

The Strength Of Sisterhood: A Comprehensive Analysis Of Interpersonal Bonds In Amy Tan's The Hundred Secret Senses

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Abstract

The word "Sisterhood" not only suggests a homogeneity of experience that is difficult to prove or imagine but also performs an idealizing function that has little in common with the reality of familial relationships. Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* is a stunning novel that delves into the complexities of cultural identity and the enduring love between sisterhoods. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Amy Tan explores the complex relationship between sisters and the idea of sisterhood. The novel examines the intricacies of sibling dynamics and the bond that exists between sisters, even when they have vastly different experiences and perspectives. Tan creates a compelling story that examines the complexities of family relationships and the power of sisterhood. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, she shifts her focus from the complex relationship to the bond between sisters. They can offer an idealized construction of sisterhood but provide a sophisticated exploration of the ideology of family relationships and emphasize the influence of the sister relationship in developing ethnic consciousness and identity. Tan's sisterhood involves not only biological bonds but also emotional and cultural ones. The bond between the two half-sisters in *The Hundred Secret Senses* is filled with ambiguity caused by simultaneous feelings of sameness and difference.

Keywords: Cultural identity, sisterhood, family, generational conflicts.

Introduction

Sisters are the different flowers in the same garden

Amy Tan is a well-known American author highlighted for her intricate and vivid storytelling that explores cultural identity, family dynamics, and the immigrant experience. Tan's writing has left an indelible effect on contemporary literature, interacting readers with her sensitive narratives that bridge the gap between her Chinese origin and her American upbringing. Amy Tan was born on February 19, 1952, in Oakland, California. Tan's works are categorized by their ability to resonate with a diverse range of readers, transcending cultural boundaries and offering a window into the complexities of the human experience. Her novels often feature strong, multifaced female characters grappling with issues of belonging, tradition, and the intersection of past and present.

The women's movement was most likely the focal historical event that compelled a reworking of the contemporary feminist family. Feminists used the idea of sisterhood to oppose patriarchy in the 1970s. The feminist's appeal for global sisterhood would form an alliance of women all over the world based on their shared humanity and resistance to the patriarchal systems in which they live. In the United States, for example, sisterhood has been utilized effectively to rally women's sympathies in favour of several reformist causes and to encourage women to become activists. As the saying goes, "Sisterhood is powerful"; historically, it has established a deep emotional tie.

In other words, sisterly bonds have offered comfort and, more crucially, empowerment in the arena of social relations. "Feminists have proposed a sisterhood based on their presumed psychological, biological, and cultural identity to and with one another". The symbol of the sister defends a feminist family by implying that the family of women is large enough to include all women, no matter what. In their works, the bond between sisters provides an architectural thought as well as a space for women's differences to be generated, demonstrated, and presented. Sisterhood occurs as both an institution and a narrative framework.

The Hundred Secret Senses is a captivating novel by Amy Tan that weaves together themes of family, identity, and the connection between the past and the present. Olivia treats Kwan disrespectfully and dismissively over the years, but her elder sister is committed to her and wants to make Olivia aware of the existence of the afterlife. Kwan is committed to

seeing her sister's marriage and self-recovery, and she never wavers in her devotion. In order to achieve this, Kwan and the others go to China, where she feels they had a past the world together in the past century.

According to Wenying Xu, the trip to China is "literally a journey toward self and wholeness" (Xu 368). Olivia becomes less hostile to the Yin world in China as she starts to get into Kwan's stories of rebirth. It turns out that Nunumu's loyalty to Miss Banner and Kwan's loyalty to Olivia are interconnected, proving that the past endures in the present. Olivia needs to come to terms with the notion that Miss Banner is Kwan and Nunumu is actually Olivia. Olivia finally rediscovers her ties to her own culture and learns to value the emotional relationships she shares with her sister.

Tan provides a straightforward explanation for the reconciliation between these two sisters, showing how Olivia connects with the sister she had long ignored and frequently written off as someone else in order to experience a fleeting moment of cultural wholeness. In the second half of the book, Kwan becomes an embodiment of several identities, which upsets the appealing symmetry created by the antagonism between Kwan and Olivia in the first half of the book. In doing so, it foreshadows the poststructuralist conceptions of identity that have since become commonplace by depicting Kwan as a character who is evasive and ambiguous. The story primarily revolves around the complex relationship between Olivia Laguni, a Chinese-American woman living in San Francisco, and her half-sister Kwan Li, who was born in China. Kwan, unlike Olivia, has deep ties to her Chinese heritage and possesses what she calls "yin eyes", which enable her to perceive the spiritual world and communicate with spirits.

The novel unfolds as Kwan shares her stories, including those of their shared past lives, with Olivia. Initially skeptical, Olivia gradually begins to appreciate Kwan's stories and beliefs, leading to a deeper understanding of her own mixed cultural identity. Instead of making women work through the difficult aspects of their sister relationships productively, it contributes to women's denial and suppression of these problems. It invites readers to contemplate the interplay of past and present, the significance of ancestral connections, and the transformative potential of understanding and accepting one's roots.

The Hundred Secret Senses digresses a little from her first two novels, that is, the novel delineates the relationship between two step-sisters - Olivia Laguni and Kwan. Kwan, Olivia's Chinese-born step-sister comes to live with Olivia and her mother after the death of her father, Jack Yee. The sister's connection is unique because they are each other's half-sisters who grew up in very different cultures. Olivia Bishop was born and reared in San Francisco, California, yet her half-sister Kwan grew up in China and immigrated to the United States several years after the girl's dying father confessed to Olivia's mother that he had a daughter in China. Olivia's severe fear and anxiety upon learning of her sister's existence seems to validate Freud's theoretical concept of sibling rivalry. She fears that Kwan will take her when she arrives.

Tan represents the sibling relationship, however, as being more complicated than a traditional sibling rivalry. She is scared that Kwan will take her place when she arrives. At her first entrance into the text, an eighteen-year-old Kwan is described as "a strange old lady, short and chubby" (10). She is clumsy and barely able to speak English. With her yin eyes, she introduces the world of ghosts to Olivia. Her belief that she can speak with spirits is another source of humiliation for Olivia. As she gets there, she worries Kwan will take her position.

Tan, however, portrays the sibling relationship as being more complex than the typical rivalry between sisters. In contrast to the traditional interpretation of sisterhood, Tan decides to illustrate how the growth of intercultural and interracial sisterhood affects the development of female identity by repainting the Chinese-American family photo to match the contemporary frame.

Throughout her childhood, Olivia refuses to play with her and constantly yells at Kwan that she embarrasses her. In the scene in which a friend taunts Olivia with racial slurs, she expresses her strong desire to differentiate herself from Kwan, yelling out: "She's not my sister! I hate her! I wished she'd go back to China!" (12). The axes of difference between the two sisters West and East, self and other set up in this scene remain the structuring principle of the first half of the novel. Tan represents the sibling relationship, however, as being more complicated than a traditional sibling rivalry. She is worried that Kwan will take her spot when she arrives. Tan stands for. However, the sibling relationship is a bit more complicated than a classic sibling rivalry.

The blossoming of Olivia and Kwan's relationship demonstrates that Olivia's antipathy toward her sister comes from their differences in culture and ethnicity rather than a competition for parental attention and affection. In other words, Olivia and Kwan's sisterly bond is culturally defined rather than biologically determined. Kwan represents Olivia's racial and cultural history, which she refuses but feels compelled to acknowledge; she acts as the ethnic other against whom Olivia must define herself. Kwan is an immediate source of enmity and humiliation for Olivia owing to her ethnicity and cultural background, rendering the situation even more difficult than a typical sibling rivalry.

As Mink and Ward argue, sibling relationships in the contemporary family are complicated by various joining and disjoining (3). Unlike the traditional treatment of sisterhood, Tan repaints the Chinese-American family portrait to fit the modern frame, choosing to show how the development of cross-cultural and cross-racial sisterhood influences the formation of female identity.

Kwan claims to be a person who can talk to people belonging to the World of Yin. Olivia has no other choice but to share her room with Kwan. Being born and bred in China Kwan converses with Olivia in Chinese, and this results in only Olivia learning the Chinese language in the family. The main character, Olivia, is a Chinese-American woman who becomes entangled in her half-sister Kwan's world of Chinese mysticism and spirituality. Kwan, who was born in China and possesses Yin's eyes, can see and communicate with spirits.

Throughout the novel, Kwan's Yin eyes play a central role in unravelling family secrets and connecting Olivia to her Chinese heritage. Olivia's mother is always concerned about herself, So Kwan takes care of Olivia. Olivia considers Kwan a motherly figure. Kwan is considered a retard by most of Olivia's friends, and yet this does not affect her. Olivia's eyelashes were already heavy with sleep one night. Then she started whispering in Chinese Libby-ah, I must tell you something, a forbidden secret. It's becoming too much to bear inside me any longer. Kwan believes that because I have yin eyes, I can pass on the deaths of people and our ancestors. One death has taken place on our street. Kwan inherited the power of seeing dead souls in one night. She can hardly speak English and is awkward. She leads Olivia to the realm of spirits with her yin eyes. They kept the secret together as a bond of sisterhood. At

the age of six Olivia is also frightened by her belief that she is able to communicate with spirits.

“I have yin eyes.” “What eyes?” “It’s true.

I have in eyes. I can see Yin people”.

“What do you mean?” “Okay, I’ll tell you.

But first, you must promise never to tell anyone. Never. Promise, ah?”

“Okay. Promise.”

“Yin people, they are those who have already died”.

My eyes popped open. “What? You see dead people? ...

You mean, ghosts?” “Don’t tell anyone. Never.

Promise, Libby-ah?” (10).

In the present instance, the sister relationship appears to follow the basic polarity pattern. At first, the sisters appear to take on opposing positions. Kwan signifies the frightening other from the East. She embodies the dichotomy between East and West while at the same time serving as a gateway to wider cultural differences, providing access to the mysteries of Chinese culture. Olivia is all-American, but for her Asian features; she is reasonable and sceptical. To preserve her American identity, she rejects Kwan’s closeness and strives to create a barrier between herself and others. As Helga G. Braunbeck explains, “Polarity is caused not only by the need for differentiation from the other who is at the same time so much like the self but also by the need to find one’s field of identity” (Braunbeck 159).

Towards the novel’s end, Kwan, Olivia, and Simon, Olivia’s ex-husband, take a trip to China. They stay in a hotel before they leave for the place where Kwan was born and bred. During the trip, Kwan keeps on speaking about her past life in China and this makes Olivia and Simon know to some extent the Chinese traditions, beliefs, and habits. Kwan seems to be at ease when she converses with the other Chinese. During the trip Simon and Olivia fight regarding their relationship and consequently, Simon walks away from Olivia in anger. As time passes by Olivia gets scared she and Kwan decide to go and search for Simon.

In the process, Kwan disappears and Simon returns. Two weeks after Kwan's disappearance, Olivia and Simon return to America. Olivia and Simon get reconciled, and then after nine months, Olivia delivers a baby. They name her Samantha Li because Li is the family name of Kwan and out of love for Kwan Olivia decides to keep Kwan's surname for her new-born baby. Thus, the novel ends with Olivia losing her mother-like step-sister but finding an identity for herself and her daughter.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, she switches her emphasis from the bond between a mother and daughter to that between sisters. The diversity of connections seen in Chinese-American households is highlighted in the book. In Chinese-American belonging, intergenerational disagreement among the first generation, born in China, and the second generation, born in America, is a common way that cultural differences are portrayed in family narratives.

Tan's narrative delves into the ethnic bond between women belonging to the same generation, instead of confirming the cultural belief that ethnicity is transmitted through generations. Tan explores how, paradoxically, the horizontal crosscut both maintains and threatens one's identity as she unfolds the family's drama on the axis of the sister relationships. Sisterhood includes cultural, emotional, and biological connections along with biological ones.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the bond between the two half-sisters is tainted by conflicting emotions of similarity and difference. Olivia, the sister who represents the ethnic other, has been acknowledged as a crucial component of the American identity from a psychological standpoint. Her sister Kwan's changing relationship with her, as well as her own, are correlated to the major turning points in her psychological development, including her divorce from Simon, her rejection of her sister and denial of her heritage, her guilt, her growing appreciation of Chinese culture, and her desire for meaningful relationships. As Downing expresses, "'For a woman the sister is the other', who is at the same time most like herself. 'She is of the same values, assumptions,' and 'patterns of interactions'" (Downing 11) it, Kwan ends up serving as Olivia's unsuspecting mentor on her journey toward self and psyche that is, toward an increased awareness of her ethnic identity and heritage.

In the final chapter, Tan uses the domestic trope of sisterhood to examine the cultural variations among modern women. Her book illustrates a feminist's fear of acknowledging and containing her uniqueness from other women. As half-sisters who are raised in very different cultures, the sister's relationship turns out to be unusual. Olivia Bishop was raised in San Francisco, but her half-sister Kwan was born and reared in China. Kwan immigrated to the US some years after her father, who was terminally ill, told Olivia's mother that he had a daughter in China.

Olivia exhibits intense dread and anxiety upon discovering her sister's existence. As their relationship develops, it becomes clear that Olivia's disapproval of her sister is not the result of her struggle for affection and attention from her parents, but rather of differences in race and culture. In different, Olivia and Kwan's sisterly bond is determined by their culture rather than just being a biological trait. Kwan is the ethnic stranger that Olivia must define herself against; she stands in for the racial and cultural heritage that Olivia rejects yet is inexorably attracted toward. Olivia feels instantly isolated and ashamed of Kwan due to her ethnic and cultural differences.

Kwan, in particular, is a memorable creation. Of her belief in the World of Yin, there can be no doubt. She emerges as a character at once innocent and wise, the relative Olivia both suffers and relies upon. Kwan gently forces Olivia to face the worst in herself and, in so doing, to find her strengths. We could all do with such a sister.

As a result, the ending efforts are hard to suppress the sister's cultural differences and portray sisterhood as an institution that minimizes that difference. Kwan vanishes abruptly in the dark tunnels of Kweilin to ensure Olivia and Simon's reunion. Olivia and her estranged husband are reunited after Kwan's disappearance, and Olivia gives birth to a baby girl who is thought to be Kwan's reincarnation. Unali Lina notes, "Kwan is sacrificed at the end of the novel in order to allow the survival of the other characters" (Lina 5). Kwan's kidnapping in China is an inevitable cost of novel writing, family reproduction, and sisterhood. Kwan can only exist as a ghost or as a daughter of the other. Tan absorbs the difference in Olivia's motherhood in order for Kwan to be welcomed and integrated into the familial enclosure. This is a reconstructed Asian American family, an embrace of Kwan's ethnic other into a family where the difference is contained. It's also a feminist

family romance with the fantasy of sisterhood as if to flee universalist assumptions.

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