her son’s death was unlike that of the rest of the family. She believed in *nengkan*, the belief that she could “do anything” she put her mind into. This *nengkan* was a combination of Chinese ‘luck’ and American ‘faith’. While the rest of the family mourned Bing’s death, she woke up early the next morning and got ready to search for her son. Rose noticed that she was carrying a white leatherette Bible with her. As soon as they reached the beach, she held the

white Bible in her hand and called out to God to give her back her son promising that she would never again be careless with God's blessing.

After she had prayed, her faith was so great that she could see Bing waving to her three times from beyond the first wave, until she realized that it was just a dark spot of churning seaweed. This was how she discovered that she was being "foolish" for thinking that "she could use faith to change fate".

An-Mei's adopted Christian faith did not last long because it could not bring back her youngest son who drowned in the sea. "It was the day my mother lost her faith in God. She found that things of unquestioned certainty could never be trusted again." (*JLC*, p. 121) Her version of the American faith was rejected and once again she turned to her Chinese **Hope**, a hope that couldn't change fate but still a hope that could defy fate and rise above its apparent finality. Tan portrays a character who dares to defy the enormous weight of fate in An-Mei-Hsu. Watching her daughter lying down on a psychiatrist's couch and squeezing tears out over the shame of her failing marriage, she tells her to keep trying, "If she doesn't try, she can lose her chance forever" (*JLC*, p.215).

Though her daughter told her that it was hopeless; that she couldn't do anything to save her marriage, An-Mei insisted that she "must save it" (*JLC*, p.116). Being a rational American, Rose believed that just as she never expected to find Bing, there was no way to save her marriage:

“What is the point?” “There’s no hope. There’s no reason to keep trying” (*JLC*, p.130). From the Chinese mother’s point of view, this attitude was not good enough. Even after death one’s spirit lives on; one’s life should be propelled by this spirit. It is a spirit that still pays attention to the things one has lost. For there will be a day when what is lost will be found in another form as Rose-Hsu realizes at last, “You have to pay attention to what you lost. You have to undo the expectation.” (*JLC*, p.131)

With this knowledge she made up her mind not to be weak and speak up for herself. By listening to her mother she would no longer lose hope. She had learnt not to confuse herself with her indecisions; to be strong; to salvage her “Life’s Importance” even when everything seemed hopeless and to emerge from life’s trials and tribulations with a brave heart:

You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight. But if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak. You will fall to the ground with the first strong wind. And then you will be like a weed, growing wild in any direction, running along the ground until someone pulls you out and throws you away. (*JLC*, p.191)

Here, Tan shows that the wisdom and strength of the past generation cannot be dismissed as outdated because it has been tested and has proved its worth, the way the mothers proved their worth in spite of the pressures of living in a different culture far removed from their own. Throughout her childhood and even in her adult life Rose-Hsu had

thought American opinions were the best. However, as she grows older and battles with various problems in life, she discovers the wisdom of her mother.

Lindo Jong is yet another character who battles fate through cunning, shrewdness and resourcefulness. She relates in 'The Red Candle' that she once sacrificed her life to keep her parent's promise; she got married, as arranged, to Huang Tai's son but there was no love in the marriage. Her fate was determined by her parents but she took control of her destiny. According to Chinese tradition a red candle in a gold holder is lighted on the night of the marriage and a servant is supposed to watch the candle all night to make sure neither end went out. On the wedding night Lindo could not sleep so she came out of the house to take a walk. She noticed that the servant who was entrusted to watch the candle was sound asleep. Without hesitating she ran inside the room and blew out her husband's end of the candle: "I was not thinking when my legs lifted me up and my feet ran me across the courtyard to the yellow-lit room. But I was hoping...to make that candle go out. It fluttered a little and the flame bent down low, but still both ends burned strong. My throat filled with so much hope that it finally burst and blew out my husband's end of the candle" (*JLC*, p.60).

Later on, when Lindo was unable to give her husband a son, her mother-in-law consulted the old match-maker and tried every means,

even to the point of confining her to the bed for many days. Meanwhile Lindo had noticed that the servant girl who had been so friendly with the delivery boy was getting bigger and her face was becoming longer each day with worry. Without having to break her promise to her parents Lindo schemed her way out of the planned marriage by pretending to be possessed by a spirit which revealed the reason why she could not bear a son. She disclosed the secret of the red candle as the sign of a doomed marriage because it was against the will of the gods, adding that her husband would die if they continued to live as husband and wife, since the real wife destined for him was the servant girl who was already pregnant with his child.

The mother-in-law extracted the truth from the servant who was entrusted to watch over the red candle, and also questioned the pregnant servant girl, who, with a sigh of relief, replied that what Lindo told her was true. The mother-in-law was so scared that she allowed Lindo to leave her unhappy marriage without creating a scandal. Lindo had ingeniously worked her way out of a fate that was apparently inescapable through sheer determination to affirm her own worth. M. Marie Booth Foster says, "It takes determination to achieve voice and selfhood, to take control of one's mind and one's life from another, making one's self heard, overcoming silence. Lindo does not resign herself to her circumstances in China."<sup>21</sup>

Tan demonstrates that a fundamental faith in invisible forces pervades traditional Chinese culture which, at first glance, is a factor that contributes to the division between the first and second generations.<sup>22</sup> Lindo Jong's daughter, Waverly Jong becomes a child prodigy at chess because her mother taught her the art of 'invisible strength'. The spirit that blew out the candle was now blowing whispered secrets into her ears enabling her to triumph over her opponents:

“Blow from the south,” it murmured. “The wind leaves no trail.” I saw a clear path, the traps to avoid. The crowd rustled. “Shhh! Shhh!” said the corner of the room. The wind blew stronger. “Throw sand from the East to distract him.” The knight came forward ready for the sacrifice. The wind hissed, louder and louder. “Blow, blow, blow. He cannot see. He is blind now. Make him lean away from the wind so he is easier to knock down.” “Check,” I said as the wind roared with laughter. The wind died down to little puffs, my own breath” (*JLC*, p.97)

When Waverly turned nine she was already a national chess champion. Lindo Jong was proud of what her daughter had achieved. While visiting friends and shops she showed her off to people. Waverly was embarrassed and this created tension between them. She ran away from her mother and symbolically she ran from her mother's winning spirit as well. After that, however much she tried, she could not win any more tournaments: “When I lost twice to the boy whom I had defeated so easily a few years before, I stopped playing chess altogether. And nobody protested. I was fourteen.” (*JLC*, p.172) Like the other daughters, Waverly also learnt that her mother's invisible strength can become hers

too only when she breaks down the invisible barriers that she had erected between themselves and try to understand her mother's part of the story.

Ying-Ying St. Clair is one more strong character in *The Joy Luck Club*, born in the year of the 'Tiger'. She was a proud and haughty young girl born to a high class family of old China. Through a symbolic incident, during her childhood, she lost her tiger spirits in China; she lost her own self and was unable to tell the moon lady her secret wish.

Ying-Ying describes how she lost herself during the Moon Festival on a boat cruise. While everyone was sleeping, Ying-Ying sneaked out to watch some boys catching fish with the help of a bird with a metal ring around its neck. Shear maintains that the bird's inability to swallow what it had caught reflects an "intensely personal, intensely perverse frustration" of a woman's inner spirit. The boys left their sport but Ying-Ying stayed to watch "as if caught in a good dream," a woman cleaning fish and cutting off the heads of chickens and turtles. Just then she noticed that her clothes were all messed up. She tried to tidy up the mess with her hands but smeared more blood on her 'tiger outfit' specially worn for that occasion. Her Amah came searching for her. Seeing the bloodied clothes she was angry and stripped off her tiger outfit. Left in her underwear Ying-Ying was alone at the boat's edge, suddenly looking at the moon anxiously to tell the Moon Lady her "secret wish". Before she could utter her wish, she fell into the water. Although Ying-Ying was

found and restored to her family, she believed that she had lost her spirit: “Even though I was found – later that night after Amah, Baba, uncle, and the others shout for me along the waterway – I never believed my family found the same girl” (*JLC*, p.82)

From then on, her life was completely taken over by a series of incidents beyond her control. She married a womanizer and a drunkard who abandoned her after she became pregnant with his first child. From a life of luxury in her father’s house, she was reduced to poverty and drudgery. After immigrating to the United States her dreams of a better life and a free spirit did not materialize because her past life in China came back to haunt her. Moreover, because she was an immigrant, her circumstances branded her a ‘displaced person’ with a changed name, and a changed year of birth, making it a ‘dragon’ year instead of a ‘Tiger’ year, thereby denying her ‘Tiger’ nature. Watching her mother reduced to a spiritless, lifeless woman on the brink of insanity, Lena St. Clair wished that she would rather be the girl next door, who was constantly quarrelling with her mother, yet loving each other passionately. Every night as she slept in a corner of her room, listening to the voices coming from the opposite wall, she could hear a girl and her mother screaming and shouting at each other and then kissing and making up later. She wished she could do the same with her mother instead of the deadly silence that pervaded her house.

Ying-Ying's indifference towards her young daughter, Lena, made her a very lonely girl. When Lena became an adult she realized that both of them were "lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others" (*JLC*, p.67). She blamed herself for remaining a ghost; oblivious to her daughter's growth and development. She had lost her *chi*, her spirit. This was her 'greatest shame', "How can I leave this world without leaving her my spirit?" (*JLC*, p.252) But once again, it is the ancestor who wakes up from her frailties and mistakes and brandishes the mantle of reconciliation:

I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose...I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter. (*JLC*, p.252)

It was up to the mother to call out both their 'Tiger' spirits and bridge the gap they had built between them, so as to help her daughter battle her marital problem:

I think this to myself even though I love my daughter. She and I have the same body. There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved. (*JLC*, p.242)

Ying-Ying concludes that she must tell her daughter what she could remember; that she possessed an energetic power, a fire in her eyes before her social conditions reduced her to such suffering that she rubbed it out of her face, "over the years washing away her pain, the same way

carvings on stone are worn down by water (*JLC*, p. 67). Thus, by learning about her mother's past, Lena, like the other daughters becomes better equipped to fight back and restore her happiness in much the same way her mother did in the course of her own life.<sup>23</sup>

In all the eight stories of mothers and daughters, there is a cry from the mothers, ringing loudly and firmly, and that is the cry to be "found". In the final part of the novel, June holds her long-lost Chinese half-sisters in an embrace, symbolizing a "resurrection and vindication of their dead mother". Bonnie Braedlin calls this a rewriting of earlier feminist concepts of daughters constantly at war with their mothers. Tan is inscribing a mother-daughter relationship within an 'Eastern philosophy of "both/and" to a Western predicament of either (daughter)/or (mother)<sup>24</sup> and attempting to show that mothers and daughters need not always be engaged in a tug-of-war. There is a plane where, in spite of all the factors that contribute to the conflict in the mother-daughter relationship, the two generations can stand side by side and look towards the future.

Tan has articulated what Shear calls "the urge to find the usable past". 'The Joy Luck Club' is made up of a series of intense encounters in a kind of "cultural lost and found".<sup>25</sup> He further states, "Tan seems to place more emphasis on the Chinese identity as the healing factor." But what is seen in the Joy Luck mothers' narratives is not so much a desire

to transfer their cultural heritage on to their daughters but a deep and earnest desire to instill the *chi*, the spirit that had seen them through the toughest circumstances in China, so that the daughters may also acquire this same strength to handle and overcome their own modern problems. Gloria Shen defines the Chinese *chi* in her own words, “The *chi* that [Ying-Ying St. Clair] refers to may be impossible to render wholly into English, but it involves a fundamental self-respect, a desire to excel, a willingness to stand up for one’s self and one’s family, to demonstrate something to others. It may well be a quality that the daughters in the book lack, or that they possess in insufficient amounts.” According to traditional theory in China, *chi* was the original cosmic cell from which the whole universe developed. It is identified with air and breath without which life cannot exist. It is the life-force itself, the vast, surging current of vital energy which flows through the world and the human body.

In further illustrating this concept, she quotes Veronica Wang who states, “In the traditional Chinese society, women were expected to behave silently with submission but act heroically with strength. They were both sub-women and super-women.” Thus what we observe in all four mothers is that they have similar personalities- strong, determined, and hopeful; endowed with mysterious power. Perhaps Tan believes that the daughters, without losing their independence and their “own persons”

should incorporate some of the values of the mothers through the concept of *chi*. After all, as Rich proposes,

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females [in society and culture].... It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. To refuse to be a victim: and then to go on from there.<sup>26</sup>

Marina Heung calls this maternal courage as the “subtext of the stories” in *The Joy Luck Club*. Mothers tell stories “as an act of self-creation, one by which they enact, with a full complement of ambivalence and doubt, their passage from loss and dispossession to hope and affirmation.”<sup>27</sup>

Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* is based on the legacy of the Chinese ancestor’s spirit that heals and confers **hope, love, honour, courage and strength** as demonstrated by all the mothers in the novel. Situated in a precarious cultural in-between-space, the daughters find it difficult to believe in and assimilate the ancestor’s spirit that the mothers represent. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan seems to be hinting at the possibilities of fusion of the two cultures through which mothers and daughters can live in perfect understanding of their different experiences. This is illustrated by the case of June when she fulfills her mother’s last wish by going back to China and locating her long-lost sisters, when they recognise their mother in themselves.

## END NOTES

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<sup>3</sup> Angier, Carole. "Chinese Customs," in *New Statesman and Society*, Vol.2, No.56, June 30, 1989, p.35.

<sup>4</sup> Shear, Walter, "Generational Differences and the Diaspora in *The Joy Luck Club*," in *Critique*, Spring, 1993, pp.193-99.

<sup>5</sup> Romagnolo, Catherine. "Narrative Beginnings in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*: A Feminist Study 1", *Studies in the Novel*. Denton: Spring 2003. Vol. 35, Iss. 1: p.89.

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<sup>7</sup> Shen, Gloria. "Born of a Stranger: Mother-Daughter relationships and Story-telling in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," in *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity*. Edited by Anne E. Brown and Marjanne Gooze, Greenwood Press, 1995, pp. 233-44.

<sup>8</sup> Dorris, Michael. "Mothers and Daughters," in *Chicago Tribune-Books*, March 12, 1989, pp. 1, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Pearlman, Mickey and Katherine Usher Henderson, *Inter/View, Talks with America's Writing Women*. The University Press of Kentucky, 1990. p.16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p.16.

<sup>11</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, PP.136-137.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

<sup>13</sup> Shear, Walter, "Generational Differences and the Diaspora in *The Joy Luck Club*," in *Critique*, Spring, 1993, pp.193-99.

<sup>14</sup> Dorris, Michael. "Mothers and Daughters," in *Chicago Tribune-Books*, March 12, 1989, pp. 1, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Dehay, Terray, "Narrating Memory" in *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*. (1994) edited by Amritjit, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., Robert E. Hogan. P. 28

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.28

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.

- <sup>18</sup> McGoldrick, Monica, John K. Pearce, and Joseph, eds. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*. New York: Guilford P, 1982, p.213.
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### Chapter-III

#### WOMAN AS ANCESTOR: *The Kitchen God's Wife (1991)*

"In China long time ago," I hear my mother say, "there was a rich farmer named Zhang, such a lucky man. Fish jumped in his river, pigs grazed his land, ducks flew around his yard as thick as clouds. And that was because he was blessed with a hardworking wife named Guo. She caught his fish and herded his pigs. She fattened his ducks, doubled all his riches, year after year. Zhang had everything he could ask for- from the water, the earth, and the heavens above.

"But Zhang was not satisfied. He wanted to play with a pretty, carefree woman named Lady Li. One day he brought this pretty woman home to his house, made his good wife cook for her. When Lady Li later chased his wife out of the house, Zhang did not run out and call to her, 'Come back, my good wife, come back.'

"Now he and Lady Li were free to swim in each other's arms. They threw money away like dirty dirt water. They slaughtered ducks just to eat a plate of their tongues. And in two years' time, all of Zhang's land was empty, and so was his heart. His money was gone, and so was pretty Lady Li, run off with another man.

"Zhang became a beggar, so poor he wore more patches than whole cloth on his pants. He crawled from the gate of one household to another, crying, 'Give me your moldy grain!'

"One day, he fell over and faced the sky, ready to die. He fainted, dreaming of eating the winter clouds blowing above him. When he opened his eyes again, he found the clouds had turned to smoke. At first he was afraid he had fallen down into a place far below the earth. But when he sat up, he saw he was in a kitchen, near a warm fireplace. The girl tending the fire explained that the lady of the house had taken pity on him-she always did this, with all kinds of people, poor or old, sick or in trouble.

"'What a good lady!' cried Zhang. 'Where is she, so I can thank her?' The girl pointed to the window, and the man saw a woman walking up the path. Ai-ya! That lady was none other than his good wife Guo!

"Zhang began leaping about the kitchen looking for some place to hide, then jumped into the Kitchen fireplace just as his wife walked in the room.

"Good wife Guo poured out many tears to try to put the fire out. No use! Zhang was burning with shame and, of course, because of the hot roaring fire below. She watched her husband's ashes fly up to heaven in three puffs of smoke. Wah!

"In heaven, the Jade Emperor heard the whole story from his new arrival. 'For having the courage to admit you were wrong,' the

Emperor declared, 'I make you Kitchen God, watching over everyone's behavior. Every year, you let me know who deserves good luck, who deserves bad.'

"From then on, people in China knew Kitchen God was watching them. From his corner in every house and every shop, he saw all kinds of good and bad habits spill out: generosity and greediness, a harmonious nature or a complaining one. And once a year, seven days before the new year, Kitchen God flew back up the fireplace to report whose fate deserved to be changed, better for worse, or worse for better."

(Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, pp. 59-61)

*The Kitchen God's Wife* revolves around the myth of a rich farmer called Zhang, whose kind and patient wife "...caught his fish and herded his pigs. She fattened his ducks, doubled all his riches, year after year." (*KGW*, p. 59) However, Zhang chased her out of the house when he met a pretty, carefree woman. He took her into the house and together they spent all his riches lavishly, reducing himself to utter poverty. The pretty woman ran off with another man when Zhang had nothing material to offer her. Nearly at death's door, starving and sick, he was taken into the house of a kind lady who happened to be none other than his good wife Guo. In his shame and disgrace, Zhang tried to hide in the fireplace but was burnt to ashes, "Good wife Guo poured out many tears to try to put the fire out. No use! Zhang was burning with shame and, of course, because of the hot roaring fire below." (*KGW*, p. 61) But when he reached the other world, the Jade Emperor rewarded him, because he had admitted his fault, by making him the Kitchen God and entrusted him

with the task of watching over human behaviour and deciding who deserved good luck, who bad. He must always be placated, therefore, with gifts of cigarettes, tea and whisky. The patriarchal notion is so entrenched in Chinese society that Zhang, for all his unfaithfulness and meanness is converted into a God. On the other hand, Guo, in spite of being unjustly treated by her husband; gave him shelter and tried to save his life is totally ignored in the myth.

The popular Chinese myth of the Kitchen God is a similar story. The 'Kitchen God' was once a simple, poor and unsuccessful mason who failed to succeed in any of his ventures. There came a time when he had to sell his own wife to another man in order to keep himself alive. A woman's value was not worth a man's single meal. As chance would have it, he happened to work for his wife's husband. He did not recognize his wife but his wife 'had him much in mind'. She decided to help him discreetly by baking him some sesame cakes with coins inside each of them. She gave him the cakes as he departed. On the way, the husband stopped at a wayside teahouse. He met another traveller who requested him to part with one of his cakes. The man bit into the cake and found the money. Without revealing what he had found he bought all the cakes from the husband for a modest amount. The husband gladly sold the cakes, thinking himself lucky to have got such a handsome amount for a

few cakes, 'in accordance with his characteristic ill-fortune'. When he learnt later what his wife had tried to do for him, he killed himself, thinking that there was 'no point in his continued existence'. When he reached Heaven, he was rewarded by the Ruler for his honesty and goodness and was appointed the 'Kitchen God'.<sup>1</sup>

Tan has revised this myth both to inscribe the suffering and pain of Winnie, the Chinese female ancestor, and to look at the wife as 'subject' rather than 'object'. In the popular myth, the Kitchen God was once a simpleton who thought that he was justified in selling his wife to another man when he could no longer sustain his life. In Tan's revised myth, the Kitchen God was a man whose infidelity is justified because he is a man. In both the versions, the wife is portrayed as of no value or consequence. However, the wives in both the myths try to save the husbands- the former from poverty and the latter from being burnt alive. Both wives' attempts fail and the husbands die. In the source version, the husband is rewarded for his 'goodness' and 'honesty' and in Tan's version, he is made into a deity for his 'courage' in admitting his faults. In both versions, the wife's story is absent. Who knows what kind of feelings she carried in her when she was sold off? Who cares about her pain in watching her husband living with another woman, depriving her of any reward for her hard work and eventually being driven out of her own

house? Why isn't she rewarded for her 'courage' in trying to save her husband; her 'goodness' for returning good for evil? Unfortunately, she is not given the space to narrate what she went through either as a sold-off wife or as a betrayed woman.

The fate of the kitchen God's wife symbolizes the fate of the ancestral woman. In China, according to Winnie, the fate of the woman ancestor was like that of "a chicken in a cage, mindless, never dreaming of freedom, but never worrying when your neck might be chopped off." (*KGW*, p. 399) Throughout history, the Chinese woman has been regarded as disposable property in spite of her crucial role in maintaining the family line through childbearing. Ironically, her childbearing ability would turn her into a liability for the husband and the entire family if she fails to bear a son, thereby branding her as a "detachable appendage"; to be easily replaced by another woman who could produce a male heir. This story narrated by Winnie to her grandchildren is about female enslavement by the patriarchal system of China.

In this novel, Tan "aims to elevate the kitchen God's wife to her rightful place in history."<sup>2</sup> The woman has suffered enough. She has been ignored for too long like Winnie, "Nobody worshipped me for living with Wen Fu. I was like that wife of the Kitchen God. Nobody worshipped her either. He got all the excuses. He got all the credit. She was forgotten,"

(*KGW*, p. 322). Tan does not want us to forget our mothers and their legacy of love, forgiveness, comfort and consolation.

Like *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* is also a novel where Tan explores the mother-daughter relationship based on this myth of the 'Kitchen God'. In the former novel she delineates the stories of four mothers and their four daughters while in the latter she confines her attention to just a single mother and her daughter. There are passionate moments of both optimism and pessimism that run throughout the novel. The beginning and ending chapters talk about mother's and daughter's lives in America, which are interspersed with lighter shades while the middle chapters revolving around mother's life in China are painted with depressing and harrowing colours.

The narrative belongs to two characters- the mother, Winnie, and the daughter, Pearl, both talking alternately in the first person. Winnie is a Chinese immigrant who has lived a greater part of her life in China. Now, she lives in Chinatown, San Francisco. She co-owns a flower shop called Ding Ho Flower Shop on Rose Alley in Chinatown with "Auntie Helen". Her late husband had served as a pastor in the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco. Pearl, the daughter, lives in San Jose, a hundred miles away from her mother with her American husband Phil Brandt, a

doctor, and their two daughters Cleo and Tessa. She works as a speech and language clinician with the local school district.

The characters in the daughter's narrative are confined to just two families, the Kwongs and the Louies. The Kwongs consist of Pearl's Aunt Helen, Uncle Henry and three cousins -Mary, Frank and Bao-bao. The Louies are Pearl, her parents, and her brother Samuel. Two contrasting incidents- one of celebration (Bao-bao's engagement party), and the other of mourning (Grand auntie Du's funeral)-introduce us to their familial relations and affiliations on one hand, and their present situations in America on the other. These two families were considered the 'whole family' for as long as Pearl could remember but they are not blood relations. Winnie's brother happens to be the first husband of Auntie Helen so they are related by marriage (this was what Pearl had been told and had believed since childhood).

As in most of her novels there are unprecedented twists and turns regarding certain incidents and relationships of one character to another. As the novel comes to a close we begin to realize that the relationships we had become familiar with are not true at all. For instance, Pearl realizes only later that Auntie Helen is not really her aunt and that her real name is Hulan. She is not even the first wife of her uncle. She is not related to her at all except for the fact that she and her mother shared the

past. They had met in the spring of 1937 in Hangchow, where their husbands finished their training at an “American-style” air force school. Pearl knows her mother as Winnie Louie and she does not realize until the middle of the novel that her mother is also Jiang Weili. Again Pearl finds out that she is not the daughter of Jimmy Louie but of Wen Fu.

Wen Fu, who at first appears to be a handsome gentleman, turns out to be a sexual sadist who uses his dead brother’s diploma to become an officer in the Nationalist air force. He delights in humiliating Winnie. He refuses to take his sick daughter to a doctor because he does not want to disturb his card game. But when the child dies he puts the blame on Winnie. He even brings a concubine to the house and then discards her when she becomes pregnant. He misuses his wife’s dowry money and forces her to turn over the remaining money to him. Winnie is stripped of her dignity by the time she finds a way to run away from him. When she finally manages to escape, Wen Fu remains a hero in the eyes of the world while his wife is believed to be seduced and corrupted by a lecherous American. Winnie is branded a prostitute who is “crazy for American sex”. Underneath, she is a psychologically and physically abused woman who has lost her last shred of dignity.

This pattern of multiple mistaken identities and sharp turn of events is a way of defamiliarizing what we seem to know at first. It is a

pattern that is suggestive of the idea that things and people are not what they actually seem to be. There are a lot of things going on underneath the still waters. This is also true of the relationship between the mother and the daughter. What, on the surface level, appears to be a broken-down relationship is actually connected by a strong bond that ties mother and daughter through generations. Tan is drawing our attention towards what lies underneath and telling us to take a fresh look at things. What is actually the 'Kitchen God' is not a God at all. He is a man without honour and dignity. The actual God is the wife- Guo- who possesses the compassionate ability to forgive all injustices done to her. She is a magnanimous character worthy to be worshipped. Here, Tan is reversing the popular patriarchal notion that the 'honour' of men is more important than the 'dignity' of women. The time has come when women like Guo and Winnie need to be heard and their voices validated. They will no longer be branded as 'prostitutes' to save the 'honour of men; or will they be considered inferior beings who have to bear the abuse of men in order to remain in the good books of such Gods as the 'Kitchen God'.

The mother's narrative is voluminous, overtly demanding the reader's sincere attention. She takes us to China to experience her personal pain. Once again Tan focuses on the mother's story in China. Sandwiched between two thin sections of the daughter's story in

America, the Chinese mother's story occupies the centre stage. We discover that Winnie has secrets locked up. She has kept them hidden from her daughter for many years until Aunt Helen pressurizes her to reveal the truth. The true story attracts the attention of the reader as well as Pearl and maintains that captivating suspense until it leads to the truth. It is then that the true relation between Winnie and Helen is learnt; the reason why they remain loyal to each other and why they pretend to be sisters-in-law.

Revolutions marked Chinese history in the twentieth century. A shift of power took place when monarchy was abolished and the communist system took over power. The historical facts around these times are relevant in building up the story of Winnie who relates her story from her childhood when she was six years old in China in the mid 1920s, through the present, when she is an immigrant in America. Her life is entwined with the upheavels of Chinese history. As she narrates her past to her daughter, she reveals how she had to hide the truth, not to deceive people but because the truth was too complicated. She had told the lies about Helen so often that even Helen had begun to believe them. If she revealed the truth that Helen was not really her sister-in-law, she would have to reveal the story of her half-brother, the one who was never married to Helen. The manner in which multiple stories of Winnie's

brother is narrated presents a sympathetic view of the upheavals of Chinese history. The brother, Kun, had actually died in the hands of the Kuomintang because he secretly sold three bolts of cloth to the revolutionaries. He lost his life needlessly, because of his greed. However, he was assigned many personas corresponding to the powers that be:

But then my half brother went on to have many other lives. When the Japanese took over Shanghai in 1937, my uncle pretended to welcome them to his textile shop. "My own nephew was educated in Japan, now lives in Changsha, married to a Japanese girl."

And then my half brother took on another life. When the Japanese lost in 1945 and the Kuomintang came back, my uncle said, "My poor nephew, Kun, he was a Kuomintang hero. Died in Changsha."

And when the Communists took over in 1949, the first story came back. Only by then Uncle was dead. So it was Old Aunt who said that my half brother Kun was a big revolutionary hero! "Gave good-quality cloth to the underground students – at no cost, of course, except to his own life." (*KGW*, p. 80)

In 1923, Sun Yat-Sen, the then leader of the republic united the Kuomintang soldiers with the help of budding communists. The death of Sun Yat-Sen in 1925 was a severe blow to the communists who were then mercilessly massacred by Chiang Kai-Shek. He took over the leadership and became the sole dictator over China. The struggle between the communists and Kuomintang factions in China continued and this helped the Japanese to enter into Chinese territory. Gradually they established their supremacy over China. In 1932, Japan bombarded the city of

Shanghai. In order to combat the Japanese, Chiang Kai-Shek became the commander of the whole of the Chinese armed forces. In a major development in 1937, the communists and Kuomintang united to fight back against the Japanese. To assist their war operations, a group of the American force – Flying Tigers – was formed. In 1941, the Japanese bombarded Pearl Harbor and in retaliation the Chinese as well as the Americans attacked Japan.

The Japanese were defeated by 1944 and were compelled to put an end to their imperialist aggression. The Chinese won the war against Japan with the help of the US Para-military force. But the internal problems within China still persisted. In 1947, Civil war broke out between the communists and the Nationalists, which ultimately led to the communist party establishing their rule over China. This resulted in a major shift in the political, economic and social scenario.

Like delicately designed and intricately laced fabric of a well-woven cloth, the two stories of China's invasion by Japan and Jiang Weili's exploitation by her husband Wen Fu come full circle to form the thematic fabric of *The Kitchen God's Wife*. The facts of Chinese history and culture and her personal losses shaped the main character, Winnie Louie or Jiang Weili, as she was called in China. Her history begins with her mother leaving her without an explanation when she was just six

years old, and this phase occupies more than 330 pages, all of them about life back in China, narrated in broken-English.

Winnie recollects bitter memories of her own mother who fell in love with a student from Fudan University, a journalist named Lu, who was a revolutionary. In China, it was an abomination for a woman to have a mind of her own and to decide for herself. So she was married off to an old friend of her own father and made his second wife. To add to her disappointment, she found out that her husband had not only two, but many wives. She had to replace the second wife who had died and was thus labeled as “double second”, a derogatory term for “Second Wife”. Her mother abhorred this term ‘Double Second’ and she had arguments with her husband about this. Winnie was too young to know what these words meant but she recalled that those words made her mother “spend many hours in front of her mirror, accusing the double second that stared back at her.” (*KGW*, p. 109)

One day she disappeared mysteriously, probably with the man she loved. This was a disgrace to the family. She was declared dead by her own kin and no one was allowed to talk about her except as gossip among the relatives and friends over tea, during meals, after the noontime nap:

For many years my mother was the source of funny and bad stories, terrible secrets and romantic tales. It was like digging up her grave, then pushing her down farther, always throwing more dirt on top,” (*KGW*, p. 118).

Winnie's mother was not brought up in the conventional Chinese way. She was educated in a missionary school in Shanghai so that her father could prove that he was "not too feudal thinking." (*KGW*, p. 120).

After she disappeared, Winnie's aunties put the blame on her education, saying that education had put "Western thoughts into a Chinese mind, causing everything to ferment." (*KGW*, p. 122) Her Aunties had been raised in a feudal family where tradition ruled supreme: "The girl's eyes should never be used for reading, only for sewing. The girl's ears should never be used for listening to ideas, only to orders. The girl's lips should be small, rarely used, except to express appreciation or ask for approval." (*KGW*, p. 121) But Winnie had come to realize, for sure, that education had not caused fermentation but something else: "Her education only made her unhappy thinking about it – that no matter how much she changed her life, she could not change the world that surrounded her," (*KGW*, p. 122). Winnie understood that her mother, by abandoning her, took the only possible path to find happiness. However, the child inside her, deprived of a mother's compassion and guidance, still ached, hoped, and waited for the mother to come to her:

In my heart, there is a little room. And in that room is a little girl, still six years old. She is always waiting, an achy hoping, hoping beyond reason. She is sure the door will fly open, any minute now.... And the pain in the little girl's heart is instantly gone, forgotten. Because now her mother is lifting her up, high up in the air, laughing and crying, crying and laughing.... (*KGW*, p.131)

Following the shame that her mother had brought upon the family, Winnie was sent away from her father's luxurious house in Shanghai to live with her paternal uncle's family in the countryside. Her uncle's two wives, the hostile "Old Aunt" and "New Aunt" were the only elders she could seek out for advice. Growing up without a mother's guidance, Winnie's life is full of regrets. In 1937, when she was 18 she married Wen Fu who turned out to be a sadistic devil. She suffered the loss of her first three children while enduring her husband's infidelities and abuses. She was aware that fate had dealt her the wrong cards. She also knew that she had made some very wrong decisions. But Winnie believes that her wrong choices were due to the absence of her mother, who could have told her what to do at the crucial moment. When she was 16, she refused to marry a good man who was not from such a rich family, but educated and with good manners. Her Aunt remarked that the man's family was trying to "climb into our family on Weili's wedding skirt." The sarcastic way in which she said it made Winnie to change her mind about the man. She was misled by her Aunt's attitude and she suffered to regret it.

If I had not lost my mother so young, I would not have listened to Old Aunt. And maybe I would have married that boy Lin when I was young. Maybe I would have learnt to love him after we married. And maybe we would have had difficulties in life, just like everyone, but not the kind that would make me hate myself and think that my own heart was my worst enemy. (*KGW*, p. 73)

At the age of 18 when Winnie was about to be married to Wen Fu, knowing fully well the kind of family he came from, the best advice that her own father could give her was to “consider what your husband’s opinions are. Yours do not matter so much anymore.” (*KGW*, p. 178)

Pearl’s mother is now almost 70 years old. She lives in America but she still waits with a longing pain for her mother to come back and explain why she had to leave her: “It is the same pain I have had for many years. It comes from keeping everything inside, waiting until it is too late. I think my mother gave me this fault, the same kind of pain. She left me before she could tell me why she was leaving. I think she wanted to explain, but at the last moment, she could not. And so, even to this day, I still feel I am waiting for her to come back and tell me why it was this way.” (*KGW*, p. 102)

There is an unexplained pain in her heart because of her mother’s disappearance. Robb Forman Dew refers to this as the “pangs of an abandoned child.”<sup>3</sup> Everything had been kept bottled up inside her. She was so used to hiding her emotions that she found it difficult to let it loose, even in front of her own daughter. She had never experienced the love of mother and she was robbed of other kinds of love too when she married Wen Fu.

Winnie says that the reason she couldn't talk about her own mother, meaning her own past, was because she did not want to believe it herself. The absence of her mother pained her to the level of "willing denial". That is why she couldn't talk to her daughter little realizing that by denying herself, she was also denying her daughter of a mother's story.

Being abandoned at such a young age, Winnie did not learn the important things about life which only a mother could teach. All she learnt was to "peel an apple all in one long curly piece." Where was the "life's importance" that she needed to learn? All she had was confusing memories that kept changing "ten thousand different ways, each time [she] recalled her." (*KGW*, p. 104) In her own words Winnie expresses this confusion: "So sad! That is the saddest part when you lose someone you love- that person keeps changing. And later you wonder, is this the same person I lost? Maybe you lost more, maybe less, ten thousand different things that come from your memory or imagination – and you do not know which is which, which was true, which is false." (*KGW*, p. 104)

Women, especially mothers and daughters, everywhere are perpetually losing each other; moving away from each other. This is a universally felt phenomenon, not simply between immigrants in America.

They are confused because the maternal ancestor is not there to tell them where they come from- to be strong and to establish a female power. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, while analyzing maternal absences in the nineteenth century literature see in “motherlessness” the sign of female powerlessness. They argue that maternal silence and absence rob the heroine of important role models for her development, of the matriarchal power, reminiscent of Demeter and Clytemnestra, which could facilitate her own growth into womanhood.

Misunderstandings and conflicts invariably characterise the mother-daughter relationships. This is true of the modern day ethnic Chinese-American mothers and daughters as well. Pearl, the daughter dreads meeting her mother because whenever they are together, she feels as though she has to spend the whole time avoiding ‘land mines’. She is unable to tell her mother that she is suffering from multiple sclerosis in spite of the fears that torment her mind: “All I know is that I wake up each morning in a panic, terrified that something might have changed while I slept. And there are days when I become obsessed if I lose something, a button, thinking my life won’t be normal until I find it again.... Of course, the worst part is when I remember once again – often in unexpected ways – that I am living in a limbo land called remission.... That delicate balance always threatens to go out of kilter when I see my

mother. Because that's when it hits me the hardest: I have this terrible disease and I've never told her." (*KGW*, p. 26)

On the other hand, Winnie, the mother also never summoned the courage to narrate her past to her daughter. The opening lines of *The Kitchen God's Wife* reveal the air of antagonism between the mother and daughter, which is generally felt by the daughter and not the mother: "Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument," (*KGW*, p.3). This strain of negative feeling continues throughout the first two chapters of the daughter's narrative, after which, the mother takes over the narrative. The daughter feels acutely the huge gap of misunderstanding and separation between them:

Mostly I see my mother sitting one table away, and I feel as lonely as I imagine her to be. I think of the enormous distance that separates us and makes us unable to share the most important matters of our life. How did this happen? (*KGW*, p. 33)

This has happened because their consciousnesses are worlds apart, marked by cultural, social, political and psychological chasms, influenced by history. As Pearl drives away from her mother's house after attending Grand Auntie's funeral, tears fill her eyes, not because Grand Auntie is dead but because of her inability to understand why there is such an insurmountable distance between her and her mother: "I quickly hand Phil a tangerine, then turn back toward the window so he does not see my

tears. I watch the landscape we are drifting by: the reservoir, the rolling foothills, the same houses I've passed a hundred times without ever wondering who lives inside. Mile after mile, all of it familiar, yet not, this distance that separates us, me from my mother." (*KGW*, p. 64) She feels like they are strangers to each other: "That is how she is. That is how I am. Always careful to be polite, always trying not to bump into each other, just like strangers. (*KGW*, p. 95)

While studying the mother-daughter dyad in ancient literature dating back to forty centuries, Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner found the mothers and daughters to be "embattled"; slowly moving away from each other into isolation.<sup>4</sup> Davidson and Broner organised a workshop on mothers and daughters in literature in the year 1976. They began collecting essays and art related to this theme. The early collected essays were on "the controversial and sometimes violent relationship between mid-Victorian mothers and daughters."<sup>5</sup> Another essay "was mourning for the mother-daughter relationship in contemporary fiction."<sup>6</sup> One common trait found in these essays was that mothers and daughters were in conflict.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife* too we see much of this conflict between mother and daughter arising because the daughter is always blaming the mother for her inability to share a peaceful co-existence.

Pearl thinks her mother is an incorrigible pessimist who sees bad luck in almost every uttered word or action. Instead of celebrating the small victories and joys of life, she is always complaining and criticizing. She has the ability to make Pearl feel very small like the time when Pearl announced proudly that she had been chosen over two other candidates for the position of a speech and language clinician, she merely asked, “Two? Only two people wanted that job?” (*KGW*, p. 8) Little does Pearl realize that her mother is a product of history, culture and experience. What her daughter understands as negative thinking and criticism is her mother’s way of telling her that she deserves better; that she should be more careful; that she should never give up hope or courage but always watch out for the dangers lurking in the shadows.

Winnie, as a young woman in China, has had her own share of blaming others before she understood that they had no choices- her mother for abandoning her, her mother-in-law for turning Wen Fu into a monster, Helen and Jianguo and Auntie Du for not raising a voice when Wen Fu treated her like a slave in front of their eyes. Later on she realized that her blaming game was a futile exercise of fighting against the kind of society she lived in:

And perhaps this was wrong of me, to blame another woman for her own miseries. But that was how I was raised – never to criticize men or the society they ruled, or Confucius, that awful man who made that

society. I could blame only other women who were more afraid than I.  
(*KGW*, p. 325)

It was in the year 1976 that Adrienne Rich alerted us to the silence that surrounded mother-daughter relationships. According to her, “The cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other.”<sup>7</sup> She then goes on to demonstrate the absence of the mother-daughter relationship from theology, art, sociology, and psychoanalysis.

Interestingly, a recent trend has developed in feminist writings with many women scholars and women writers finding other paths to their mothers. Books, novels, essays, articles, poems, plays, films and television, conferences and courses are dedicated to this relationship. Much of these works trace a mother-daughter relationship “minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy”.<sup>8</sup> There is a breath of fresh air, a wave of new courage and hope, and that is an “embracing of the maternal past.” This is a very courageous attempt to retrace history, in order to make history; to identify a strength which requires the act of revision. In “The Muse as Medusa,” Karen Elias-Button explains that even in contemporary literature the study of mother-daughter

relationships is an examination of the past: “The process of reclaiming the mother involves, in part, an historical reaching-back to the lives women have lived before us, to find there the sense that our experience is rooted in a strength that has managed to survive the centuries.”<sup>9</sup> And finally, the effort of all women writers is to put their new-found energy towards erecting “new stones and inscribing them with the lost names.” Many voices are coming forward to fill the silence. The mother-daughter relationship has become central to feminist scholarship.

Women are now consciously exploring the previously unconscious bonds that have tied them to both their real as well as their historical mothers and grandmothers. In relation to this there is a growing body of literature of matrilineage; women are writing about their female heritage and their female future. While this is not a totally new subject for literature, it is a new passion for the women of this generation, a passion based on the feminist movement and new theory about women, history, and literature.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout history women’s story has been much neglected and there is the possibility that the ancestral mother’s story may be lost altogether if the daughters do not take pains to inscribe them in the memory of this patriarchal world as Davidson and Broner has done:

When we seek the literature of mothers and daughters, we are looking for a lineage not traced in any genealogy. We are tracing our roots back to ancient mothers whose origins are the earth itself but whose traces are as dust. They have no names throughout history, these mothers and daughters. Changelings, they are listed at birth and on tombstones without their conceiver’s name, born and buried as daughter/wife/mother.<sup>11</sup>

Tan is one among the many female writers who answers Marianne Hirsch’s questions-“... I am asking not only where the stories of women

are in men's plots, but where the stories of mothers are in the plots of sons and daughters. I am asking that we try to examine those stories." In her discussion of the silence of Jocasta in the Oedipus story, Hirsch comments that the mother is represented by "silence, negation, damnation, suicide. The story of her desire, the account of her guilt, the rationale for her complicity with a brutal husband, the material of the body which gave birth to a child she could not keep and which then conceived with that child other children- *this* story cannot be filled in because we have no framework within which to do it *from her perspective*."<sup>12</sup> Similar to this analogy, the universal woman remains, in man's words, that wife, that woman, that mother, or that daughter.

Tan's work contributes to the attempt to reverse the absence and silence of the mother-daughter relationship that has prevailed since Biblical times. By telling Pearl that she is not at all like her father Wen Fu, Winnie is discarding the male ancestry and embracing the maternal ancestor. The mother is celebrated and glorified. In *The Female Imagination*, Patricia Meyer Spacks says, "In nineteenth-century novels women express hostility toward their mothers by eliminating them from the narrative: twentieth-century fiction dramatizes the conflict."<sup>13</sup>

Dew is right in saying that *The Kitchen God's Wife* is a more ambitious effort than *The Joy Luck Club*. This does not, of course,

undermine the lofty ideals of Hope and Courage manifested in *The Joy Luck Club*. *The Kitchen God's Wife* is a bold attempt to show the mother's role in retrieving the initial position from devalued woman to a powerful and venerated deity as in the myths of ancient literature. It seems hard to imagine that there was a time in ancient history and literature when women were considered important enough to be bestowed the title of goddesses or "cultic celebrant" and "daughters were valued as much as sons." In her discussion of mother-daughter relationships in the ancient Near East Literature, Judith Ochshorn talks about the intensity of the divine mother-daughter bond which is devoid of conflicts.

Ochshorn reveals that nowhere in Ancient Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian or Canaanite literature, do we find conflicts between divine mothers and daughters. There are instances in the legends where conflicts arise between fathers and sons or fathers and daughters in their struggle for power or divine authority. But there appears to be no such power-struggle between mothers and daughters. Accounts of unusually close mother-daughter relationships appear in some of the earliest literature of the Ancient Near East. At times, the divine mother-child relationship predominates, and where the child is female, the nature of the bond between mother and daughter is pictured as incomparably intense.<sup>14</sup> As Ochshorn further states:

By way of contrast, younger female divinities do not usurp the powers of their goddess-mothers in quite the same fashion.... On the contrary, the literary treatment of mothers and daughters in this early time most often describes their straightforward, unreserved, unambivalent love for each other.<sup>15</sup>

Elaborating this point, she draws our attention to Mesopotamian literature where “one of the earliest and most passionate statements of female filial devotion” is to be found in *The Exaltation of Inanna* by Enheduanna (2300 B.C.). She was a poet, high priestess, theologian and hymnographer, who served in the temples of Akkad. This hymn, says Ochsorn, “extols the power of the Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna; narrates Inanna’s role among civilized people; establishes Enheduanna’s identification with her surrogate mother Inanna; and concludes with a splendid celebration of Inanna’s cultic primacy in the city-states of Ur and Uruk, the ancient centers of Sumerian religion.”<sup>16</sup>

The interesting depiction of Inanna in this hymn is that her “sexual aspect” is minimized and instead she is pictured as “autonomous and awesome in her power.” Rather than celebrating the divine mother as a source of stability and fertility, Enheduanna celebrates her “as the awful goddess of war, the personification and deification of the raging, destructive forces in nature which neither deities nor people can withstand, and the judge and punisher of people, dispensing to them their just deserts...”<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the intensity of the mother-daughter bond is revealed in the Demeter-Kore myth (though this time it is the mother who assumes the greater role) which is enacted and reenacted in one of the most enduring and widespread rituals in the ancient world, the 'Eleusinian Mysteries'. Demeter's daughter Kore was abducted and then raped by Hades who carried her off to the underworld to become his august queen, Persephone. Demeter was so bitterly angered that she refused to perform her duties as the goddess of agriculture. The earth becomes barren and humanity is threatened with starvation until her daughter is restored to her.

Later on, polytheistic belief was superseded by monotheistic belief. The "patriarchal" society was replaced by the Bible which preached worship of one God and men were ascribed a special and closer relation to God than women. Women were identified closely with their normal bodily functions and sexuality rather than to their spiritual powers:

However, within the parameters of the moral and spiritual universe of monotheism, while women are shown as recipients of divine judgement and grace, they also are often described, in comparison to men, as less capable of moral judgement and more tied to the material than the moral or spiritual aspects of existence. At times, female sexuality symbolizes the community's idolatry or is shown as endangering the pursuit of righteousness by men.... This ambivalence toward women is carried over into views of their importance as mothers.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, Ochsorn tells us that even the misogyny of Biblical times did not destroy the bond of love between Ruth and Naomi:

Ruth provides for Naomi in her old age. Naomi, in turn, provides a husband for her daughter-in-law through the custom of her people, levirate marriage. And Ruth is rewarded for her love for Naomi with status explicitly comparable to that held by Leah and Rachel, “who together build the house of Israel” (Ruth, 4:11), for though she bears but one son, he is the grandfather of David (Ruth, 4:17). Interestingly, the action of the book of Ruth is initiated by women; the central result – the birth of David’s ancestor – issues from the love of “mother” and “Daughter” for each other...<sup>19</sup>

Thus mother and daughter bring comfort to one another, as is implied by Naomi’s Hebrew name, “Nechama,” which means “consolation”.

However, in subsequent literature, the Greeks repressed the “awe for the mother-goddess” and forcefully turned the once powerful goddesses “into molds.” Professors Ida H. Washington and Carol E. W. Tobol suggest that the myth of rape and seduction of goddesses (such as Persephone, Leda, or Europa) was one of the “principal ways the Greek invaders dealt with their predecessors’ goddesses, thereby bringing about their ‘death’ as protecting, powerful deities.”<sup>20</sup> Since then women have been oppressed and suppressed by a patriarchal world. Bonds between mothers and their daughters have been severed to a certain extent. Women are made orphans like Winnie. They are abandoned by their mothers. They no longer grow under the protection and guidance of their wiser, older ancestors. Unlike Ruth, Winnie had no “Nechama” to guide her through the tough decisions of life: “So you see, I did not have a mother to tell me who to marry, who not to marry.” In order to forget the disgrace that her mother had brought upon the family, Winnie was packed

off by her own father to an island upriver from Shanghai, and brought up by an uncle and his two wives.

Tan draws us closer to the predicament of the devalued Chinese woman through Winnie, who was married off at a young age to the evil and vicious Wen Fu, and had to endure the loss of her children and her husband's abuse and infidelities during the upheaval of the Japanese invasion. Nothing prepared her for the monster that her husband would turn out to be but her Chinese society had conditioned her to face the sexual exploitation and humiliation that her husband resorted to every night. She had been taught by her mother-in-law to be dutiful to a terrible husband: "So this is what my mother-in-law taught me: To protect my husband so he would protect me. To fear him and think this was respect. To make him a proper hot soup, which was ready to serve only when I had scalded my little finger testing it," (*KGW*, p. 207).

Without the weapons to fight back, Winnie is a woman who has lost so much – her innocence after her marriage to Wen Fu, her children, and her self esteem. The shades of optimism become stronger after Winnie meets and marries Jimmy Louie, and eventually becomes an American. But her wound has not healed yet. Over sixty years have gone by since her mother abandoned her, but she still suffers the pangs of a daughter abandoned by her mother. But Winnie is now a woman

cherished by family and friends and she has realized that there is something every mother ought to do to bridge the gap between herself and her daughter.

Tan shows that, like Winnie, there is a little girl in the heart of every woman, young or old, waiting, hoping for the mother to come and lift her up “high” to celebrate the privilege of being a daughter, the beauty of being a woman and the uniqueness of being a mother. Once again Rich’s remark complements Tan’s message, “The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities....*To refuse to be a victim....* As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours.”<sup>21</sup>

In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Winnie Louie replaces the Kitchen God with the goddess Lady Sorrowfree because the Kitchen God is determined by her to be an unfit god for her daughter’s altar, as well as the altar of her heart. The Kitchen God is unfit because he became a god despite his mistreatment of his good wife. Looking at him smiling down at Winnie’s unhappiness reminded her of Wen Fu. She “took his picture out of the frame” and threw it over the stove. She watched the fire eating up his smug, smiling face and in her mind she could hear the Kitchen God’s Wife shouting, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” A porcelain figure is taken from a storeroom where she has been placed as a “mistake” and is made into a

goddess for Pearl, Lady Sorrowfree. Now Winnie can celebrate Lady

Sorrowfree:

I heard she once had many hardships in her life.... But her smile is genuine, wise, and innocent at the same time. And her hand, see how she just raised it? That means she is just about to speak, or maybe she is telling you to speak. She is ready to listen. She understands English. You could tell her everything.... But sometimes, when you are afraid, you can talk to her. She will listen. She will wash away everything sad with her tears. She will use her stick to chase away everything bad. See her name: Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world. (*KGW*, p. 532)

Together mother and daughter light three sticks of incense. As the smoke rises upwards, their hopes too rise “higher and higher” taking their wishes to heaven. This time it is not a swan feather that the mother wants to give her daughter but a goddess to replace the god which had undeservingly occupied the altar of the female ancestor. Life is like a rally where the mother hands the baton to the daughter. Winnie has run her course. She has crossed many difficult trials that are not of her making but simply a difficult terrain that the China of her time had laid down for her. Her daughter must know of every step of her treacherous trial but at the same time her daughter, if she can help it, must not undergo the same trial. She will bestow upon her the same courage and hope that has navigated and propelled her towards the finishing line so that her daughter will be able to battle through her own difficulties and hardships. She will be like Lady Sorrowfree, teaching her daughter to achieve happiness over bitterness, having no regrets. The mother’s

history must be told but not repeated. “This gift of lady Sorrowfree is symbolic of their bonding; this goddess has all the characteristics of the nurturing, caring, listening mother. Her imperfections lie in her creation; experiences make her. She has none of the characteristics of the Kitchen God.”<sup>22</sup>

Tan wants to provide a fair hearing for the ancestor by compelling Winnie Louie to narrate her bitter past, “I will call Pearl long, long distance. Cost doesn’t matter, I will say ... .And then I will start to tell her, not what happened, but why it happened, how it could not be any other way.” (*KGW*, p. 100) The mother represents all women ancestors of China and disclosing her secret implies revealing her weaknesses as well as her strengths. Winnie’s story is much more than it seems to the reader. It is a story that shows all daughters that mother is not altogether responsible for their ambivalent relationship; that though mother may appear full of dour aphorisms, preternaturally cranky, and intrusive she is a product of things she could do nothing about. For this reason, her daughter must listen to her story.

Marie Booth Foster recognizes the importance of self-exploration, appreciation of cultures and knowledge of one’s history. Each must come to grips with being her mother’s daughter. Because of their different historical backgrounds, both mother and daughter, specially the daughter,

feel that the mother stands outside the daughter's life. Ironically it is the revelation of the mother's long-hidden history that will bridge the gap between them and end that feeling of antagonism as it did for Winnie and Pearl after they had shared their secrets. Winnie had just told Pearl "the tragedy of her life," but they were laughing together like small children. Pearl too experiences a silent rush of peace after she tells her mother her own tragedy, that she is afflicted with multiple sclerosis. The questions her mother threw at her and the fuss she made over her ailment was no longer irritating. Rather she began to like it because now she knew this was her mother's way of comforting her:

.... She glared at me."How can you say this? How can you think this way? What do you call this disease again? Write it down. Tomorrow I am going to Auntie Du's herb doctor. And after that, I will think of a way." She was rummaging through her junk drawer for a pencil, a piece of paper. I was going to protest, to tell her she was working herself up in a frenzy for nothing. But all of a sudden I realized: I didn't want her to stop. I was relieved in a strange way. Or perhaps relief was not the feeling. Because the pain was still there. She was tearing it away – my protective shell, my anger, my deepest fears, my despair. She was putting all these into her own heart, so that I could finally see what was left. Hope," (*KGW* p. 515)

Pearl, the abandoned child finds her mother. Nonetheless, she does not assume the Chinese identity totally. Neither does she embrace the mother's beliefs. She is a second-generation Chinese American with her own views, principles and beliefs but she is a more complete person for having shared her mother's history. As Judith Caesar writes in her essay, "When, at the end, she [Pearl] accepts her mother's herbal cures and the

offering to Lady Sorrowfree, she does so as an acceptance of her mother's solicitude, not her beliefs. She hasn't found a "Chinese identity"...instead she has found a closer relationship with her mother and an insight into the seemingly conflicting layers of reality in the world around her...”<sup>23</sup>

In this story of struggle and survival, both mother and daughter seek healing- the mother from her haunting past- abandoned by her mother under mysterious circumstances as a young girl of six, marriage to a sadistic man who abused her physically and psychologically, heartbreak over a stillborn child and two children dying young, a patriarchal society that allowed little room for escape from domestic violence, the ravages of war, her flight to America and the love of a good man- and the daughter from her pain upon the loss of her father and the unpredictable disease, multiple sclerosis. After they have revealed their secrets, they prepare to visit China. For Winnie, it will be a journey of memory and forgetting. For Pearl, the journey promises a miraculous healing. But Penelope Fitzgerald warns us, we are not encouraged to think that Pearl will be cured of the “disease”.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, of one thing we are assured, revealing the truth has healed her heart as well as her mother's.

Presenting Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* side by side with the hymn of Enheduanna, we can draw parallels in the stories by focusing on

the way Inanna is celebrated and the way Lady Sorrowfree is elevated. The idea is to remove the undeserving Kitchen God from the historical and cultural altar and replace it with a female figure who has all the attributes of a mother who now takes the place of a goddess; to give her due respect, love and honour because that is what a mother deserves. Only then will she be able to retain her rightful place in the daughter's life. When mother and daughter share this kind of a bond, the daughter will no longer suffer the pangs of the abandoned child and will respond positively to her legacy. Here, like Enheduanna, Tan is redefining the concept of Chinese ancestor by replacing a 'God' with a female figure and facilitating reconciliation between mother and daughter so that they can enjoy that "straightforward, unreserved, unambivalent love" that Ochshorn talks about.

The significance of 'Lady Sorrowfree' is manifold. By replacing the 'Kitchen God' with 'Lady Sorrowfree', Tan not only achieves the empowerment of the woman but also reinforces the importance of feminine qualities that 'Lady Sorrowfree' possessed. Whereas the function of the 'Kitchen God' is characterized by moral judgement and dispensation of due punishment to mortals, 'Lady Sorrowfree's' attributes are that of compassion and forgiveness; a goddess who attentively listens to sad and frightened mortals. The removal of the 'Kitchen God' implies

the rejection of a rationale of judgement and punishment in filial relationships especially that of mothers and daughters because such a rationale does not yield positive results. By raising 'Lady Sorrowfree' to the status of goddess, Tan is metaphorically elevating the role of the mother as ancestor to mythic proportions, which progressively contributes immensely to the literature of matrilineage in feminist fiction.

#### END NOTES

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Eds., Cathy N. Davidson and E.M.Broner, in Introduction to *The Lost Tradition, Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York. 1980.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xii.

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<sup>9</sup> Elias-Button, Karen. "The Muse as Medusa" in Introduction to *The Lost Tradition, Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York. 1980. Eds., Cathy N. Davidson and E.M.Broner, p. 201

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- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.10-11
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>20</sup> Washington, Ida. H and Carol E. Washington Tobol. "Kriemhild and Clytemnestra – Sisters in Crime or Independent Women?" in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York, 1980, p.18.
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- <sup>23</sup> Caesar, Judith. "Patriarchy, Imperialism, and Knowledge in *The Kitchen God's Wife*," in *North Dakota Quarterly* Vol. 62, No. 4, Fall, 1994-1995, pp. 164-74.
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## Chapter IV

### **Ancestors' Ghost: *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995)**

'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.'

(Amy Tan, *The Hundred Secret Sense*, 1995, p.91)

All Amy Tan's novels except *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *Saving Fish from Drowning* have mothers and daughters as the main characters. For reasons of her own, instead of a mother as the Chinese ancestor, she presents a half-sister, Kwan in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. She may not be the biological mother, but virtually, she plays the role of Olivia's mother. Kwan believes 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." (HSS, p. 19) Olivia too admits that her flighty mother had never been around to take care of her so Kwan had acted like her real mother:

With Kwan around, my mother could float guiltlessly through her honeymoon phase with Bob. When my teacher called to say I was

running a fever, it was Kwan who showed up at the nurse's office to take me home. When I fell while roller-skating, Kwan bandaged my elbows. She braided my hair. She packed lunches for Kevin, Tommy, and me. She tried to teach me to sing Chinese nursery songs. She soothed me when I lost a tooth. She ran the washcloth over my neck while I took a bath." (*HSS*, p. 10)

Su-Lin Yu also reveals in her study of the theme of sisterhood in *The Hundred Secret Senses* that "Tan presents the sisterhood as a distinctive variation on motherhood. As Olivia transfers her desire for the mother to Kwan, the relationship between Kwan and Olivia is played out within the parameters of a vertical mother-daughter relationship."<sup>1</sup> Looking back at how things had happened between her mother and herself, Olivia recalls that Kwan had "been more like a mother to [her] than [her] real one." (*HSS*, p. 19)

Though Tan offers us an apparent re-working of the theme of mother-daughter bond by shifting her attention slightly and choosing the theme of sister-hood, we are confronted by the same conflict between the Chinese ancestor and the young Chinese-American daughter. Kwan's voice and presence is that of the ancestral mother.

Olivia Bishop, a commercial photographer, is the novel's primary narrator representing the Chinese-American daughter and Kwan, twelve years her senior, is her half-sister. Kwan is the product of her father's first marriage in China and she represents the Chinese ancestor. Jack Yee, Olivia's father, was a Chinese who had immigrated to America. Olivia's

mother, Louise Kenfield was born in Moscow but moved to San Francisco and got married. Olivia, her mother and her two brothers were shocked to learn at her father's death- bed that they had a half-sister that he had left behind in China. It was his last wish 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!' (*HSS*, p. 6)

Kwan's arrival in America set in motion a whole set of new beliefs and perceptions contrary to what Olivia had grown up with. Coincidentally, it is a ghost (that of her mother) who initiates her 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." (*HSS*, p. 3)

Olivia was very young- 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. The result was that she was taken to a mental asylum to be treated. All that the doctors at the hospital could do was 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." (HSS, p. 14) They could not erase her ghosts because that would always remain part of her belief system, her culture. The shock treatments merely released all her ghosts; her *yin* eyes were no longer a secret. Kwan had stories to tell about 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." (HSS, p. 15) Kwan's 'eccentricity' or 'wackiness' shines through, affecting people around her, especially Olivia. 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." (HSS, p. 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’...” (*HSS*, p. 16) Her extraordinary ability is reminiscent of witch-doctors and quacks in primitive societies where such abilities were sought after then but is now waved away as rubbish.

Kwan is the most eccentric among Tan’s characters. She tells stories from her perspective which cannot be defined as objective or rational. The ghosts in her stories are very real to her. Her world is not different; it is only her experience of the world that is different. *Yin* people, for Kwan, are not Olivia’s interpretation of ‘ghosts’. They don’t haunt or scare people. They are spirits that guide Kwan to insights concerning complex human emotions in a complex world. These spirits give insight into emotions like love, hope, loyalty and courage. Tan’s comment on *yin* people is that they are those who “give one a sense of what other people are feeling”.<sup>2</sup> This, according to Tan is the “purest form of communication.” Since Kwan can achieve a sense of what others are feeling through her *yin* eyes, there is apparently no need for misunderstanding or mistranslation.

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.” (*HSS*, p. 17)

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 victim of Kwan’s ‘weirdness’.

Kwan also assumes the role of multiple characters. 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 takes us away from the present to the past to a place called Thistle Mountain, just south of Changmian. This is a totally different world. 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. 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. (HSS, p. 26-27)

Tan sets part of her story 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. 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 the environs of the Thistle Mountain (Zing Shan), the Taiping stronghold in Guangxi.

Tan also borrows from the history of Hakka people and the Buddhist teaching of reincarnation. Hong Xiuquan and most of his followers were Hakka. The feud between the Hakka (“guest people”) and the Punti (“Local Cantonese”) leads to 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.

Kwan of the present is a down- to- earth, ordinary 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. She keeps appearing and disappearing and the disturbing fact is that this magical atmosphere prevails in all her three worlds. Even as she is considered ordinary, Kwan cannot be regarded as normal. She has too many secrets. And the stories she narrates to her sister are like fairy tales. Dead people walk side by side with the living engaged in very serious conversation with each other. People are reborn

with different nationalities, languages and personalities. One can dig a hole in the ground and see naked people dancing underground.

Olivia is always sandwiched between the two contradictory views concerning ghosts. 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 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 Buncake.<sup>3</sup> This linking of different space and time foregrounds the mystical connection between Kwan and Olivia, crossing the borders of generation and culture.

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 advice 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. Since Tan writes about things closest to her life, Kwan

is certainly a character who is close to her heart. In this respect, Tan has written a novel in the genre of ‘magical realism’, which is “*always serious, never escapist*, because it is trying to convey the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed. Magical realism is a kind of realism, but one different from the realism that most of our culture *now* experiences.” (Italics mine)<sup>4</sup>

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.’<sup>5</sup> In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, ghosts turn out to be more than representations of “identity”. They are a projection of what one feels and believes. 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 with 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.’”(HSS, p. 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. (HSS, p. 96)

From the interviews Tan has given on different occasions to different interviewers, we don’t see her talking about magical realism *per se* but that is a technique she has applied in the portrayal of Kwan and in depicting spirits- the *yin* people- in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. She has circumscribed the interplay of human emotions within two worlds by invoking “spirits” or “ghosts”. She talks about how spirits have been a part of her life for at least twenty years. She grew up with many different kinds of spirits in her imagination. Her mother influenced her with a mix of animism, ancestor worship, Buddhism and even Catholicism, while her father, who was a Baptist minister, believed in the ‘Holy Ghost’ or “Holy

spirit'. Her mother used to talk about ghosts from the time she was a little girl, in almost the same way that Kwan filled Olivia's childhood with stories about ghosts. When her father died, she unleashed all the ghosts within her and talked openly about them. She even made Tan use an Ouija board to talk to the spirits of her dead father and brother. There had been a lot of deaths in her life, of people who had been close to her. Mingled with her mother and grandmother's stories about spirits, these experiences have influenced her belief system as well as raised questions of identity and values in her life. The irrational, mystical and intuitive ancestor has much to teach the rational, realistic Chinese American daughter, which Tan is exploring in this novel.

According to Magdalena Delicka, magical realism is "a mode which crosses the borders between two different forms of reasoning. The very term 'magical realism' already suggests a binary opposition between two separate discourses: the realistic and the magical."<sup>6</sup> The premise of 'magical realism' is defamiliarization- to make the familiar unfamiliar and vice-versa; to create different ways of looking at the world.

The principal conflict in the relationship of Kwan and Olivia emerges out of different world views. 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. The Chinese American daughter has an inbuilt habit of mind that tries 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 general law, and in doing so has often tended to exclude 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 lives with plausible explanations and give such 'weird' events a space of their own which is intricately linked to their everyday activities. Precisely, Kwan's assimilation into American life is not totally without its 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 laughed 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” (*HSS*, p. 39) and not knowing when one is laughed at. Kwan is considered ‘wacky’ or ‘weird’ by her American friends and relatives because her actions and beliefs are not in correspondence to this general law of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’.

Tan’s loyalty to an alternative reality is evident from Kwan’s contemplation about the same word ‘retard’ in connection to Miss Banner, who she once thought was retarded. She had difficulty adapting to Chinese culture and language. It was Kwan who taught her. During their first meeting, “her speech was like a baby’s!” (*HSS*, p. 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’. On the other side, like a shot into the past in a time machine, we have 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 were

projected as retarded because of difficulties in communication. When one thinks in one language and speaks in another, meaning gets misplaced. Hence the confusion. 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.<sup>7</sup>

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? Which is more important, reasoning or feeling? Is it possible for a Chinese ancestral mother and an American daughter 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 another reality 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

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.”(HSS, p. 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 appears to have been greatly influenced by 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’.<sup>9</sup> 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.’<sup>10</sup> According to Jung, the deepest structure of the human mind is the collective unconscious. 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"<sup>11</sup> 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 who has witnessed two realities, that of the Western rational reality and that of the Eastern magical reality. 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" (*HSS*, p. 223) She cannot perceive that life is a paradox, both *yin* and *yang*. That is why she is pounded 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" (*HSS*, p. 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." (*HSS*, p. 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.

Kwan as a symbol of *yin* and *yang*, as a body containing both positive and negative charges, as a paradox, acquires better powers of perceiving and discerning the universe. She gains the ability to look into the soul of things by weighing and balancing the binary oppositions of

life: “She dispenses health warnings, herbal recommendations, and opinions on how to fix just about anything, from broken cups to broken marriages.” (*HSS*, p. 18) Imbued with this mystical power, Kwan is all set to resolve the conflicts in Olivia’s personal life.

Being a paradox, Kwan is wacky by “Chinese standards” too as Olivia comments, “A lot of stuff she says and does would strain the credulity of most people who are not on antipsychotic drugs or living in cult farms.” (*HSS*, p. 17) Tan’s character is not representative of all Chinese culture and beliefs in totality. She is one of those among millions who don’t have a face or a nationality but are endowed with powers, or in other words, senses beyond the normal. She belongs to that microscopic group of people who can conduct séances, talk to the dead and pry into certain questions whose answers the spirits from the other side might perhaps be capable of furnishing. She is neither harmful nor a menace to society, considering her “wackiness”. Ordinary people too are not equipped to question her fathomless insights. She is not on the edge of madness like those people who stand with placards shouting “The End is Near”, or those who “chant on the sidewalk like [the] guy on Market Street who screams that California is doomed to slide into the ocean like a plate of clams.” (*HSS*, p. 17) Kwan is not a charlatan professing to tell fortunes for fast money: “she’s not into New Age profiteering; you don’t

have to pay her a hundred fifty an hour just to hear her reveal what's wrong with your past life. She'll tell you for free, even if you don't ask." (*HSS*, p. 17) She is neither an imposter nor concerned about being different. Kwan is unassuming and ordinary; the only special quality about her being that she is a paradox, a hologram of the principles of *yin* and *yang*, yet a character few people would understand: "Most of the time, Kwan is like anyone else, standing in line, shopping for bargains, counting success in small change.... But Kwan is odd, no getting around that." (*HSS*, p. 17) And yet she is the structuring principle in Olivia's life.

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." (*HSS*, p. 12) What is certainly evident from the beginning of this novel is Tan's concerns 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." (*HSS*, p. 20)

Kwan, like Nunumu is self-effacing, selfless, loyal, patient, loving and all 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" (*HSS*, p. 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. (*HSS*, p. 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?” (*HSS*, p.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.” (*HSS*, p. 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]" (*HSS*, p. 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." (*HSS*, p. 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.<sup>12</sup> 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." (*HSS*, p. 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.'" (*HSS*, p. 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."<sup>13</sup> 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." (*HSS*, p. 58)

Olivia had fallen deeply in love with Simon and she knew that he possessed the qualities capable of unleashing a "secret and better part" (*HSS*, p. 60) of her. But there was the ghost of Elza, Simon's former girlfriend who had died in an accident, coming between them. Elza's ghost is the perfect example of Olivia's version of a ghost- a spirit that haunts, disturbs, and destroys. Through Olivia, Tan explores the journey of an individual who is searching for a deeper meaning of life. Olivia, in her own words, was so "stupid -in-love" with Simon that she committed the mistake of embracing Elza's former life as a means of endearing herself to Simon. Leaving aside her own likes and dislikes she opted for

everything Elza liked- from “oyster-and-chestnut stuffing” to music of the latter’s favourite musicians. However, after six months of *playing* the role of the understanding, self-effacing, sacrificial friend, Olivia wanted to get rid of the haunting ghost of Elza. Consequently, she realizes too late that out of her insecurities she had nurtured the ghost, bringing her to life in both their hearts.

Out of desperation she sought Kwan as an accomplice, entreating her to help out Simon in exorcising his obsession for his dead girlfriend, hinting that she should convey the message from Elza’s ghost asking him to forget her and to continue with his new life. Kwan performs her mock-séance in a way that “impresses” Olivia and mesmerizes Simon.<sup>14</sup> Olivia’s trick is apparently successful but she would be forever haunted by an additional ghost- the ghost of her doubts and fears- since she has not been exorcised as Simon was:

On countless nights, I’ve awakened in the dark with a recurring fever, my mind whirling, scared about the truth. Did Kwan hear what I heard? Did she lie for my sake? If Simon found out we’d tricked him, what would he do? Would he realize he didn’t love me? (*HSS*, p. 96)

Lack of trust had impelled Olivia to resort to trickery, a step which pre-empts gradual decay of her relationship with Simon: “Suddenly, everything about our life seemed predictable yet meaningless. It was like fitting all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle only to find the completed result was a production of corny art, great effort leading to trivial

disappointment. Sure, in some ways we were compatible- sexually, intellectually, professionally. But we weren't *special*, not like people who truly belonged to each other. We were partners, not soul mates, two separate people who happened to be sharing a menu and a life. Our whole wasn't greater than the sum of our parts. Our life wasn't destined. It was the result of a tragic accident and a dumb ghost trick. That's why he had no great passion for me." (*HSS*, p.112) While Simon is, apparently, comfortable and unperturbed 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." (*HSS*, p.114)

This inability to pin-point what she actually wants out of her marriage proves destructive because Simon cannot apprehend her tantrums and tirades. 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." (HSS, p.115)

Kwan is a soothing balm 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...”” (*HSS*, p.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.” (*HSS*, p. 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." (*HSS*, p.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."<sup>15</sup> A reflection on their childhoods and present

circumstances reveal 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?

With these questions steering her towards retrospection, 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." (*HSS*, p. 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?" (*HSS*, p.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." (*HSS*, p.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.” (*HSS*, p. 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....”” (*HSS*, p. 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.” (*HSS*, p. 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* in a hologram titled "Love", it is clearly perceived that Tan has created a work of art. After all, it is love that endures; that makes the world go round. This hologram of love encompasses what she believes. Love comes out of the combination of *yin* and *yang*- both "happy and sad" (*HSS*, p. 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?" (*HSS*, p. 67) In short, life is a paradox. 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. It is when she has imbibed these senses or ‘vibes’ according to her American translation that she enters the world of paradox: “Olivia feel[s] as if the membrane separating the two halves of [her] life has finally been shed.”(HSS, p. 205) She finally succeeds in finding the balance between the binary oppositions of the *yin/yang* hologram of her own life and comes to understand that one “cannot just balance checkbook” but “Must balance life too” (HSS, p. 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. (HSS, pp. 361-362)

In an interview<sup>16</sup> 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.”

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. In the same interview she says, "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."

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. (*HSS*, pp. 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." (*HSS*, p.321)

The dynamics of mother-daughter relationship in *The Hundred Secret Senses* takes place in a totally different realm- that of the ancestor's spiritual world. Kwan is a metaphor of the Chinese woman's realm of spirituality. She is the intruding figure in an otherwise generally accepted American reality and therefore initiates a magical realistic mode of narration. Hers is a mystical world where ghost take the place of psychiatrists and modern problems are resolved through an understanding of the 'Hundred Secret Senses'. In spite of the difficulties in experimenting with a new narrative of time and space, Tan's achievement

is laudable because she has successfully worked out an amiable negotiation between the Chinese mother and American daughter through Kwan as the mystical ancestor. This is indeed Tan's way of showing that multiple possibilities of genre exist which she has successfully employed in this novel by depicting mother-daughter relationships in this manner.

### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Yu, Su-Lin. "Sisterhood as Cultural Difference in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Cristina Garcia's *The Aguero Sisters* in *Critique*, Summer 2006, Vol. 47. No. 4, p.349.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, Jami. Interview, Bookreporter.com, 1996-2005.

<sup>3</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Flamingo, Hammersmith, London, W6 8JB, 1995, pp. 228-232.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.Writing-world.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, Ken-Fang. "Cultural Translation and the Exorcist: A Reading of Kingston's and Tan's Ghost Stories. MELUS. Los Angeles. Summer 2004. Vol. 29, Iss-2; p.106.

<sup>6</sup> Delicka, Magdalena. "American Magic Realism: Crossing the Borders in Literatures of the Margins." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 6 (1997): pp.25-33.

<sup>7</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Flamingo, Hammersmith, London, W6 8JB, 1995, pp. 40-42.

<sup>8</sup> Holroyd, Stuart and Neil Powel. *Mysteries of Magic*. Bloomsbury Book. London 1991.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Shapiro, Laura. "Ghost Story" *Newsweek* 126.19 (6 Nov. 1995): p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Flamingo, Hammersmith, London, W6 8JB, 1995, pp.120-123.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, Ken-Fang. "Cultural Translation and the Exorcist: A Reading of Kingston's and Tan's Ghost Stories. MELUS. Los Angeles. Summer 2004. Vol. 29, Iss-2; p.105.

<sup>14</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Flamingo, Hammersmith, London, W6 8JB, 1995, pp.94-95.

<sup>15</sup> Delicka, Magdalena. American Magic Realism: Crossing the Borders in Literature of the Margins. *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 6 (1997): pp.25-33.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, The Hall of Arts. 'Amy Tan: Best Selling Novelist'. June 28, 1996 Sun Valley, Idaho.

## Chapter V

### **Ancestor's Voice: *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001)**

“How could beauty be more than divine?” I murmured, knowing I would soon learn the answer.

‘The fourth level,’ Kai Jing said, ‘is greater than this, and it is within each mortal’s nature to find it. We can sense it. It occurs without motivation or desire or knowledge of what may result. It is pure. It is what innocent children have. It is what old masters regain once they have lost their minds and become children again.’

He turned the page. On the next was an oval. ‘This painting is called *Inside the Middle of a Bamboo Stalk*. The oval is what you see if you are inside looking up or looking down. It is the simplicity of being within, no reason or explanation for being there. It is the natural wonder that anything exists in relation to another, an inky oval to a page of white paper, a person to a bamboo stalk, the viewer to the painting.’

(Amy Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, 2001, pp.277-278)

For the first time, Amy Tan re-writes the story of mother-daughter relationships from the perspective of the mother through the written word. In the preceding novels, stories are passed down from ancestor to daughter through oral story-telling. But in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the power of the written word is closely linked to salvaging memory. LuLing Young, the representative ancestor is incapable of retaining her memory anymore due to Alzheimers’. Day by day, the words on the pages of her memory are erased. The written words act as the saviour. Thankfully, she has descended from a family of ink-makers, learning calligraphy from early childhood and was taught to write by a voiceless mother.

In an interview with Dylan Foley, Tan remarks that she was inspired to write *The Bonesetter's Daughter* because she was “all tied up in a mix of emotions” where “the whole idea of existence- the loss of one’s memory” especially that of her ancestor was so disturbing. Whatever memory she had of her grandmother was the memory of her mother’s memory of her own mother. Her grandmother existed in a “memory of a memory”. Thus, writing *The Bonesetter's Daughter* was a form of “ancestor worship”. Ancestor worship, according to Tan, was an important part of Chinese culture, not in the sense that they were made into deities, but that they continued to live in the hearts of people as long as they were remembered. For the Chinese it is very important to remember one’s ancestors, to do rituals. Chinese people are taught to show the utmost loyalty to their ancestors without questioning their wisdom and any sign of disrespect to an elder makes them traitors of their ancestors and all that they stand for- their beliefs, morals and values. The woman, especially, must never step beyond those boundaries marked out by ancestors. The foot-binding culture serves as the best symbol of such bondage in a patriarchal society. Ancestors were the links through which the Chinese family approached the gods. Raymond Dawson gives further insight into the system of ancestor worship in China:

The importance of the family in Chinese society has become a commonplace, and ancestor-worship is the central feature to which all

other aspects of the Chinese family pattern may be related. It was ancestor-worship which was an almost certain guarantee of a family's survival through many generations, because of the supreme filial duty of ensuring that there were sons to carry on the sacrifices. It was ancestor-worship which was basically responsible for concubinage undertaken in order to guarantee continuity when the first wife had no son, and for the low status accorded to girl-children because ultimately they could play no part in securing the family line.<sup>1</sup>

For Tan, writing about her ancestors was her way of performing ritual.<sup>2</sup> In the novel, Ruth, the daughter, hosts a dinner in celebration of their Chinese thanksgiving. It is a family re-union where all the guests are connected by blood or marriage. As she stands up to deliver a brief speech after dinner, she realizes how important family reunions are. They are "a ritual to preserve what was left of the family" (BSD, p. 101). Looking around her, Ruth experiences fear of losing all family ties once the older generation was gone. Her own mother was ageing and losing her memory which only accelerated the urgency to make an effort to strengthen family ties.

Tan looks beyond the traditional worship of male ancestors and takes a bold leap by worshipping the female ancestor- from daughter to mother to grandmother. Traditionally, a female ancestor could intercede on behalf of women desiring children only and more importance was attached to male ancestors. The portraits or photographs of the female ancestors were generally "stuck in trunks or forgotten." (BSD, p.5) In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan restores the Goddess of mercy from her

peripheral role among the Chinese gods and places her in an important position where her compassionate power and understanding strength can be bestowed upon all the women who look up to her for mercy: "...the Goddess of Mercy, her face smooth, free of worry. Her black eyes looked into mine. Only she listened to the woes and wishes of women." (*BSD*, p.4)

By looking afresh at the concept of ancestor worship, Tan is re-visioning the myths, beliefs and assumptions that are taken to be basic. Putting the mother's story within a historical framework- that of the Japanese invasion of China- Tan subverts the basic assumption that history consists of the economic, political, cultural and social implications of 'influential men' alone. Women too have been a part of history, irrespective of the nature of their role. In many ways, the historical upheavels of a society have affected the personal lives of women with far greater consequences than men because of their sex. However, what affects the personality of a woman is apparently negligible because her experiences, however harrowing, do not affect the commonly believed higher activities of society. She is a casualty unless she too wields the equivalent power of a man and plays a direct role in determining the fate of society. "Women as a gender have no history," according to Meng and Dai. They explain in their book, *Emerging From*

*the Surface of History* (1989), that “history belongs to father, not mothers. Mother is no parent except as a personification of father’s will, without which, mother is only a signifier.” *Kai Jing*, LuLing’s first husband was killed by the Japanese after he was taken away by the Chinese soldiers to fulfill his role as a patriot. His death was recorded officially and he was posthumously awarded martyrdom after the war. But there is absolute silence about the woman who was Kai Jing’s wife; the hardship she underwent during and after the war. Her story is her own and history has forgotten this woman’s role in rescuing the young girls of the orphanage and the experiences close to her heart. Hence, Tan is tracing and writing the history of women whose stories are close to the heart which become personal and emotional chronicles in contrast to men’s history.

If worship of male ancestors has relegated the position of women to the periphery, since they played no part in securing the family line, Tan is determined to excavate the female ancestor from her grave and empower her so that at least she could listen to the woes of womenfolk. Thus she traces the family line of her mother, the passions, feelings, hopes and strengths of her female ancestors. Female ancestors, neglected for a long time, need to be worshipped because matrilineage is as important as patrilineage. This search for the female ancestor is a form of strengthening Tan’s belief that one can understand life and the world by

asking first “how things begin”. Tracing her own life to that of her mother and her mother’s mother, she realises that she is in her mother’s “bones”. Tracing back to how and when the first word was spoken, Tan, like LuLing believes the first word could have been “ma” because “a mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin.” (*BSD*, p. 299) Sadly many mothers’ stories have disappeared without a trace and their names have become dust. Ruth’s grandmother too had existed and yet without a name. Tan is not the only writer to attribute the beginning of things to the mother. Many Native American mythologies associate the creation of the world with the power of mothering and the mother-daughter bond. Central to some South-West tribal theology is the idea of Woman who creates not through her body but through her powers of thought. North-West Coastal Indians tell their origin story through the figure of Copper Woman, washed up in an uninhabited land, she creates a manikin from her tears of loneliness by whom she conceives a daughter, Mowita, genetrix of all the peoples of the world. South-Western Native Americans also highly regard the mother-daughter relationship as a life-long tie, involving grandmothers who hand down the maternal heritage. They associate the importance of mother to the myth of Spider Woman who is “the grandmother of earth and all living things.”<sup>3</sup> In her assertion of mother as the giver of life, as the source where things begin, Tan is also

implying that it is mother who first imparts language to the child. In this respect, language is a maternal heritage. Mother teaches daughter how to write keeping one's intentions in mind. Mother teaches daughter to gather the "free-flowing" of her heart and write what is close to it. Especially for people juggling two cultures and languages like Tan, language becomes problematic. Doubtless, the assertion that a child's language originates in the mother is open to debate. One could disagree with Tan that language is derived from mother because like all her daughter characters, Tan too knows little of her Chinese language. As a matter of fact, the language that she uses as a writer is English. It would be worthwhile to argue that language in a child is conditioned and not genetic or essentialist. Language acquisition can be determined by material culture, national ideology, politics of language, location, social environment and such other determinants. As valid as these arguments are, they are beside the point here because Tan's assertion arises from the point of view of a second generation Chinese American whose primary concern is not the mother tongue *per se* (which in her case would be Chinese) but the intentions and feelings contained in the language that her mother uses (which in this case could be Chinese as well as English), and which eventually filters into the sensibilities of the daughter as well. In her essay, "Mother Tongue", Tan voices her belief that the language spoken

by the family, especially that of the mother, whether it is Chinese or English influences the language of the child. As further proof to this assertion, Tan illustrates how, in 1985, when she first started writing fiction, she “wittily crafted sentences” like “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state.” She decided that the lines were “terrible”. Then she began to write with all the “Englishes” that she grew up with, “the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”.... I wanted to capture what language ability test could never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.”<sup>4</sup> Thus for Tan, performing the ritual of writing as a way of reciting her matrilineage involves writing in a manner that engages continuity of mother’s language, however fragmented it is because embedded in that language is her intentions.

The novel opens with LuLing Young’s agitated attempt to remember her mother’s name. She can remember many incidents of her childhood but the most important thing- the name that links her to a maternal past- has vanished from her memory: “I know all this, yet there is one name I cannot remember. It is there in the oldest layer of my memory, and I cannot dig it out.” It is reminiscent of the nostalgia that

resides in women about the mothers whose names slip away from their memories because the patriarchal society requires that the family name should be passed on from father to son to grandson. Mothers' names are never recorded; they live as long as they remain in the memories of their children, and perhaps, grandchildren. Even then, the memories are that of the woman as a mother or wife or daughter and never as one possessed of the power to leave a historical and cultural legacy behind. The remembered ancestor is never the woman but the man.

At the beginning of the story there is a persistent nudging from the voiceless mother to the daughter to 'never' forget her own mother's name. Sadly, the daughter does not take her mother's plea to heart and she forgets her 'family name'. The importance of claiming back that name comes to her only when her mother is on the verge of losing her memory. She recognizes the importance of her mother's story; how it will act as the antidote to all her fears and misconceptions about life; how remembering her mother's name will make sense of her own life. She no longer wants to live a life that is replete with ambivalence and misunderstanding. She wants to know why events and incidents in her life have taken different twists and turns. In short she wants to search for balance in her life which she believes can be achieved through her mother's good intentions. By claiming her mother's name, she will be

claiming her own life and making sense of the things that have happened and are happening in her life: “Almost all that mattered in my life has disappeared, and the worst is losing [mother’s] name....What is our name? I always meant to claim it as my own. Come help me remember.... Don’t you recognize me? I am LuLing, your daughter.” (*BSD*, p.6)

Searching for the family name is Ruth’s way of invoking the ancestors to act as her muse and saviour. Looking at her grandmother’s photograph, Ruth finds inspiration. “Through it she can see from the past clear into the present.” (*BSD*, p. 401) Precious Auntie comes alive in her imagination and “side by side, Ruth and her grandmother begin. Words flow.... They write about what happened, how they can make other things happen. They write stories of things that are but should not have been. They write about what could have been, what still might be. They write of a past that can be changed. After all...what is the past but what we choose to remember? They can choose not to hide it, to take what’s broken, to feel the pain and know that it will heal. They know where happiness lies, not in a cave or a country, but in love and the freedom to give and take what has been there all along.” (*BSD*, pp. 402-403)

Tan’s personal concern about the loss of memory; the fear that one may forget the most important memories of one’s life is portrayed in the way so many of her characters resort to different methods to retain what

they should not forget. Miss Grutoff, the American missionary who works at the orphanage begins to make flags after flags when she senses that the Japanese would one day occupy the orphanage. She cannot speak aloud about the impending doom. Nevertheless, she desires to retain the wonderful memories at the orphanage so she starts sewing a star or a strip on the American flags everyday- “She was saving some memory, afraid of forgetting.” (*BSD*, p. 305) LuLing too resorts to similar ways of never forgetting her beloved husband. She takes the dragon bones that Kai Jing had dug up and begins to carve words into them with a needle. She writes, “You are beauty, we are beauty, we are divine, unchanged by time”, the same words Kai Jing had uttered before he was killed by the Japanese. Like a ritual, she transforms the “uttered” into “written”, and places the bones before Kai Jing’s grave. These are the words she wants to remember because they embody her love for Kai Jing. Symbolically, when LuLing flees from the war she carries with her the manuscript that Precious Auntie had written and wrapped for her in a blue cloth.

Ruth’s role in the novel is to lend voice to her ancestors through three generations “to speak for her mother, translating for her mother, translating for other people.”<sup>5</sup> Just as Precious Auntie, Ruth’s grandmother in the novel, was unable to say who she really was, Tan’s mother kept her past away from her own daughter, unable to tell her even

her real name. Precious Auntie's voicelessness was her mother's voicelessness too. Silence and voice constitute a dominant motif in the novel. Precious Auntie speaks through sign language: "She 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.... Hand-talk, face-talk, and chalk-talk were the languages I grew up with, soundless and strong." (BSD, p. 2) Ruth's mother, who is a Chinese immigrant, finds her acquisition of English very limited. People don't understand her very often or they simply ignored her because of her 'fractured' English. Most of the time Ruth has to act as her mother's interpreter: "By the time she was ten, Ruth was the English speaking "Mrs LuLing Young" on the telephone, the one who made appointments for the doctor, the one who wrote to the bank." (BSD, p. 50)

Ruth's muteness is seen by Carol Cujec in "Excavating Memory, Reconstructing Legacy" as "a metaphor for the passive role she has assumed in her relationship with her partner Art and his two teenage daughters who take her endless care-giving for granted." It is also seen as suggestive of "the secrecy that has fractured her relationship with her mother." Added to this it can also be seen as a metaphor for the silence that emerges out of their everyday battles; the loss of LuLing's memory;

Ruth's inability to translate her mother's story from Chinese to English. In the first three novels, Tan's ancestors tell their stories orally. They follow the traditional Chinese narration. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* breaks through the barrier of traditional oral storytelling and gives voice to the characters through the written word. Precious Auntie communicates through writing on a chalkboard. In spite of her inability to talk, she still had a chalkboard-voice. In times of excruciatingly painful silences between her and her mother, Ruth expresses herself in a diary, venting her anger, scribbling words that she would not dare speak out loudly. LuLing finds herself getting disoriented and confused with the onset of Alzheimer and she pens down her secrets in a manuscript for her daughter. This is suggestive of the empowerment of Tan's characters. They are rescued from eternal silences through the written word, which is another powerful form of 'voice' for all of Tan's characters in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Through the process of storytelling, memory assumes utmost importance, since without the power of remembering the past, the characters are incapable of telling their stories, revealing their secrets. Added to this 'remembering' comes the written word which remains even after the narrator is long gone and memory has left the owner of the stories. Nancy Willard also points out in her review of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*: "For Tan, the true keeper of memory is language,

and so the novel is layered with stories that have been written down by mothers for their daughters, passing along secrets that cannot be said out loud but must not be forgotten.

Ruth's method of remembering things was taught by her mother LuLing who had devised a method of counting fingers- an item for each finger. Is it a coincidence that LuLing's story begins with her trying to remember her mother's name while Ruth's story begins with her trying to rake her memory about what number nine of her fingers meant. Ruth knew that "nine was usually something important, a significant number that also stood for *Do not forget, or risk losing all.*" (BSD, p. 20) Finally Ruth remembers that she had promised to drive her mother to see the doctor.

In reviewing *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Willard has captured the power of writing; penning down memories, by referring to the Armenian folklore which talks about three apples that fell from heaven. She laments that while the three apples were presented to the storyteller, the listener and the one who "took it to heart"; there wasn't a fourth apple for the one who wrote the story down.<sup>6</sup> Memory can be illusive; remembering an arduous task. For people who are empowered with the literacy of writing like Precious Aunty, LuLing Young and Ruth, they are able to communicate their stories more truthfully and clearly even in their

different states of speechlessness which threaten the disappearance of stories. LuLing recalls the intentions and meanings imparted in the very act of writing:

I recalled for them what Precious Auntie had taught me about writing characters, how a person must think about her intentions, how her *ch'i* flowed from her body into her arm, through the brush, and into the stroke. Every stroke had meaning, and since every word had many strokes, it also had many meanings. (BSD, p. 269)

Lisa Dunick comments in her essay, “This novel’s intense focus on the literary quality of women’s writing may allow us to recognise that literacy in the form of writing and written texts represents an important and often more effective means of transmitting cultural memories and cultural identity across generational lines than talk-story.”<sup>7</sup> Dunick takes into account Stephen Souris’ insight into the mode of communication of the Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* where an “actual” communication does not take place between the mother and the daughter suggesting that it is the “reader who establishes the connections between the dialogic voices of the text and in whom the prospect for reception of the stories resides.”<sup>8</sup> Tan’s first novel, no doubt, consists of multiple perspectives where all four mothers and their four daughters speak in the first person narrative. The mothers’ voices, instead of talking directly to the daughters, seem to be a thought process which only the readers are

aware of. They talk about telling their stories and their secrets to their daughters but actual communication gets lost.

In Tan's second and third novels, the mothers talk directly to their daughters. The reader is often reminded through brief breaks in the mother's saga that Pearl is listening to her mother Winnie in *The Kitchen God's Wife*. So also, in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan Li's stories about ghosts and her past filter into Olivia's brain as she listens to her sister every night, lying down in the bedroom they shared. Even then, the reader is aware that it is Tan who actually writes these stories and the mothers are merely engaged in "talk-story". Both Winnie and Kwan, along with the four mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* are endowed with the power to speak what was for a long time unspeakable. It is in her fourth novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* that Tan allows the mothers to 'write' their own stories. Precious Auntie, LuLing's mother had a dark secret. She finally writes about these unspeakable things in a manuscript before she dies. LuLing too had secrets that she could not tell anyone. However, when she fears that her memory is failing, she writes her secrets; the truth about her past life in a manuscript that she hands over to her daughter. Tan progresses from the mother's "talk-story" to mother's "written story" in this fourth novel. Dunick calls it an "aesthetic tradition broader than that of talk-story or even of oral narrative", for the mothers are "not

dependent on speech alone” but “are able to move between speech and writing, voice and silence.” Thus, Tan’s fourth novel is a progression from oral history to written history: “*The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is essentially about writing and the act of writing, what fuels it and how it is created. More specifically still, it is about how we, as women, creatively express ourselves via language.”<sup>9</sup>

Tan attempts to explain that writing is not simply ink on paper but “feeling”. This is what LuLing had learnt from her mother and thereby teaches her own daughter: ““When you write...you must gather the free-flowing of your heart.””(BSD, p. 58) A single stroke of the pen or a single word can evoke different “feelings” in different people. Tan demonstrates this through the horizontal stroke that looks like “a spare rib picked clean of meat” in the eyes of Ruth while her mother sees it as “a beam of light” (BSD, p. 59). Tan’s concern about language is explained in her essay, “Mother Tongue” where she talks about the various “Englishes” she had grown up with. The English she uses with her mother is different from the English that she uses in a talk. When she started writing fiction, she envisioned a book that would capture her mother’s “intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.”<sup>10</sup>

Tan says she had always been “fascinated” by language:

I try to create different kinds of languages, which are based on the languages that I grew up with. I had an internal language – as I think

most people do- that is not fully expressible in words, but I try to come closest to it in images and metaphors. I also have a language that I spoke in school and among friends. And I heard a language that was different, which was my mother's language. She also spoke a version of English that wasn't standard and I try to include that. It's what people might call fractured English, but within it were combinations of words that I think, looking back as an adult, were wonderful at expressing herself- this cross between a Chinese sensibility and American circumstances. It's one of the major reasons that I love being a writer...playing with the language.<sup>11</sup>

Her fascination for the power of language, “the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth”<sup>12</sup> is part of her mother's legacy. Whether it was the Chinese language or the “fragmented” English that her mother spoke, her main concern was about preserving the essence of her mother's intentions. In this aspect, Tan has achieved her aim of portraying the internal language of her mother which is “heart-talk” through the written word. Since the mother's “broken” or “fragmented” English is limited, Tan has empowered the mother in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* with literacy so that all her intentions can be translated into perfect English, thereby, bridging the gap in language and understanding between the mother and the daughter. Since the mother believes that only Chinese words make sense, and there is failure in communication whenever she tries to use English with her daughter, LuLing takes recourse to writing down her story in Chinese. As a young girl, Ruth had to translate the American world for her mother “how the world worked, explaining the rules, the restrictions, the time limits on

money-back guarantees” (BSD, p. 65) But when it comes to transferring the mother’s story, they need a mediator who is an expert in both Chinese and English languages for the mother’s language is more complex: “each character is a thought, a feeling, meanings, history, all mixed into one.” (BSD, p. 59)

The first time Ruth acknowledged the power of the written word was after she broke her arm and lost her voice. Her mother gave her a “large tea tray filled with smooth wet sand” (BSD, p.83) so that she could communicate by writing on it. At first her mother asked her simple questions about what she wanted to eat and how the bean curd dish tasted. But soon her mother was asking her opinion on more complex matters like the stock market- “I invest, you think I get lucky” and Ruth wrote “Lucky” (BSD, p. 85) LuLing had taken Ruth’s silence as a form of possession by a higher power, most assuredly, that of Precious Auntie, her own mother. Her mother did not have a voice but spoke to her through gestures and a chalk board. Her guilt about her mother’s death and the unanswered questions that still haunted her made her believe that Precious Auntie would speak to her through her daughter. During Ruth’s silence, her mother cries out in anguish about not being forgiven by her mother and that there is a curse that will bring the death of her entire family. Ruth is too young to realise that her mother has revealed a very

painful and secret part of her life during the brief spell of her silence. The pressure of being the medium of communication grows too heavy and she speaks out in protest. This breaks the spell and her mother summons herself back to the present, pushing away her painful past to the confines of her memory. There is a deliberate break in communication as soon as Ruth recovers her voice.

Words can be powerful in a fearful way too. Like the time Ruth wrote the “fateful” words that led to her mother’s attempted suicide. Ruth and her mother had always had a tempestuous relationship with her mother threatening to kill herself every time Ruth disobeyed her or tried to assert her right to “pursue [her] own happiness” (BSD, p. 158). One day Ruth is caught smoking and the two exchange angry words. Ruth, full of anger, poured into her diary all the harsh words that her momentary madness could evoke. Knowing that her mother had the habit of eavesdropping into her diary in her absence, Ruth wrote something she knew as “risky”: ““You talk about killing yourself, so why don’t you ever do it? I wish you would. Just do it, do it, do it! Go ahead, kill yourself! Precious Auntie wants you to, and so do I!” (BSD, p. 159) The next day, LuLing jumped out of their window, “suffered a broken shoulder, a cracked rib, and a concussion.” (BSD, p.161) Later Ruth realised that she had written something that could not be erased because the deed had been

done. Writing her wishes down was as close to acting them out: “she was stricken with a sense that God, her mother, and precious Auntie knew she that she had committed near- murder. She carefully crossed out the last sentences, running her ballpoint pen over and over the words until everything was a blur of black ink.”(BSD, p. 165) Her only option for redemption was to write another apology which she hoped her mother would read one day-“I’m sorry” – she wrote wishing that her mother would say the same things to her too.

The act of writing is retention of memory. But it can be unforgiving too. As soon as something is written, it gives room for different interpretations and meanings. Teacher Pan tells LuLing, ““When you grind ink against stone you change its character, from un giving to giving, from a single hard form to many flowing forms. But once you put the ink to paper, it becomes unforgiving again. You can’t change it back. If you make a mistake, the only remedy is to throw away the whole thing.””(BSD, p. 295)

Later on in life, LuLing’s illness gets worse and as Ruth rummaged her mother’s things, sorting things to be thrown away and things to be kept, she comes across the manuscripts her mother had written and “she sensed her mother’s life was at stake and the answer was in her hands, had been there all along.”(BSD, p. 167) LuLing’s principle about life is to

remain silent about things that are most important, most meaningful: “A lot of her admonitions had to do with *not* showing what you really meant about all sorts of things: hope, disappointment, and especially love. The less you showed, the more you meant.” (BSD, p. 104) Ruth glanced at the first sentence her mother had written. She could only read as far as “These are the things I should not—”. Ruth assumed that her mother had written something that she should not “tell”, or “write”, or “speak”. Reflecting on the silence her mother had maintained about her past, Ruth could only surmise that her mother had written something “unspeakable”. However, as she looks up the word in the Chinese- English dictionary, she discovers how much emphasis her mother had put in not forgetting her story: “These are the things I should not forget.” Finally it dawns upon Ruth that her mother intends to pass down her story to her daughter as an act of establishing the female ancestry because her story is the only legacy she can leave behind. This maternal heritage is vital to mother-daughter relationships because it embodies the past, the present and hope for the continuity of the future.

LuLing had seen her Great-Granny losing her memory to old age. She had witnessed her grandmother’s “thoughts that were crumbling walls, stones without mortars”. She suspected, in her old age, that she may be afflicted with the same malady but writing comes to her rescue

for she could record those things she should not forget. Writing unclogs the confusion in her head. She discovers that she can remember many more things as she puts pen to paper. Writing is empowering; effortless expression; amplified articulation. Writing cures her of the disease of forgetfulness: “But now that I am writing down so many things, I know I don’t have Great- Granny’s disease.”(BSD, p.179)

What Ruth construes as “confusion” in her mother is actually LuLing’s “truth”. When Ruth takes her mother to the doctor, her mother gives the wrong answers to the questions thrown by the doctor concerning her bio-data. She gives answers that contradict the life that she had been living in America. All the facts and figures about her date of birth, the number of husbands she had and other personal information confuses Ruth. She realises later on in the novel that her mother had been living a lie all the time in America. She had to lie about many things when she immigrated to America. Many “truths” about her life either got lost or covered up due to circumstances beyond her control. Ironically, when her memory begins to fade, her lies disappear quicker than the secret “truths” she had been harbouring for more than fifty years- “Dementia was like a truth serum” (BSD, p. 351). LuLing starts revealing her true age, her actual relationship with Aunt Gaoling- that they were not really sisters at all, and who her mother really was. The disease had no

cure but it had cured LuLing of her needless worries. She had forgotten “to lie” (BSD, p. 376) and with this forgetfulness, LuLing can hope to live without worries and fears. Ruth believes “Dementia was her mother’s redemption, and God would forgive them both for having hurt each other all these years.” (BSD, p. 108) Since her mother has written down her story, loss of memory becomes less painful. Ironically, her mother forgets all the hurtful, destructive parts of their past and remembers only the beautiful ones. As predicted by Kai Jing, “You cannot leave behind spoken words” (BSD, 299), LuLing too has erased all the quarrels and hurtful words she had exchanged with her daughter and salvages the beautiful memories in the form of a manuscript. Ruth’s mother has become “hollow” but has also become “lighter” because the painful memories had been weighing her down like a heavy load, a “curse” that had been haunting her and her family.

An implication of ancestor worship is the belief that life is a continuous process from mother to daughter to granddaughter. The beginning of part two of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* foreshadows this notion. Precious Auntie teaches her daughter LuLing the meaning of their village- “Immortal Heart”. She reiterates the importance of remembering one’s roots, one’s origins because the beginning determines the end. Flapping her hands she tells her daughter, “A person should consider how

things begin. A particular beginning results in a particular end.” (BSD, p.173) Is Tan exploring the notion that life has a circling pattern; that what goes round comes around? Precious Auntie, like Tan’s own grandmother, committed suicide. Ruth’s mother, like Tan’s own mother, Daisy, threatened her about killing herself. Ruth, like Tan, had suicidal thoughts more than once.

The repetitive pattern of unnatural death impels LuLing to believe that there is a curse engulfing the female lineage. This curse brings sadness and misery to the women. When Precious Auntie became “a widow and an orphan in the same day” with the murder of her husband and her father, she murmured, “This is a curse” (BSD, p, 197). She believed the dream where her father came to her and told her that they had been cursed because they had taken the bones of their ancestors from the Monkey’s Jaw. The only way to break the curse was to “return the bones”.

This pattern of repetition spreads to other facets of the women’s lives. Similar misunderstandings occur between mothers and daughters as the daughters grow older; asserting their independence. The daughters provoke the mothers by rebelling and the mothers respond with ““Why am I still alive to hear this child say such things?”” (BSD, p. 217) or ““Why I have daughter like you? Why I live? Why I don’t die long time

‘go?’”(BSD, p. 158) The cyclic pattern continues in the way the mothers reveal their secrets. Precious Auntie told her true story through a written manuscript just before she committed suicide. LuLing narrated her story in a manuscript before Alzheimer got to her. Ruth was a writer who translated other’s thoughts into paper. She eventually ends up writing her own story and that of her ancestors; a legacy for the world. Life itself is a cyclic pattern where a daughter is at first the mother’s child, and later on, the mother to the child her mother becomes.<sup>13</sup>

LuLing was fated to forever mourn for her mother because she refused to read the final pages of her mother’s story which revealed the truth about her parentage. She went to “the end of the world”, searching feverishly for her but it was too late. She was a girl “who had lost part of herself in the End of the World.” (BSD, p. 244) After she is sent to the orphanage, LuLing opens the blue cloth which wrapped Precious Auntie’s pages and discovers a pocket sewn into the cloth. Inside the pocket were “two wondrous things”, an oracle bone symbolising her ancestors and a photo of Precious Auntie as a young girl. Looking at the picture of her mother, LuLing realises “Her face, her hope, her knowledge, her sadness- they were mine” (BSD, p. 270-271) Exploring the personal aspects of her relationship with her mother and delving into her mother’s heritage enables LuLing to rediscover herself in new ways.

She becomes her mother, accepting her mother's reality and reconciling herself to the fact that her mother is closest to her than any other human relations.

In the same way that a mother is where things begin, Tan endorses the idea that only a daughter can really understand her mother. Precious Auntie was dumb but LuLing had learnt to understand her gestures. The daughter was the only one in the family who could translate what was in Precious Auntie's heart. But often the daughter relegates this power within her to please people other than her mother: "Since she could not speak and mother could not read, when I refused to talk for her, she was left wordless, powerless" (BSD, p. 216). Precious Auntie's frustration and despair is suggestive of women who find themselves utterly helpless, their fates dictated by a patriarchal society and deprived of the sympathy of their only hope- their daughters.

At the end of the story, Ruth realises how misunderstood her grandmother and mother was. During her childhood Ruth had resented the unseen presence of Precious Auntie in her mother's life. She had suspected that this ghost was the source of her mother's unhappiness, her sense of doom. Her mother's quirkiness had irritated Ruth no end. Her mother called her "Lootie" because she could not pronounce "Ruth" and she had always wondered why, among all the easy names, her mother had

given her a name she could not even pronounce. Later on, Ruth discovers that her mother had named her after two people who had been her loyal friends during her lonely phase as an orphan. Her English name came from Ruth Grutoff while her Chinese name came from Sister Yu Luyi. Why did she have this skewed vision of her ancestors? Was it because they hid the “truth” about their own lives from her? Or was it because she never tried hard to understand them and find out what they held in their hearts? Perhaps there is no single answer to these questions or maybe the answer is just within Ruth’s grasp. Perhaps the answers are within the questions. One thing that Ruth is certain about- her ancestors are watching over her. They are her source of inspiration; the channel of life. Ruth may not have found all the answers to life but reading the true story of her ancestors has made her realise that it is now her turn to make amends for whatever ambivalences exist between her and her mother; to ask for her forgiveness and to forgive her mother too. Finally, Ruth learns the name of her grandmother and this knowledge fills her with exhilaration that her grandmother existed, and wonderfully, with a name that she would never forget for it was indelibly etched in her memory: “It feels like I’ve found the magic thread to mend a torn-up quilt. It’s wonderful and sad at the same time.” (*BSD*, p. 354)

It is necessary to mention here that Tan has faced fears of losing her own memory through infection of the brain cells by Lyme disease. She has experienced times when she could not remember what she had done five minutes ago. While writing she missed out the first letter of words. She became disoriented and couldn't find her own way home without the help of her dogs. She couldn't drive because she could not decode the messages given by traffic lights, stopping at green lights and going through red ones. Fearing that she might be suffering from Alzheimers', the same disease that was slowly eating away at her own mother's memory, she began to realize how important memory is for our lives. She had nightmares that her mother would die without her actually knowing who she was and that she too would leave the world without knowing who she was because she never knew her mother. For Tan, knowing her mother was the link to finding herself in the world, understanding her own self, discovering what was in her bones and finding a balance in the world. When loss of memory threatens the loss of this story, she had to muster her will to change that fate through the written word. Thus, for Tan, ancestor-worship, recording memories and telling stories, voicing one's secrets are all part of the healing process. Such acts answer the questions that had been haunting her from her childhood; questions about the binary oppositions of memory/loss,

silence/voice, faith/fate and mother/daughter. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is dedicated to Tan's mother and grandmother. It is an autobiography which talks about Tan's personal experiences with her mother. By writing this novel, she has assumed the role of both mother and grandmother. As Professor Lynnn Z. Bloom points out in *Heritages: Dimensions of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Women's Autobiographies*, "The daughter as autobiographer becomes her own mother, she also becomes the recreator of her maternal parent and the controlling adult in their literary relationship." (p. 292)

Ruth has achieved solace and peace of mind through the understanding that her mother's intentions for her had always been for her betterment. Somewhere along the line, the gaps in language, perception and cultural imagination had created rifts between her and her mother. Nonetheless, her mother's voice speaks so clearly of her unconditional love towards her daughter. This is a lesson Ruth learns and she makes up her mind to claim her own voice. She would stop thinking and writing for others. Her mother and grandmother have given her a reason to write for herself. She would no longer be a "ghostwriter" but a writer with a voice of her own- a voice that is delicately yet strongly wrought in the multiple voices of her ancestors:

I look at the photograph of my grandmother. Together we write stories of things that were and shouldn't have been, or could have been, or

might still be. We know the past can be changed. We can choose what we should believe. We can choose what we should remember. That is what frees us, this choice, frees us to hope that we can redeem these same memories for the little girl who became my mother.<sup>14</sup>

*The Bonesetter's Daughter* is a definitive progression of Tan's depiction of mother-daughter relations from the traditional mode to the modern. Oral storytelling and 'talk-story' worked fine in the milieu where mothers were the carriers of the ancestor's history. This is no longer possible in their new habitat where the pace and the pressures of urban life afford them very little opportunity for proper communication. It is for the first time in Tan's depiction of mother-daughter relationships that we see a mother who is empowered to write her story so that her writing becomes the means through which she fulfills her role as the transmitter of ancestral history. By writing down her history; the truth about her past life, the bond between mother and daughter is strengthened. Thus, 'silence' which is a dominant concern of feminist writers is thus circumvented by Tan through the written word.

## END NOTES

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<sup>4</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*, Harper Perennial, 2003, pp.278-279.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Willard, Nancy. "Talking to Ghosts" in *The New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Dunick, Lisa M.S. "The Silencing Effect of Canonicity: Authorship and the Written Word in Amy Tan's Novels." MELUS, Thursday, June 22, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Souris, Stephen. "'Only Two Kinds of Daughters': Inter-Monologue Dialogicity in *The Joy Luck Club*," in MELUS, Vol. 19, No. 2, Summer, 1994, pp. 99-124.

<sup>9</sup> Hull, Akasha. "Uncommon Language," in *The Women's Review of Books*, vol. 18. No. 9 (June, 2001), p.13.

<sup>10</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*, Harper Perennial, 2003, p.279.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>13</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Ballantine Books, New York, p. 346.

<sup>14</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*, Harper Perennial, 2003, p. 104.

## **Chapter VI**

### **Conclusion**

Most mother-daughter stories in general are immersed within the theme of patriarchal negotiations where the young nubile daughter is separated from the mother with or without her consent. This separation initiates the daughter into an economic negotiation either as a wife or concubine which is accompanied by overtones of rape in the sense that the man is entitled to sex for the daughter's security and survival. While rape became an instrument for the Greek gods in the literature of antiquity to dispossess the goddesses of their power and strength and hence reduce women to subservient beings, the lords of feudal society assumed the right to rape the female serfs working under them. So also, slave stories of ancient Roman, Egyptian empires and the colonial era are replete with sexual exploitation of women slaves. The mothers were left with heavy frustration or even guilt because they were powerless to rescue their daughters from this patriarchal negotiation.

Meanwhile, the resentment of daughters towards their mothers grows when they find themselves forced to comply with the patriarchal decisions because they fail to understand their mothers' powerlessness. Between their frustrations and resentments a chasm is formed and

mothers and daughters find themselves on different sides separated by the force of sexual, economic, cultural and social exploitation.

During the years after the two World Wars, most stories of mothers and daughters portray the “disgraceful” mother. Daughters write about mothers addicted to alcohol and drugs. Post war stories depict mothers as “sexually suspect” with the rise in divorce cases and extra-marital affairs. Perhaps the largest number of mother-daughter stories is that of Jewish women writers. Recent writings of “disgraceful” mothers are to be found in the stories of Chicana and Puerto Ricana writers. In the literature of matrilineage of female Black American, Asian American, Chicana and Puerto Ricana writers, much of the ambiguities and complexities of mother-daughter relationships lie within economic, psychological, cultural and historical negotiations. Poverty, menial employment, slavery, cultural and historical misplacement determine to a great extent the attempts made by mothers to forge a better future for their daughters and their angst and frustration whenever they are unable to succeed in this attempt.

On the other hand, the daughters’ antagonism toward mothers is grounded on the belief that all that they have inherited from their mothers is poverty, enslavement and a confused identity. Thus, separation of daughters from mothers can be seen in the daughters’ attempts to

establish identities for themselves different from that of mothers'. The daughters refuse to be extensions of their mothers who they perceive as retrogressive. There is a fear that a continuum of mothers' values, choices would thwart their growth as independent individuals. The romantic notion that self identity is obtained by separating from mothers and choosing for themselves inversely force daughters to dissociate themselves not only from their mothers but from the community of women:

The romantic illusion that a woman can "find herself" in isolation from her community has been dangerous for women. It tricks a young woman into abandoning the world that has nurtured her.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the concept of mother as 'disgraceful' or 'terrible', women writers have transcended their fear of mother by recognising the complexities of mother-daughter relationships within a patriarchal society and daughters are now able to not only forgive their mothers but see in their mothers the continuation of their own creativity. Women are developing their mother-daughter bonds on their own terms: "By confronting the Terrible Mother in order to move beyond the entanglements of the mother/daughter relationship and by claiming her as metaphor for the sources of our own creative powers, women are creating new self-configurations in which the mother is no longer the necessary comfort but the seed of a new being, and in which we are no longer the

protected child but the carriers of the new woman whose birth is our own.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, mother-daughter relationship studies and the literature of matrilineage have achieved the status of a rich and evolving canon in feminist studies.

In modern times, daughters (and women in general since every woman is also a daughter) have realised that they cannot find themselves in isolation from their mothers. A search for maternal roots has impelled daughters to celebrate their mothers because they owe their creativity and imagination to a past that embodies a long history of female power. While Adrienne Rich has brought alive a matrilineal discourse that has been suppressed through the ages, African American writer Alice Walker, in her path finding essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”, goes back to her female ancestor to understand her artistic talent and has greatly inspired Asian American writers like Amy Ling who, in *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*, outlines the literary tradition of one group of Asian American women. Both writers of novels and critical literature on matrilineage are breaking grounds by shifting the daughter’s to mother’s centrality. There is the analysis by Marina Heung that the study of matrilineage need to assume a culturally and historically specific critique because using a single paradigm is not universally applicable.<sup>3</sup> This analysis cannot be refuted for even though the mother-daughter bond

is a universal one, African American matrilineage cannot be understood without understanding the history of slavery and Chinese American matrilineage needs to be studied through historical devaluation.

A beautiful metaphor used by black American women writers to grasp the mother-daughter dyad in terms of material, cultural and aesthetic understanding is the “quilt”.<sup>4</sup> In *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers & Daughters*, Patricia Bell-Scott and Beverly Guy-Sheftall explain how the quilt embodies the creativity of black women handed down from mothers to daughters: “...the most important part of this tradition [quilt making] was the transmission of skills and of a value system handed down from grandmother, to mother, to granddaughter. Bonds were strengthened when a mother taught her daughter to quilt; as the mother imparted skills, techniques, and aesthetic design principles, she, perhaps most significantly, forged a bond essential to the survival of the family, and by extension, the community.” (p. 2)

The dynamics of African American mother-daughter relationships, therefore, is primarily founded on mother as historian. Mothers may not have been scholarly historians but they recorded facts of family and community and told them to their daughter. The pieces of rags stitched together artistically to make a quilt represent recollection of memories and salvaging mother’s talent as well. Most importantly, the quilt-

making is symbolic of the love that mothers have for their daughters; that it is mother's best intention to keep her daughter protected from the poverty and abuse that she herself had faced:

Black women's culture is particularly characterized by mother love. The book dedication of black female critics and editors, the short stories by black women writers, and the lyrics sung by the "girl" groups on the Motown label attest to a combination of love and gratitude to the women credited with teaching their daughters about life and helping them dream and achieve lives accessible to their mothers.<sup>5</sup>

The journey back to female ancestors is a spiritual journey. Daughters inherit a legacy of *strength* that endures much suffering, toil and hardship; of *hope* that always strives for the better and fights against the odds of patriarchal negotiations; of *creativity* that is manifested in "quilt-making", "calligraphy", "tending gardens" and "story-telling"; of *voice* that is founded on the power of language. Walker captures this sensibility in her famous essay: "...it is to my mother- and all our mothers who were not famous- that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the Black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day.... Therefore, we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know."<sup>6</sup> Tan also attributes the inspiration of her books to her mother: "I say the muse is my mother, the woman who gave me both my DNA and certain ideas about the world. Or

I pay homage to my grandmother and say that it is she who inspired me to find my voice because she had lost hers so irrevocably.”<sup>7</sup>

In the sphere of Chinese American literature of matrilineage too, a development that tries to find a middle path between a daughter’s search for identity and the opposition of mother’s ethnic culture can be found in the writings of Maxine Hong Kingston and Tan who believe in claiming one’s ancestral origin without totally rejecting the culture of one’s adopted country in order to establish order and understanding in mother-daughter relationships. Tan herself has commented in an interview with Jay Macdonald that writing is a search for a philosophical middle ground between ‘faith’ and ‘fate’ – to find out what works for her- ‘faith’ or ‘fate’. Elaine Kim too writes in her foreword to *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (Lim and Ling 1992, xiii): “The lines between Asian and Asian American, so important to identify formation in earlier times, are increasingly being blurred.” In the process, Tan has deconstructed and reconstructed myths to circumscribe both the dominant culture and the receding culture. By creating an in-between myth she can locate her in-between existence in America as a Chinese American. In *The Joy Luck Club*, all four vignettes are myths that clearly explain the strained relationship of the mothers and daughters. *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is based on the myth of the ‘Kitchen God’ who is replaced by ‘Lady

Sorrowfree'. In *The Hundred Secret Senses* too she builds a myth upon Kwan's 'Secret Senses' which is in stark contrast to the physical senses. Finally, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* reverberates around the myth of the 'voiceless woman' who finally finds her most powerful weapon in the written word. Women writers before Tan have explored ancient myths of 'mother' and 'women' as a form of self-discovery. Elias Button refers to reaching out for myth as a "complex process in which the current difficulties are transcended through a recovery of the mythological past....involving not a relinquishment of ego development in the name of cyclicity and romantic unconsciousness but rather a reaching-back to the myths of the "mother" to find there the source of our own, specifically female, creative powers."<sup>8</sup>

*The Kitchen God's Wife* is the first definitive move of Tan to rework the Chinese myth by reversing the patriarchal domination by placing a female figure as the subject of worship and devotion. While the stories of the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* were exercises in exploring the agony and seemingly unbridgeable gaps in their understanding of each other, *The Kitchen God's Wife* clearly defines the ancestral order when the mother/female is enthroned on the altar. In *The Hundred Secret Sense*, Tan presents a completely different concept of an ancestor in the person of Kwan, who is not her mother. Yet on another

level, she is given all the attributes of a mother which Olivia also acknowledges. The multiple facets of Kwan perhaps represents Tan's vision of the possibilities that reworking an ancient myth to suit present circumstances may provide the via-media to bridge the divide between Chinese mothers and Chinese American daughters. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan highlights the need of the written word as a means of understanding between mothers and daughters and also elevating the Chinese mother's position further by empowering her to overcome silence, both literally and figuratively. In doing so, Tan manages to present a new vision of life for the mothers and daughters, a vision that one may even call the new Chinese American Myth which is a powerful tool for the Chinese American daughter to negotiate her ancestor's culture with her own and thereby find a common platform where they can stand together and look towards the future.

### END NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Elias-Button, Karen. "The Muse as Medusa" in Introduction to *The Lost Tradition, Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York. 1980. Eds., Cathy N. Davidson and E.M.Broner, p.205.

<sup>3</sup> Heung, Marina. "Daughter-Text/Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*," in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Fall, 1993, pp. 597-616.

<sup>4</sup> See Elsa Barkley Brown, "African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History." *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (Summer 1989): 921-29. Also see Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South* (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990)

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<sup>7</sup> Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate*, Harper Perennial, 2003, p. 250

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DEPARTMENT : ENGLISH

TITLE OF DISSERTATION : SPEAKING THROUGH ANCESTORS:  
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN  
AMY TAN'S NOVELS

DATE OF PAYMENT OF : 7.5.2002.  
ADMISSION

APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL :

1. BPGS :

2. SCHOOL BOARD :

REGISTRATION NO. & DATE : 740 of 8.5.2003

EXTENSION (IF ANY) : 2 years upto 7.5.2010

  
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