Re-thinking Female Subjectivity through Magic Realism

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Abstract: In her novel The Hundred Secret Senses, Amy Tan takes distance from 1990 America and China while travelling back to 1860 Changmian. She revisits the Taiping rebellion, re-affirms the Hakka identity and re-thinks-female Hakkanese subjectivity. She ‘invents’ and makes use of ‘the world of yin’ that allows her to travel across continents, temporal spaces as well as life and death. Consequently the novel is a magical realist text. There are magic realist elements as in the case of ‘the world of Yin’ which is the world of the dead; while reality is demonstrated in the Taiping rebellion (…). The common ground between the two worlds is that the narrator conveys the truth about the Manchu’s oppression of the Hakka’s minority on one hand and she further asserts the female subjectivity of the Hakkanese. Therefore the purpose of this article is to reveal the techniques used by Amy Tan to parallel lives of three characters (Chinese and Chinese Americans) with other three incarnated characters from 1860 China; through the use of magic realism and reincarnation. She aims to restore balance and assert one’s identity (with focus on female subjects). In her reference to a specific historical context, Tan recognizes the oppression the Hakkanese (fe/male) were subject to and clings to their origins. She transgresses temporal and special boundaries through magic realism and re-rights their position and values.

Although magic realism is not a prominent characteristic of Asian American literature, it is widely used by Chinese-American novelist Amy Tan in her third novel The Hundred Secret Senses. In this novel, Amy Tan exposes two sisters’ narration of their respective lives; the Chinese-born Kwan Li and the American-born Olivia Yee being half-sisters. The novel is concerned with the journey of the American-born Olivia toward identity formation and psychic balance. It describes how the parallels between her life and the life of the American missionary Miss Banner help her find that balance. Olivia traces her experiences in two settings: in San Francisco and Changmian. Living with Simon Bishop—her husband for seventeen years—she is torn by grief, despair and fears. She asserts that “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 know only what it wasn’t” (128). Olivia suffers from psychic traumas with the death of her father, living her childhood and adolescent years with her Chinese sister who brought her up with her ‘yin stories’ as she possesses ‘yin eyes’ ‘yin voice’ and she lives with those who died in ‘the world of yin’

Therefore the real and fictional fuse with the magic realist to reconstruct suppressed cultures, identities of the Chinese and Chinese-American as well as the Hakka minority. Furthermore Amy Tan uses magical realism and the concept of reincarnation to articulate the silenced voices and historical traces of a Chinese minority group: the Hakka. Through inscribing the past, the 1850’s to the 1860’s into the present, the novelist challenges the erasure of the Hakka identity and the achievement of the Taiping Rebellion. Moreover, the use of magic realism unearths the historical atrocities and horrors experienced by the Hakka. Thus Kwan’s “yin stories and voice” will guide Olivia through her journey of self-affirmation and will help her find balance with herself, her husband and the environment.

Kwan—the Chinese half-sister—helps the American-born Olivia to recover her balance by convincing her to visit China and precisely her ancestral homeland Changmian where she—Olivia—lived 18 years. She convinces Olivia that “you and Simon love China, guarantee one hundred percent, specially my village. Changmian so beautiful you can’t believe. Mountain, water, sky, like heaven and earth come together. I have things I leave there, always want to give you” (155). As a half-Chinese, Olivia is raised—unwillingly—listening to Kwan’s “yin stories” about China, the Hakka and the Taiping Rebellion. Her difficulty is resisting Kwan’s stories and recognizing that she is the reincarnated Miss Banner. Therefore one function of Kwan’s “yin stories” and storytelling is that it lets Olivia “realize that individual experience is not isolated but is part of a coherent and timeless whole, providing [her] with a means of personal empowerment and giving shape and direction to [her] li [fe]” (100 Paula Gunn Allen).

Consequently, I will start with probing the nature of the sisterly bond and examining the role of Kwan’s secret senses in helping Olivia find balance. For this, Amy Tan blurs the boundaries between fact/fiction and magic on one hand and natural/supernatural on the other hand. The novel, a magic realist text, uses the Hindu
A concept of reincarnation to fuse the Taiping Rebellion and the Hakka identity with 1995 San Francisco and the Chinese American experience. As early as the first chapter “The Girl with Yin Eyes,” we discover that Kwan is gifted with “yin eyes”. Olivia narrates that “[my] sister Kwan believes she has yin eyes. She sees those who have died and now dwell in the world of yin.” (3) Consequently, Kwan will guide Olivia’s destiny with her “yin eyes,” “yin voice” and “yin stories”. As she immigrated to America—at her dying father’s will—when her sister was six years old, so she will import Chinese values and culture to her beloved half-sister and she will prove to be ever faithful and loyal to her, acting as a mother to the American-born Olivia. Kwan instructs Olivia about the dynamics of family relationships in China. She maintains that “Chinese family very close, friends very loyal. You have Chinese friends or family one lifetime, stay with you, ten thousand lifetime, good deal” (100). However, the latter despises her and resists her Chineseness. Seen in this light, the relationship between Kwan and Olivia is just like all the previous tense relationships between Tan’s mothers and daughters. Moreover, the same differences that separate the Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-born daughters influence the relationship between the Chinese Kwan and the American Olivia in terms of linguistic and cultural barriers. Indeed, Olivia states that after living thirty years in America “[t]ime did nothing to either Americanize her or bring out her resemblance to our father” (20). Like all Tan’s mothers, Kwan does not assimilate into the American society or culture. She lives in Chinatown, speaks a combination of Chinese-English, and dresses like all immigrants. Kwan is characterized to possess unusual abilities and supernatural qualities. Her half-sisters summarize them in this way:

The weirdest of her abilities, I think, has to do with diagnosing ailments. She can tell when she shakes hands with strangers whether they’ve ever suffered a broken bone, even if it healed many years before. She knows in an instant whether a person 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’” (18).

In addition to diagnosing illness, she cures them. Tan characterizes Kwan in such away that she’s different, strange and even endowed with supernatural qualities, traits that are unusual even by Chinese standards. She has magical powers. Furthermore, Kwan possesses secret senses that she defines as “not really secret. We just call secret because everyone has, only forgotten. Some kind of sense (…) How can I say? Memory, seeing, hearing, feeling, all come together, then you know something true in your heart, like one sense” (102). Accordingly, in her narrative, Kwan will use these secret senses and interweave the present with the past, the real with magic and fact with fiction. At the center of Kwan’s tales about “yin people,” she relates the story of “‘a woman named Banner, a man named Case, a one-eyed girl, a half-and-half man’; Olivia adds that “she made it seem as if all these ghosts were our friends” (28). Indeed Kwan’s narrative about “yin people” is not ghost stories about the afterlife or the supernatural world; they become an integral component of the plot with specific dates, places and historical events. Consequently, _The Hundred Secret Senses_ lends itself particularly well to an analysis informed by magic realism. In the novel, there are both a factual and magical plot, setting and characterization.

*The Hundred Secret Senses* relies not only on history. It uses magical realism and the concept of reincarnation to articulate her silenced voices and historical traces of a Chinese minority group: the Hakka. Through inscribing the past, the 1850’s to the 1860’s into the present, the novelist challenges the erasure of the Hakka identity and the achievement of the Taiping Rebellion. Moreover, the use of magic realism highlights the historical atrocities and horrors experienced by the Hakka. Throughout the novel, the stories of Kwan and Olivia are intertwined just like the 1850 stories about Nunumu and Miss Banner. And what is worth mentioning is that in the novel there are two narratives which encompass a story told by Kwan (about the Taiping Rebellion) and reported by her American half-sister. Thus, Tan creates a time-space continuum from Changmian in the 1850’s to San Francisco in 1995, fusing two voices and two histories. She makes a smooth uninterrupted transition from the past to the present, from fact/fiction to magic.

In chapter two “Fish of Men,” narrated by Olivia, the Taiping Rebellion, the Hakka and the other characters are set forth Kwan asserts that “[o]f course, I can’t say exactly how long ago this happened. Time is not the same between one life time and the next. But I think it was during the year 1864.” (32) Thereafter, Amy Tan inserts magical realism by making Kwan the reincarnation of Nunumu.

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1. “yin” as a term is invented by Amy Tan and is used as an adjective: yin eyes, yin stories, yin world. I will be placing it in inverted commas.

2. In Amy Tan’s previous novels: _The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God’s Wife, The Bonesetter’s Daughter_ and _The Valley of Amazement_ the plots are based on a tense mother-daughter relationship, whether one mother and one daughter like _The Kitchen God’s Wife_, a grandmother, a mother and an American-born granddaughter like _The Bonesetter’s Daughter_ and _The Valley of Amazement_ or four daughters and four mothers like _The Joy Luck Club, The Hundred Secret Senses_. _The Hundred Secret Senses_ is constructed on two sisters: one Chinese-American, the other is Chinese. However it doesn’t take variations on the mother-daughter texts.

3. who is the ghost of another girl

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NunumuwashisthefirstHakka bandit to join the struggle for Great Peace when the heavenly king came back to us for help. In the spring, she took an army of the Hakka maidens to Grulin, and the Manchus captured her. After they cut off her head, her lips were still moving, cursing that she would return and ruin their families for a hundred generations. That was the summer I lost my eye. And when I told everyone about Nunumu galloping by on her ghost horse, people said this was a sign that Nunumu has chosen me to be the messenger, just as the Christian God had chosen a Hakka man to be the heavenly king. They began to call me Nunumu. (147)

In this quotation, Kwan reports memories about the Hakka as an indigenous minority group in China as well as the Taiping Rebellion and its leader the heavenly king while stressing the role of the “Hakka maiden” in the uprising. Moreover, she introduces the character of Nunumu, the one-eyed bandit girl who will take the same name. The two characters are alike and analyzed as one: Nunumu. Huntley, stressing her triple marginality, argues that “she is an outsider. She has marginal status in China because of her ethnic-heritage, in the Ghost Merchants’ House because she is a Chinese servant in a household of Westerners, in the population at large because she is physically deformed” (136). Taiping—as a term— is the Chinese abbreviation of “Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace” as its leader Hong Xiuquan or Heavenly King describes it. It is “the most important peasant-led revolt in Chinese history” contends Huntley (135). In his book The Search for Modern China, history professor Jonathan D. Spence introduces the Taiping uprising as “a military and social movement that sought to overthrow the Qing and to establish a “Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace” in China with a combination of quasi Christian beliefs and communal vision. The Taiping armies spread northeast (...) capturing Nanjing in 1853, where they made their capital for eleven years” (805). Indeed this “military and social movement” aimed to destroy the Manchus and create a new Christian community. For that Hong Xiuquan translated the bible into Chinese (with the help of American missionaries) (Spence 172) then he began to preach his message publicly, baptize converts and destroy, publicly, Confucian and ancestral shrines (Ibid 171). It is the Taiping’s use of Christianity that attacked the whole structure of Chinese values (177). The inception of the uprising was the formation of “the society of good worshippers” in the Province of Thistle Mountain and he considered the Manchus as “demons fighting against the true God” (172).

As a result, the rebellion starts with persuading the “Hakkanaese” of the spiritual and religious powers of their leader. Since Hong Xiuquan is a Hakka, so the Taiping Rebellion historically speaking and as fictionalized in Tan’s text constructs and celebrates the Hakka culture, knowledge and identity. In this respect, critic Sheng-Mei Ma considers in his article “Chinese and Dogs’ in Amy Tan’s The Hundred Secret Senses: Ethnicizing the Primitive à la New Age,” that “[t]he fending between the Hakka (guest people) and Punti (“local, Cantonese”) leads to the eruption of the Taiping Rebellion which serves to construct Hakka identity through history” (158). In portraying Hakka people, Amy Tan rewrites the Taiping Rebellion, accounting for the ability of one Hakka rebel to convince many followers, advisors, converts and recruits to form an army and fight the Qing government. Besides, she celebrates the female Hakka character who is represented by historians, writers and critics—unlike other females in pre-Communist China—to be free, clever and strong. Historian Jonathan D. Spence portrays them to be “used to the life of hard farming in the mountains” emphasizing that “the Hakka women had never bound their feet as other Chinese females did” (173); this is a point stressed by many critics including Huntley who agrees that “Hakka women—famed for their industry, cleverness, and physical strength—never bound their feet, even during the Qing period when that custom was followed most rigidly” (136).

Consequently, during the Taiping rule, Hakka women were not like the other Chinese mothers and grandmothers depicted in Tan’s previous novels traumatized by social and cultural practices including concubinage, foot binding and arranged marriages, which are measures associated with a Confucian upbringing. The Taiping ideology banned footbinding, concubinage and prostitution. Furthermore, unlike females in post-modern feudalist China who were educated and held important positions, they “were allowed to hold supervisory offices in the bureaucracy and to sit for their own special examinations” (Spence 175) Ultimately, the novelist subverts the Chinese gender system by portraying the Taiping Rebellion and celebrating the role of the Hakka female subject in the uprising and life alike. Kwan boasts that in her existence as Nunumu back in the Thistle Mountain

[all]the women worked as hard as the man, no difference in who carried the rocks, who made the charcoal, who guarded the crops from bandits at night. All Hakka women were this way, strong. We didn’t bind our feet like Han girls, the ones who hopped around on stumps as black and rotten as old bananas. We had to walk all over the mountain to do our work, no binding cloths, no shoes. (33)

In representing the Hakka women as different from the Chinese women described in her texts, Amy Tan presents a portrait of a female consciousness unsuitable in China, with the defection of the Taiping regime in 1864 and reinstition of the former system; the Hakka women were deprived of their equality, status and all
privileges. However, the Hakka were a minority group in China considered as another entity. In the United States Kwan observes that “I belonged to China. I belonged to the Hakka” (149) and in Changmian she asserts “we were Hakka, Guest People” (33). So with respect to Tan’s magic realist text Kwan is the reincarnation of Nunumu and since the latter’s death in 1864, her spirit accompanies the destiny of all the Hakka people. Consequently, Kwan is linked with their history and culture and so is her half-sister Olivia. Thus this linkage enables her to assist Olivia in the process of identity formation through affirming her cultural differences and by extension her ethnic differences, based on interweaving the magic and the real, the past and the present through storytelling.

Through the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, Amy Tan reconstructs the suppressed culture and identity of the Hakka minority. Through her “yin eyes and “yin voice” Kwan lives with those who died in “the world of Yin”. Moreover, the concept of reincarnation is introduced in the seventh chapter of The Hundred Secret Senses by Olivia, who views that “[r]eincarnation. You know, after you die, your spirit or soul or whatever can be reborn as another human being” (100). In The Hundred Secret Senses, the main female characters, the Chinese-born Kwan and the American-born Olivia have their “doubles” in Changmian in 1864, or rather are the reincarnation of the American Miss Banner (Olivia) and Nunumu (Kwan). To connect the two lives and reconcile past and present the novelist creates a male character Simon Bishop as the subject of the reincarnated Yiban. Olivia and Simon have been married for seventeen years. She met him when he was grieving over the death of his girlfriend Elza. Olivia—with the help of Kwan—tricks him into marrying her. Kwan convinces Simon that Elza visited her from “the world of Yin” and they chatted about her life in the afterlife, her parents, grandparents. Then Kwan persuades him not to waste his life anymore and forget her. Therefore—feeling guilty for tricking Simon—Olivia confesses that “[o]ur break up was the result of many things: a wrong beginning, bad timing, years and years of thinking habit and silence were the same as intimacy” (24). Since Olivia is the reincarnation of Miss Banner who has a love affair with Yiban, so Yiban is reincarnated in Simon. Kwan answers Olivia’s “and why is this my fate?” with “[b]ecause in your last lifetime together, you loved someone else before Simon. Later, Simon trusted you with his whole life that you loved him too.” (142) And hence both Olivia and Kwan have to pay for past debts according to the doctrine of reincarnation.

Though the Hakka don’t have their own religion, they highly worship spirits and believe that they can possess new bodies. This is an idea at the core of Buddhism: reincarnation. “Buddhism first reached China in the first century A.D.” states Conrad Schirokauer in his A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilizations, specifying that “it had been introduced as the religion of foreign merchants” (86), yet Buddha’s teachings “did not take hold in China until the collapse of the Han dynasty weakened faith in the imperial Confucian Orthodoxy” (79). According to Buddha’s philosophy all “living beings are subject to reincarnation in one painful life after another. According to the law of Karma, for every action there is a moral reaction” (Ibid). In this respect then the Buddhist law of Karma is represented in Kwan and Olivia’s feelings of guilt. They both believe that they have to pay for past debts, the first with Miss Banner and the second with Yiban. Olivia admits that “I would have to pay for this. It would all come back to me, the full karmic circle” (102). Furthermore, “a life of good deeds leads to reincarnation at a higher and more desirable level in the next cycle, evil deeds lead in the opposite direction” (Schirokauer 79) which is why the real/fictional and magic realist characters Kwan and Olivia on one hand, and Miss Banner and Yiban on the other hand strongly believe in reincarnation and have plans for their life after death. Olivia asserts happily that “I believe that the forces of chaos and uncertainty will allow me another chance to make amends.” (313) Olivia’s recognition of pastmistakes and her need for a “chance to make amends” already is one step in her recovery process. She restores her balance with the geographical landscape of Changmian, the caves setting of all the “Yin stories”.

Through the use of the concept of reincarnation, Amy Tan presents a cyclical perception of reality concerning relationships and events. She builds a harmonious relationship between female characters across continents, cultures and centuries. Olivia gets a second chance with her husband Simon and gives birth to a daughter despite the fact that her husband is sterile. In addition to this, “it’s not too late to tell Kwan” she admits; “I was Miss Banner and you are Nunumu, and forever you’ll be loyal and so will I” (349). When in Changmian, Olivia will be exposed to the geographical landscape of Kwan’s “yin stories,” she spent her life listening to. Unable to distinguish dream from reality or memory from fantasy, she discovers the evidence for her nineteenth century existence as Miss Banner: the music box, the journal and the duck’s eggs. There she focused her psychic unity. When she believes Kwan, then her traumas are healed and she is transformed into a spiritually integrated character who knows her past, history and origins. The balance of Olivia results from her reunification with the spirit of Miss Banner. She reaches balance when she believes and understands Kwan/Nunumu’s “bed-time stories”. This balance occurs slowly/progressively when she lives the “yin stories”. When she is in Changmian, Olivia’s gaze(s) at the mountains and realiz(es) why Changmian seems so familiar. It’s the setting for Kwan’s stories, the ones that filter into [her] dreams. There they are: the archways, the cossia 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” (205 italics added). Since the
“yin stories” occurred in Changmian, it is no longer an empty space, and the yin stories are the communicative devices that will foster Olivia’s recovery.

Moreover, through the cave in Thistle Mountain the gaps between Miss Banner and Olivia as isolated different human beings and the remote landscape Kwan was describing is fulfilled. Through this unity, Olivia reaches truth and understands the significance of the situation: her mysterious pregnancy, Kwan’s presence and disappearance in/from her life. From Kwan’s characterization, Tan shows that she is a “healer,” “a shaman”. In this way, Olivia derives her Chineseness from Kwan: her Chinese language, culture, values, history and dreams. Kwan is responsible for Olivia’s life the way Nununu was with Miss Banner. She contends that “I taught her to point to and call out the five elements that make up the physical world (...) I taught her (...) what makes the world a living place (...) I taught her the tastes that give us the memories of life (48); so “in five ways she could sense the world like a Chinese person” (49). Consequently, she taught both the American missionary and her half-sisterhow to be “Chinese” and perceive the world as a Chinese. She is Miss Banner’s confident, best friend and a mother to Olivia. The latter utters that “I should have been grateful to Kwan. I could always depend on her. She liked nothing better than to be by my side.” (11) Shortly afterwards she confesses that “in many respects, she’s been more like a mother to me than my real one (...) Kwan is sweet, also loyal, extremely loyal” (21-2). Olivia’s Chinese father died when she was four years old, and her American mother presents herself as “American mixed grill, a bit of everything white, fatty, and fried” (3). She complains that her mother “had plenty of room in her life for dates with men or bouds 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” (7).

Subsequently, unless Kwan takes care of her, she will live in an alien condition, especially that she is half-American, half-Chinese. Unlike the other American-born daughters, Olivia is motherless [without Kwan] and lacks security and a sense of belonging. Her emotional connections and shared memories are with her Chinese half-sister. Tan inserts the character of Kwan as a substitute for the absent mother. Tan explains that Kwan is devoted and loyal to her “treasured little sister” who resents, humiliates and ignores her at the beginning of Kwan’s life with them. Since Olivia doesn’t articulate her isolation, alienation, believing that Kwan is responsible for her mother’s carelessness, she rejects her presence and interference in her life. Ultimately, being abandoned by her mother, Olivia suffers an identity crisis intensified by the presence of a strange Chinese sister who converses with the dead and possesses supernatural powers. However, it is Kwan’s “yin stories” and “yin voice” that will guide Olivia through her journey of self-affirmation and will help her find balance with herself, her husband and environment. Indeed, in China Olivia and Kwan “will reestablish their emotional connections with each other and they reaffirm a relationship that has endured through at least two lifetimes (...) and as they rewrite their story, each one finds what she has been seeking—an integrated self for Olivia and/peace for Kwan” (141 Huntley). Before going inside the mysterious cave Kwan implores Olivia “[n]ow you know all my secrets”, “Give me peace” (343).

In The Hundred Secret Senses, Amy Tan takes up Kwan’s supernatural “yin eyes” as both a central theme and a narrative strategy weaving the supernatural with the natural, the magic with the fictional; inviting a reading of magic realism “determined by myths and legends and linked to communal values and traditions” (Walter 64). Therefore magic realism as a discourse conveys the novelist’s views about her cultural specificities.

Moreover The Hundred Secret Senses examines magic realism as a way of representing the true hidden past that Chinese characters lived before immigration. It is being discussed in terms of representing characters with multiple identities and thus questioning the notion of truth in the lives of the Chinese in China and in the United States. Consequently the purpose of this section is to probe into the nature of magical realism in thenovel. For this, it is useful to situate the term in a theoretical framework. Although magic realism is not a prominent characteristic of Asian American literature it “has been gaining popularity as a means of literary expression for the majority of ethnic literatures in The US since the late 1960’s,” affirms Magdalena Delicca in her article “American Magic Realism: Crossing the Borders in Literatures of the Margins”: She defines the term as “a mode which crosses the borders between two different forms of reasoning,” suggesting “a binary opposition between two separate discourses: the realistic and the magical” (ibid). In line with this definition, Ronald Walter affirms that “[m]ost critics agree upon the fact that magical realism is an oxymoron combining natural and supernatural categories of reality” (63). Already the word magic implies the existence of the supernatural world whether it be myths, gods, or superpowers that govern the universe. This supernatural world is not constructed, it just exists mysteriously, yet it is an integral part in/of life for “[l]ife is a circle, and everything has a place in it” states Paula Gunn Allen. Magic realist writers cross the boundaries between the real and the magic fusing the two in one. Amy Tan inserts Kwan’s story set in Changmian, positioning the narrative in the supernatural world. She constructs the “world of yin” which has “yin stories” told by “yin people”. The “yin” is a term inventedby the novelist, but it doesn’t mean ghosts; it refers to those who are dead. Obviously then, “the world of yin” with its accompanying people, stories, relationships...is the supernatural which is the magic. Tan explores the
supernatural world through a Chinese character and fuses her narrative with 1990’s America. In this way she naturalizes the supernatural.

Moreover, Tan has two realities collide: the rational and discursive, and the irrational and intuitive maintains Magdalena Delicka (3). She further adds that Kwan “displays through her stories the best magical qualities of storytelling in which the supernatural coexists with the real” (6). Kwan is a mysterious and powerful woman and many signs in the text indicate that she has supernatural powers. It is through Kwan’s characterization that the novelist moves to the supernatural magic world. Indeed Kwan reconciles two opposing worlds separated by two different languages, continents, cultures and one hundred and thirty years of history. Therefore she lives two dimensions of time” (8) describes Delicka: “she exists in the twentieth –century San Francisco; as Nunumu, she lives in the nineteenth-century China. She travels freely between two centuries and countries. What is more, she can establish contact between the world of yin and the world of the living” (8-9). Through Kwan, Amy Tan presents a cyclical perception of time and space; she harmoniously blurs the boundaries between fiction, magic, history and storytelling, as well as time and space. For this she has recourse to the concept of reincarnation, and no less magical than her supernatural powers are the nineteenth century existence of Miss Banner, Nunumu and Yiban.

In her (Kwan’s) narrative, the novelist explores the Taiping rebellion which is a reference point in Kwan’s magic realist narrative inasmuch as she celebrates the Hakka identity and represents their uprising. Accordingly magical realism in Tan’s text is “a cultural-political practice that articulates the ongoing (hi) story of colonization and decolonization in the Americas” (Walter 79). As an ethnic minority group the Hakka in China revolted against the Manchus who suppressed them politically, culturally and religiously, since the rebellion was based on Christian beliefs attacking the Chinese belief system. Furthermore, “the underlying ideological function” of blurring the real with the magical, contends Walter “ is to transform an invisible past into a recreated visible present becoming future through the discursive creation of a reality—as a border site that facilitates possibilities of indigenous agency and sociocultural transformation” (69/70). Accordingly, Tan creates a condition of visibility for the Hakka minority and recreates their rebellion.

Through magical realism—asserts Delicka—Tan projects her ideological concerns with the sociocultural and political borders of ethnic communities in US (3). However, Tan examines the Chinese as the ethnic minority in the US and ethnic minority within their country. The first community concerns the Chinese immigrants while the second refers to the Hakkapeople. Critic Bella Adams reads Kwan’s characterization and reincarnation in terms of therelationship between the dominant westernized group and the Chinese ethnic group “through the character of Kwan, whose immigrant life spans a period in American history—the 1960’s and the 1990’s—that saw identity politics complicated by a politics of difference, as well as the growing popularity of ‘American magic realism’. Tan analogically re-presents a history of the neocolonial relationship between the dominant western (ized) group and other(ed) Americans” (100).

Magic realism for Ronald Walter, Magdalena Delicka and Frederic Jameson is informed by myths and traditions. The first contends that “the subject consciousness develops through active participation in human, natural and cosmic realms” (64). He adds that “magic/marvellousness is a material reality with a psychic dimension actualized through visionary experiences and embedded in ritual practices” (65). The magic realist characters are Kwan-Nunumu and Olivia-Miss Banner. Since Kwan is Chinese, was born and raised in China, she will guide her American half-sister through the process of identity formation. Olivia will be exposed—as early as the age of six—and will participate in a “cosmic reality,” “the world of yin”; she will have dreams every night and her life will be “embedded in ritual practices;” till she confesses “[a]nd I listen, no longer afraid of Kwan’s secret. She’s offered me her hand. I’m taking it freely. Together we’re flying to the world of yin.” (325) Finally, Jameson asserts in “On Magic Realism in Films” that magic realism has shifted “to what must be called an anthropological perspective: magic realism now comes to be understood as a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myths” (302).

The Hundred Secret Senses dwells on the Hakka minority as “a peasant society,” “a village” and a tribe. “Magic realism reflects the duality that resulted from this cross-cultural intersection and accommodated the popular myths, legends and folklore inherent in the lives of the indigenous people, while adhering at the same time to the conventions of realistic fiction” (2). Tan articulates the two narratives (Olivia’s 1990’s San-Francisco’s stories and Kwan’s stories about her childhood in China before immigration, her life as Nunumu and her 30-year experience in the States) with an interestingly intricate plot, real-life characters and real geographical, historical settings. Yet she records the history and traditions of the Hakka minority—mainly the Hakka women—through the reincarnation of three characters, who lived during the Taiping rebellion, and had a tense relationship which is resolved in a future life, time and place. All in all, then, since the characters participate in a human, non-human, natural, supernatural and real, magic realms the novel acquires a duality that results from these double worlds leading the text—or rather Kwan’s narrative—to possess an oxymoronic form.
Critics agree that magical realism is an oxymoron for it combines “natural and supernatural categories of reality” (Walter 63). Yet in Tan’s text, though the protagonist is an “oxymoronic” character who combines two opposite sides, natural and fictional on one hand, and supernatural and magical on the other, the two realms are fused in one. The novelist naturalizes the supernatural and Kwan–Nunumu is a convincing woman who has got a chance in a different life span to redeem her mistakes. Even if we extend Nunumu’s portrayal to the one-eye bandit girl she is still a physically real character. Therefrom, Tan portrays characters with multiple, unfixed identities. Kwan in The States is both Kwan and Nunumu. The latter is another bandit girl. In China—at the age of five years—Kwan switches bodies with another child: Bancake. She drowned in the flood and during the funeral, Kwan—as a ghost—“flew back to the mortal world” (156). Unable to return to her body, Kwan comes back in Bancake’s body. From this, the multiplicity of Kwan’s personalities implies that “reality…is already in and of itself magical or fantastic” and “realism is already necessarily a “magic realism” confirms Frederic Jameson (301). Thereupon both Chinese and American realities are magical; for instance their father’s name is not Jack Lee. He took the identity/name from papers he found containing “official documents for immigration to America!” (162) as well as “certified academic records, a quarantine health certificate, a student visa, and a letter of enrollment to Lincoln University in San Francisco, one year’s tuition already paid(…) one-way ticket (…) and two hundred U.S. dollars” (Ibid). Thus he seizes the opportunity and immigrates in 1949.Kwan’s switching bodies with Bancake, her father’s wrong name and loss of the true one result in Olivia’s questioning her identity, that of her sister and the reliability of her stories. She asserts that I stare at Kwan. I stare at Big Ma. I think about what Du Lili has said. Who and what am I supposed to believe? All the possibilities whir through my brain, and I feel I am in one of those dreams where the threads of logic between sentences keep disintegrating.May Du Lili is younger than Kwan. Maybe she’s seventy-eight. Maybe Big Ma’s ghost is here. Maybe she isn’t. All these things are true and false (246). On account of the repetition of “maybe’s,” Tan magic realist text exemplifies the inadequacy of a single interpretation and contains numerous ambiguities. In line with this, critic Mary Jane Hurst interprets the multiple possibilities in her article “Balancing self and Other through Speech and Silence in Chang–Rea Lee’s Native speaker and Amy Tan’s The Hundred Secret Senses” as a pattern in the novel for “nothing is as it seems everyone has a complicated past, community relationships are unstable, everything has more than one explanation, including competing supernatural explanations, and no one ever knows whether or not to believe family stories within other stories. Language is as layered and masked and complicated as the people who use it” (93). Consequently the novel is set on one main paradigm: different versions of the truth and varying identities for the characters. Therein, the novelist aims to “create uncertainty and to describe a world in which no definite answers are possible” (120 Huntley).

Since magic realism in The Hundred Secret Senses is “an oxymoronic form and, as such, generates different interpretative possibilities, some literal, others figural” (Adams 101) so Amy Tan through the characterization of Olivia questions the notion of truth and destabilises the American-born daughters’ trust in the Western education they had by inserting magical realism in the form of Kwan’s ‘yin stories’ as well as her supernatural powers. She places her afterlife beliefs in a westernized rational community in San-Francisco. Thus “[u]nable to secure a reliable relationship between cause/effect, father/daughter, husband/wife, and intention meaning, it is no small wonder Olivia acknowledges that arbitrariness is a condition.” (ibid 106) Besides, many ambiguities and inconsistencies and varying realities govern the plot of The Hundred Secret Senses. Crucially, however the inconsistent, oxymoronic character is Kwan. Hurst reads her as Olivia’s “mentor/ double/shadow/alien” self (92). Indeed Olivia develops her subjectivity through her relationship with Kwan. Being ‘the double’ she represents according to Hurst “a quest for meaning and identity” (96). Already Kwan while switching bodies with her discovered that she has ‘yin eyes,’ she wasn’t dead; she became a ghost in Bancake’s body; “Again the double has been redoubled. Since her return to life, Kwan’s primary goal has been to fulfill her promise and rectify a wrong she feels she committed against Miss Banner in the late 1800’s” (97).

In line with this Ronald Walter agrees that magical realism is a form of writing characterized by a dual character: an inward doubleness—the natural and the supernatural (66). This doubleness affirms the oxymoronic form, so fundamental to a magic realist text, plotand characters. Consequently “like any figure, the oxymoron brings together different phenomena” asserts Bella Adams in the case of The Hundred Secret Senses, “the real and the magical, the literal and the figural” (123 italics in the original). The Hundred Secret Senses ultimately suggests that identity formation—in the case of Olivia—is the outcome of a fusion between the natural/real and the supernatural/magic. That’s why she undergoes an identity crisis when she visits China, she asks “why question the world, indeed?” 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. (247)

What further foregrounds Tan’s use of magical realism as a device through which the Chinese female character and the American-born half-sister restore balance between themselves, within themselves and with the outside world is the empirical verifiability of Kwan’s “yin stories” through the recovery of the music box, the journal as well as the duck’s eggs. In her existence as Nunumu, Kwan buried a box filled with treasures in a
small valley (167). Thus she returns to China after thirty years and recovers her hidden belongings. She tells Olivia “This is my box I hide long time ago. Already tell you this” (312); surprising her half–sister who is supposed to be Miss Banner and convincing her at the same time that “[t]hey’re no longer talking about bedtime story of ghost. Here is the music box”; yet there are the things that supposedly belonged to them” describes Olivia for she “can barely speak” (317). Therefore, Amy Tan here appears to be insisting that what seems to be magical and unreal is actually real with evidence; and again Olivia will be endowed with her sister’s hundred secret senses. Though she doesn’t possess “yin eyes,” she asserts that she was in a different life, time and space a different female subject: Miss Banner. Accordingly, Amy Tan revises the notions of space and time, questioning our stable knowledge about them. The female subject in The Hundred Secret Senses travels freely between two continents and enters an abstract time frame. Kwan reimagines Thistle Mountain during the Taiping rebellion and uses magic realism—her ‘yin eyes’—to transgress the Manchu’s oppression of the Hakka minority and to liberate the female subjectivity in the form of Miss Banner, Kwan-Nunumu and the one –eyed bandit girl.

Moreover The Hundred Secret Senses offers a reading of magic realism in which the magic realist female subject—both Kwan and Olivia at the end of the novel—create a space to portray a traumatized self (her orphanage: the two characters lost one of their parents), body ( Kwan is the one eye-girl), to recover and transgress patriarchal oppression. This is manifested in Olivia’s desire first to change her name, second to give her daughter Kwan’s last name. Actually, Amy Tan allocates a whole chapter to ‘name change,’ a process that further complicates and destabilizes one’s identity starting from their father who changes his real name for the sake of immigrating to the States and finally he loses both his true name and identity. Consequently, again the unreal becomes the real. Furthermore when Olivia starts the divorce procedure she immediately thinks to change her name from Olivia Bishop to Olivia Lee. So “through language, she edges toward greater identification with her Chinese heritage” asserts Hurst, adding that “but because her father died when she was very young, she has little memory of him, and her knowledge of Chinese culture derives mainly from Kwan’s stories” (95). Besides through language Olivia reappropriates her name and by extension her identity and that of her husband ‘Bishop’. She regrets her father’s “fake” “unreal” name, already a sense of rootlessness governs her life. Thus through a “name change” she allows her female identity to open up to multiple possibilities of subjectivity. Ultimately she controls her daughter’s identity by adding Kwan’s last name to hers: Samantha Bishop Lee. She purposefully creates and strengthens the bonds between Kwan- Nunumu and Samantha as the latter blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal on one hand and past, present, future on the other hand.

In the last pages of the novel Simon–Yiban enters a cave in Thistle Mountain which is famous for being a place of switching bodies with the dead. In other words if anyone goes inside s/he comes back only as a ghost. Thereafter Kwan or Nununu, since events take place in 1850’s Changmian, goes into the cave deliberately so that Simon–Yiban returns and is reunited with Miss Banner. Additionally, promising Olivia to come back, she gives her a gift: a baby girl. Olivia states that “I call her Samantha, sometimes Sammy. Samantha Li. She and I took Kwan’s last name–why not? What’s a family name if not a claim to being connected in the future to someone from the past” (375). Kwan’s reincarnation in Samantha amazes Olivia and Simon, who are supposed to be reasonable and real, and further underlines the explicit use of magic realism to naturalize the supernatural. All in all, then the scene of Kwan’s mysterious disappearance in the cave is a harmonious linkage between the natural and the supernatural categories of reality. As Ronald Walter describes it, “the supernatural is naturalized and becomes an integral part of the textual reality. The narrative, then, stages the past as mythomagical history and memory through visionary experiences and inscribes it in the present as a dream reality with varying dimensions of meaning” (27). Accordingly The Hundred Secret Senses challenges our traditional conception of history. It retells and unravels the history of the Taiping rebellion and reactivates the forgotten identity of the Hakka minority through what Walter labels “mythomagical history and memory”.

The concept of “mythomagical history and memory” voices a key component in Amy Tan’s literary identity construction of female subjectivity in The Hundred Secret Senses. Central to Kwan’s magic realist narrative is rewriting the history of the Hakka minority group in 1850’s Changmian. Equally important is her endeavor to inscribe their cultural characteristics. Ronald Walter contends that the reconstruction of suppressed cultural knowledges, myths and legends, the recreation of figures and events from the past—is a powerful literary strategy of ethnic representation and empowerment: tracing the potential for individual and collective relocation as an imaginary solution to lived fragmentation and discontinuity, it translates internal and/or external colonization into an aesthetic politics of liberation” (66).

Therefore rewriting a specific historical event (The Taiping Rebellion) together with recreating the leader figure, generals and soldiers (…) is Tan’s main narrative strategy to represent the Hakka groups as an ethnic minority group. Moreover she uses magical realism as a discourse of cultural differences and resistance of the Hakka to the Manchu’s oppression. Though magic realism “has been gaining popularity as a means of literary expression for the majority of ethnic literatures in The US since the late 1960’s,” affirms Magdalena

DOI: 10.9790/0837-2206053139 www.iosrjournals.org 38 | Page
Re-thinking Female Subjectivity through Magic Realism

Delicka in her article “American Magic Realism: Crossing the Borders in Literatures of the Margins”. She defines the term as “a mode which crosses the borders between two different forms of reasoning,” suggesting “a binary opposition between two separate discourses: the realistic and the magical” (ibid).

The Hundred Secret Senses examines magic realism as a way of representing the true hidden past that Chinese characters lived before immigration. Moreover it is being discussed in terms of representing characters with multiple identities and thus questioning the notion of truth in the lives of the Chinese in China and in the United States. Moreover Tan uses magical realism as a discourse of cultural differences and resistance of the Hakka to the Manchu’s oppression. Accordingly, Tan creates a condition of visibility for the Hakka minority and recreates their rebellion. Kwan reimagines Thistle Mountain during the Taiping rebellion and uses magic realism—her ‘yin eyes’-- to transgress the Manchu’s oppression of the Hakka minority and to liberate the female subjectivity in the form of Miss Banner, Kwan-Nunumu and the one –eyed bandit girl. Despite the fact that this experience refers to the 1850’s China it crosses all boundaries and reactivates female oppression yet struggle to assert their identity.

Through what Walter labels “mythomagical history and memory”, Olivia reaches truth and understands the significance of the situation: her mysterious pregnancy, Kwan’s presence and disappearance in/from her life. From Kwan’s characterization, Tan shows that she is a “healer,” “a shaman”. In this way, Olivia derives her Chineseness from Kwan: her Chinese language, culture, values, history and dreams. In The Hundred Secret Senses, Amy Tan takes up Kwan’s supernatural “yin eyes” as both a central theme and a narrative strategy weaving the supernatural with the natural, the magic with the fictional; inviting a reading of magic realism “determined by myths and legends and linked to communal values and traditions” (Walter 64)

BIBLIOGRAPHY