



Cultural Alienation and the Quest for Identity in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the themes of cultural alienation and the quest for identity through the entangled lives of Olivia and her half-sister Kwan in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*. It examines how the novel portrays the struggles of navigating dual cultural heritages, the alienation and the identity crisis that arise from conflicting cultural norms and values in the United States. Drawing on the concept of cultural alienation and Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and third space, this article analyzes the clash of cultures within family dynamics and the impact of migration on forming a unified identity. These concepts are of great utility insofar as, in the quest for identity, they highlight the transformative power of storytelling as a means of self-discovery and reconciliation in the novel. By tracing the female characters' journey from estrangement to acceptance, the novel reveals how embracing one's cultural roots can lead to a deeper understanding of self and belonging. Ultimately, *The Hundred Secret Senses* reveals the necessity of transcending both cultural and personal borders in the search for self-realization.

KEY WORDS: Cultural alienation, identity crisis, hybridity, migration, reconciliation.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural alienation and the quest for identity constitute two common themes found in the majority of works produced by authors born and raised in a bicultural context. These writers often struggle with the complexities of belonging to two distinct cultural spheres, navigating conflicting norms, values, and expectations. In such works, the struggle to reconcile dual heritages frequently manifests as a crisis of identity, manifested by feelings of displacement and alienation. Amy Tan, a prominent voice in Chinese-American literature, explores these themes in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). In the novel, the entangled lives of Olivia and her half-sister Kwan reveal the emotional and psychological challenges of negotiating a bicultural identity.

Titled "Cultural Alienation and the Quest for Identity in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*," this paper delves into the dynamics of cultural alienation and identity formation in the novel. Set both between two locations, in San Francisco in The United States of America and in Gullin Province in rural China, the narrative reflects the dual cultural worlds and identities struggling to find a balance and reconcile. From there, the following problem can be raised: How do the protagonists negotiate their dual cultural heritages and identities? Simply said, how do the female characters achieve self-realization despite their identity crisis caused by conflicting and opposing cultures and traditional values.

To answer the above principal question to the paper, Homi Bhabha's concepts of "hybridity" and "third space" appear to be useful in examining how the clash of cultures within family relationships and the transformative power of storytelling shape the characters' journeys. Through this lens, the novel emerges as a profound exploration of the necessity of transcending cultural and personal borders to achieve self-realization and a sense of belonging.

1. Cultural Alienation and Identity Crisis

In her work entitled *Cultural Alienation: A Concept Analysis* (2020), Timothea Vo defined Cultural alienation as "a feeling of not belonging to a particular group due to differences in cultural orientation" (2020, p. 9). The study identifies three key aspects of cultural alienation: precedents or antecedents, attributes and consequences. Each one of these aspects of cultural alienation has its key factors. As per precedents, we have factors such as "belonging to a minority (racial, ethnic, or sexual), insufficient sense of belonging and threats to one's cultural of life (2020, p. 3). Regarding the attributes, cultural alienation is characterized by "feelings of vulnerability, cultural dissonance, and a sense of being different or an outsider (2020, pp. 7-8). In the end, cultural alienation has consequences which result in "judgment, mistrust, anxiety, strained relationships, distrust, sociocultural deprivation, uncertainty, racism, loss of identity, attempted or completed suicide" (2020, p 9). In the context of *The Hundred Secret senses* (1995), the female

characters suffer from cultural alienation resulting from antecedents like the clash of culture in family dynamic and the impact of migration and dual identity. This aligns with the finding of Thimthea Vo, as these factors lead the characters to identity crisis.

1.1. The Clash of Cultures in Family Dynamics

The clash of cultures is understood in different ways. Some interpret this notion as the “physical and emotional distress caused by being removed from one’s familiar environment and immersed in a setting with different points of reference” (Rozo, 2014, 31). Others, however, see it as “a way to explain why you feel different now that you are in a new country” (2014, p. 32). These perspectives best describe the situation of Kwan, one of the female characters in Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). Throughout the narrative, the reader can perceive the clash of cultures within family dynamics, particularly through her relationship with her half-sister named Olivia Yee Bishop.

Olivia is the novel’s narrator and a Chinese-American woman raised in the United States with her brothers : “My brothers, Kevin and Tommy, and I were born in San Francisco after my father, Jack Yee, immigrated here and married our mother, Louise Kenfield” (1995, p. 6). Kwan is Olivia’s older half-sister, born in China and deeply rooted in Chinese culture and spirituality : “Aunt Betty also passed along the story of Kwan’s birth... My father had been a university student in Guilin. He later married a young woman named Li Chen. He later married her, and in 1944 she gave birth to their daughter, the skinny baby in the picture, Kwan (1995, p. 8).

From these two different cultural backgrounds and after being reunited in the United States, both sisters have a tensed relationship to the point of seeing each other as rivals. Olivia would even express her fear before meeting her sister : “I was scared of Kwan before I ever met her” (1995, p. 7). That tensed relationship manifests through generational differences and language barrier. Olivia and Kwan are not from the same generations : “I was nearly sis by the time Kwan came to this country” (1995, p. 11). Being from different generations and not being raised with the same cultural values and principles pushes Olivia to segregate and invisibilize her half-sister to the community :

Actually, Kwan is my half sister, but I’m not supposed to mention that publicly. That would be an insult, as if she deserved only fifty percent of the love from our family. But just to set the genetic record straight, Kwan and I share a father, only that. (1995, p. 6)

Behaving so, Olivia not only de-identifies herself from Kwan, but also rejects her racial and cultural identity. Indeed, Kwan is the representative and the embodiment of the racial and cultural heritage that Olivia denies. In Olivia’s own words, Kwan “looked like a strange old lady, short and chubby, not exactly the starving waif” (1995, p. 11) when they first met at the airport. Even some years later, Olivia still has aversion towards Kwan for her presence in their family and also for having taking care of her when her mother was missing at home : “I should have been grateful to Kwan. I could always depend on her. She liked nothing better than to be by my side. But instead, most of the time, I resented her for taking my mother’s place” (1995, p. 12). As a whole, the generational difference between both sisters is source of disdain and aversion to Olivia: “She’s not my sister! I hate her! I wish she’d go back to China! (1995, p. 13).

That disdain deepens with the language barrier due to Kwan’s inability to speak English. The language barrier serves here as a powerful manifestation of cultural clash and alienation in the relationship between the two sisters. Kwan is unable to pronounce “Olivia”. Rather, she calls her sister “Libby-ah”. All their interactions look like disconnected exchanges. While Olivia speaks English, Kwan speaks in Chinese: “When I visited her...Kwan whispered to me:

“Libby-ah, listen, I have secret. Don’t tell anyone, ah?” And then she switched to Chinese (1995, p. 16). This situation enlarges the gap between both sisters. Indeed, this linguistic disconnect not only highlights their cultural division, but also deepens the emotional distance between the sisters. In her article titled “Sibling Rivalry in Amy Tan’s *The hundred Secret Senses*”, Amutha Monica J. asserts that this type of “sisterly appears to follow the pattern of extremity... Kwan exemplifies the differences between East and West and Olivia, with the exception of her Asian identity, is all-American” (2017, p. 24). As one can see, the language barrier serves as a metaphor that highlights the gap between the half-sisters and most importantly their cultural alienation.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), the generational difference and the language barrier results Olivia’s identity crisis. The female character’s journey aligns with the study by Thimthea Vo cited above inasmuch as Olivia feels lost between her two cultures. This can be seen through her embarrassment regarding her sister’s mannerisms and abilities “my sister Kwan believes she has yin eyes” (1995, p. 16), “No one in our family talks about Kwan’s unusual abilities” (1995, p. 16) and her resistance to accepting her Chinese roots as she considers herself “American mixed grill, a bit of everything white, fatty, and fried” (1995, p. 6). That identity crisis does not only result from the culture clash. It also results, on one hand, from the impact of migration and from the characters’ dual identity on the other.

1.2. The Impact of Migration and Dual Identity

Migration and dual identity play an important role in the identity crisis that both Kwan and her half-sister Olivia suffer from in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). On the one hand, Kwan’s experience in America after her migration is marked by feelings of

alienation and disconnection. These feelings result entirely from her cultural displacement and her incapacity to fully integrate into both her family and the American society :

In so many ways, Kwan never fit into our family. Our annual Christmas photo looked like those children's puzzles, "What's Wrong with This Picture?" Each year, front and center, there was Kwan—wearing brightly colored summer clothes, plastic bow-tie barrettes on both sides of her head, and a loony grin big enough to burst her cheeks. Eventually, Mom found her a job as a bus-girl at a Chinese-American restaurant. It took Kwan a month to realize that the food they served there was supposed to be Chinese. Time did nothing to either Americanize her or bring out her resemblance to our father. (1995, p. 20)

This quotation reveals how disconnected, displaced and unassimilated Kwan is in her new family and her new host country. First, her physical appearance through her dressing makes her different from the Americanized family she is now living with. Not complying with the dressing code shows how disconnected she is. The choice of colors and types of clothes reinforce that idea of disconnection. Then, her cultural displacement is manifest through her misunderstanding of the Chinese-American restaurant's cuisine as she is unable to recognize the Americanized version of Chinese food as connected to her own heritage. At last, Kwan is still the same despite her long presence in America. She is unable to assimilate. Indeed, she fails to grasp her American heritage by refusing to resemble her father who was an American.

Her disconnection, displacement and unassimilation isolate her in the new home to the point of being considered as an outsider with mystical abilities such as having "yin eyes," a capacity to see ghosts and communicate with spirits. This will have serious impact on her physical and mental health. The yin eyes, considered as a spiritual ability in China is perceived as a mental disorder or an insanity once in the United States: "the doctors diagnosed Kwan's Chinese ghosts as a serious mental disorder" (1995, p. 16). Consequently, she is sent to a hospital to be treated, isolating her from healthy and normal people : "They gave her electroshock treatments..." (1995, Ibid).

Thirty years after, her social and cultural isolation still have effects on her physical and mental health : "That was more than thirty years ago, and Kwan still mourns, "My hair sooo beautiful, shiny-smooth like waterfall, slippery-cool like swimming eel. Now look. All that shock treatment, like got me bad hair permanent, leave on cheap stuff too long. All my rich color—burnt out...All that electricity doctor force into my brain, now run through my body like horse go 'round racetrack" (1995, p. 17). Overall, Kwan's situation underscores the devastating impact of cultural alienation on an individual's self-identity. It highlights how societal rejection and familial disconnection exacerbate the struggles of those belonging to and living in a bicultural environment.

Olivia's experience, on the other hand, is also marked by her incapacity to accept her dual identity additionally to the generational difference and the language barrier. She struggles with her bicultural identity insofar as her desire is to fully assimilate into American culture while deliberately distancing herself from her Chinese cultural values and principles to the point of creating tensions between her and her mother :

Hell yes, I'm furious with my mother. This morning she asked if she could drop by to cheer me up. And then she spent two hours comparing my failed marriage with hers to Bob. A lack of commitment, an unwillingness to make sacrifices, no give, all take. (1995, p. 48)

This quotation highlights the mother-daughter conflictual relationship that results from the daughter's reluctance to embrace the Chinese cultural values and principles. She refuses to make sacrifices, she lacks commitment and she is unwilling to give while receiving from others. In so doing, she refuses to comply with the Chinese societal expectations in the American environment. One can assert that she perceives her Chinese heritage as a burden, associating it with traditions, beliefs, and behaviors she finds incompatible with her American lifestyle.

Olivia also has a strained relationship with her half-sister Kwan due to her firm choice to assert herself as American. Kwan is, in fact, her total opposite as she enthusiastically embraces her Chinese identity and spiritual beliefs. In response to Kwan's choice, Olivia often reacts with frustration and skepticism : "For most of my childhood, I had to struggle *not* to see the world the way Kwan described it" (1995, p. 44). This further alienates her from Kwan and her own cultural roots, creating a void and a fragmentation of self. Hence the identity crisis. This internal conflict emphasizes a central theme of the novel: the necessity of embracing one's multifaceted identity to achieve a sense of wholeness and belonging.

2. The Quest for Identity and Self-Realization

Olivia Yee and Kwan Li are two contrasting characters struggling to find balance in their true selves in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). Both characters endure profound identity crises and cultural alienation—Olivia, as she navigates her strained relationship with her Chinese roots, and Kwan, as she confronts societal expectations and the challenges of adapting to a new cultural environment. The journey of these characters toward assuming their identities involves, on the one hand, discovering who they truly are through storytelling and embracing their bicultural roots on the other. This process of navigating between cultures and forging a sense of belonging resonates strongly with Homi Bhabha's theories of "hybridity" and "third space."

These two concepts shed light on the transformative potential of existing between and beyond fixed cultural boundaries in Amy Tan's fiction. Both characters come into existence due to their alterity, as Homi Bhabha puts it in *The Location of Culture*: "To

exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness" (1994, p. 95). In other words, coming into existence or assuming one's identity is not a process that happens in isolation. Rather, existence and identity are formed through interaction with the other, whether external or internal. In Tan's novel, external otherness is represented by the sister and Chinese culture, while internal otherness is reflected in the way the characters internalize their in-betweenness, leading to a hybrid sense of self, materialized through self-discovery and reconciliation.

2.1. Self-Discovery

According to the *Encarta World English Dictionary*, Self-discovery is "the process of learning about one's true Personality and Motives" (p. 1702). In other words, it is the process of understanding one's true self, including values, needs, wants, emotions and personal potential. Olivia witnesses this process in the work of fiction by Amy Tan entitled *The Hundred Secret Senses*, (1995). Kwan is the starting point to her self-discovery process. As a matter of fact, she is the one always trying to convince Olivia to go to China :

When Kwan answers the phone, she doesn't wait for me to explain why I've called. "Libby-ah, this afternoon I talking to my friend Lao Lu. He agree, you *must* go China—you, Simon, me together. This year Dog Year, next year Pig, too late. How you cannot go? This you fate waiting to happen!" (pp. 128- 129).

This quote is the revelation of Kwan's important role as a bridge between Olivia and her origins in the novel. One can perceive that Kwan is pushing Olivia to go to China, emphasizing it is her "fate". For Kwan, Olivia's need of self-assertion would not be complete unless she travels to China, the place where she can fully understand herself.

"Kwan" and "China" are, in this quote, the representative of the "otherness" Homi Bhabha talks about in *The Location of Culture* (1994, *ibid*). Indeed, the critic's idea that existence is defined through the interaction with the other mirrors Olivia's struggle to reconcile her hybrid identity. Behaving so, Kwan serves as catalyst in Olivia's self-discovery process. By insisting, she forces Olivia to meet and confront the cultural "other" hidden in her inner soul. She confronts that inner identity because she tends to resist it: "How you cannot go ?". That resistance is in line with Bhabha's idea that identity emerges not in isolation but through tension, dynamic exchanges with difference: "The very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting [...] To be different from those that are different makes you the same" (1994, pp. 95-96).

Kwan's stories also serve as a powerful medium to meet and confront Olivia's inner soul additionally to her trip to China. In their book entitled *Storylistening: Narrative Evidence and Public Reasoning* (2021), Sarah Dillon and Claire Craig explore and analyze the multiple functions of stories. From their analysis, we understand that stories should not only be seen as mere tools to entertain. Rather, they actively help shape reality in the sense that they are medium through which "we construct a sense of self" (2021, p. 12). From their study, the critics determine six functions of stories that are communication, identity, empathy, social knowledge, simulation and persuasion (2021, p. 12).

As far as identity is concerned, since this is the point intrinsically linked to the present work, the two researchers put it : "Through the development of a life story, individuals establish for themselves and others their present identity, how it came to be, and their projected identity in the future" (2021, p. 59). This is typically what happens in *The Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan. By listening to her half-sister's stories back in China, Olivia is able to connect with her hidden Chinese identity, creating a dialogue with her inner otherness: "Kwan infected me with [her stories]. I absorbed her language through my pores while I was sleeping. She pushed her Chinese secrets into my brain and changed how I thought about the world. Soon I was even having nightmares in Chinese" (1994, p. 13).

This quote illustrates Olivia's progressive acceptance of her dual identity with the insistence of Kwan, telling her repetitively her life stories. "Olivia," on the one hand, represents the American identity while "Libby-ah" represents the Chinese identity on the other. By internalizing Kwan's stories, Olivia begins to reconcile these fragmented selves, engaging in a dialogue with the "otherness" within her soul. The stories, like Bhabha's theory suggests, are not passive recollections but active places of negotiation, where Olivia's hybrid identity is called into being through relational exchange. The journey to China later becomes the physical manifestation of this inner reckoning, but the stories themselves are the foundational medium for her self-discovery.

2.2. Transformation and Reconciliation

The trip to China is a pivotal event in Olivia's transformation and reconciliation with her Chinese cultural root in the novel. The trip helps the main character to confront, on the one hand, the emotional, relational and cultural complexities that she has always tried to avoid, but also serves as a powerful means to connect and reconcile with her heritage on the other. This is quite perceivable through the following statement by Olivia herself :

The trip presents a number of firsts for me as well. The first time I've gone to China. The first time since I was a child that Kwan will be my constant companion for two weeks. The first time that Simon and I will travel together and sleep in separate rooms. Now squished into my seat between Simon and Kwan, I realize how crazy it is that I am going—the physical torture of being in planes and airports for almost twenty-four hours, the emotional havoc of going with the very two people who are the source of my greatest heartaches and fears.

And yet for the sake of my heart, that's what I have to do. Of course, I have pragmatic reasons for going—the magazine article, finding my father's name. But my main motivation is fear of regret. I worry that if I didn't go, one day I'd look back and wonder, What if I had? (1995, p. 140)

As one can see, this quote reveals Olivia's beginning of transformation in her relationship with the two characters she feels discomfort with in the novel as they are the source of her "greatest heartaches and fears". Accepting to be alone for a long period with those two people, despite the "physical torture" she feels, shows her commitment to open the doors to transformation. In so doing, the journey serves as a catalyst for the change she fears but deeply needs.

Olivia's beginning of transformation is indeed manifest through her "fear of regret" and her desire to write her "magazine article," marking a big change in the character's attitude towards her origins. The following quote from her shows her new dispositions about China once physically present in the country:

I inhale deeply and imagine that I'm filling my lungs with the very air that inspired my ancestors, whoever they might have been. Because we arrived late the night before, we haven't yet seen the Guilin landscape, its fabled karst peaks, its magical limestone caves, and all the other sites listed in our guidebook as the reasons this is known in China as "the most beautiful place on earth." I have discounted much of the hype and am prepared to focus my lens on the more prosaic and monochromatic aspects of communist life. (1995, p. 140)

Now that she is in China, she starts realizing that the country is not just "the most beautiful place on earth," but a part of who she is. Her presence and journey through the landscapes make her feel China as part of her identity. The physical journey reflects also the inner journey that she experiences as she "deeply" inhales and fills her lungs with "the very air that inspired her ancestors."

The act of breathing the air of her ancestors symbolizes her acceptance of her true origins. This act also is a big shift from the position of an observer or "a tourist" (p. 164) to the one of an actor who just no more sees China not as "communist," but as a personal home, leading the way to her reconciliation with her cultural roots and symbolically her reconciliation with her half-sister Kwan and her Chinese root.

As far as the reconciliation with Kwan is concerned, that can be seen when Olivia admires her sister's good actions. Indeed, on their way to Changmian, Olivia, who used to belittle and depreciate Kwan's deeds back in America, is in total appreciation of her sister saving a bird: "I almost cry with joy and guilt. Why do I think such bad things about Kwan?" (1995, p. 162). As for the reconciliation with her Chinese root, this is perceived through her acceptance of her hybrid self in the city of Changmian:

I gaze at the mountains and realize why Changmian seems so familiar. It's the setting for Kwan's stories, the ones that filter into my dreams. There they are: the archways, the cassia trees, the high walls of the Ghost Merchant's House, the hills leading to Thistle Mountain. And being here, I feel as if the membrane separating the two halves of my life has finally been shed.

The preceding quote is of great importance in understanding Olivia's new integrated or hybrid self once in China. The falling apart of the "membrane," here symbolizing the wall separating her two identities, leaves the space for the affirmation of her in-betweenness as Homi Bhabha puts it with his notion of "Third space": "It is only in the 'interstices' of difference – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the 'partial' representation of the 'other' can emerge" (1994, p. 4). From now on, Olivia's two selves are no more competing against one another, but are complementary parts of a unity. The journey finally happens to be a healing treatment to her cultural alienation and also a tool of reconciliation with her half-sister who is no more her enemy, but the source of her cultural empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The present reflection explores how do characters find their way out by assuming their cultural identity and asserting their true selves after suffering from cultural alienation in a bicultural environment in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1994) by Amy Tan. In so doing, the main question to the work is how do the protagonists negotiate their dual cultural heritages and identities? Simply said, how do the female characters achieve self-realization despite their identity crisis caused by conflicting and opposing cultures and traditional values.

Homi Bhabha's concepts of "hybridity" and "third space" help us understand and answer the issue raised by the main question. In his work on identities, Bhabha uses these two concepts to challenge fixed binaries in order to assert agency. Indeed, he positions hybrid identities not as mere blends of pre-existing cultures but as emergent forms produced in the "third space" of intercultural negotiation (1994, 211). This is what happens throughout the narrative in the novel with Olivia Yee and her half-sister Kwan Li.

From the beginning to the end of the narrative, both characters evolve from alienated individuals who mutually appreciate and understand each other, embodying Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and third space. Indeed, while the skeptical Olivia accepts her Chinese heritage and her sister's otherness into her own identity, Kwan, in turn, serves as a bridge between the two cultures.

As a whole, one can infer from this study that the resolution of cultural alienation comes not from rejecting or privileging one culture over the other but from embracing the multiplicity of identity. Through her work, Amy Tan demonstrates that self-

discovery and empowerment emerge from the negotiation and acceptance of one's hybrid identity within the "third space" of intercultural experience.

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