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.” Looking back at how things had happened between her mother and herself, Olivia recollects 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 sisterhood, 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 deathbed 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”. 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 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 12th 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. 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)⁴

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.’⁵ 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.” 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.\(^7\)

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. 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’. The magical delves into what the reason discards as chance or coincidence; whatever is fantastic, marvelous or fabulous. With his tremendous knowledge, experience, and diligence to the task of discovering the meaning of synchronistic events, Jung worked towards the idea of physics and psychology coming together under a ‘common concept that would be a unifying key to the forces at work in the physical and psychical worlds.” According to Jung, the deepest structure of the human mind is the collective unconscious. 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”\(^ {11} \) 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.12 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.” 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-seance in a way that “impresses” Olivia and mesmerizes Simon. 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.”^15 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 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**


