QUESTIONING MEMORY AND FAMILY HISTORY IN AMY TAN'S THE BONESETTER'S DAUGHTER AND THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES

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Abstract
This study explores the ways in which Chinese cultural and artistic traditions together with the narrative rhetoric of talk-stories are appropriated and transformed in Amy Tan's novels. The focus on culture, ethnicity and gender identity requires knowledge of Chinese worldviews, without which one cannot hope to achieve full understanding of Asian American literature. Intended to elucidate Tan's unique interpretation of Chinese and American ways of life, this study also highlights the power relations, as seen from a new historicist perspective. This paper suggests that, although in society race and gender play crucial parts in discussions regarding culture, family structure and also social activities are closely tied in order to construct roles of femininity within the two cultures that are embraced in Tan's work. The paper is intended to bring to the fore aspects related to the relationships between mothers, daughters and even sisters, as they succeed in sharing stories about their lives through narration.

Key words: *new historicism, power, ethnicity, femininity /vs/ masculinity, cultural inheritance, storytelling*

1. MORE THAN AN INTRODUCTION

This study deals with issues related to Chinese-American history as Amy Tan's novels raise questions related to both identity and ethnicity. In demonstrating that her works are indeed part of a contemporary cultural context, theories of new historicism in connection to Asian American assimilation were selected. Nevertheless, before defining new historicism, one finds it crucial to first mention historicism. For these reasons, Paul Hamilton (1996, p. 2) claims that, "historicism (or 'historism' in this translation of Curtius' *Historismus*) is a critical movement insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds". In other words, historicism comprises the multitude of events that happened in one or more places in the past, and their historical, and implicitly, accurate interpretation. The same work (Hamilton 1996, p. 3) brings to the fore a rather intricate theory related to this movement, because "on the one hand, therefore, historicism is suspicious of the stories the past tells about itself; on the other hand, it is equally suspicious of its own partisanship. It offers up both its past and its present for ideological scrutiny". It is obvious that history cannot be viewed as having only one interpretation, so who can tell whether a story is true or false? Who can actually say if the events encountered in books were described exactly in accordance with reality? One answer is sure: there is no plausible explanation as history, just like literature, develops in time.

Hamilton (1996, p. 94) rightfully considers that "both past and present have to remain separate so that one can question the other, and so that a 'fusion of horizons', making possible agreement and disagreement, can take place". Hence, one needs to detach himself/herself from past events in order to understand former actions with present results. Additionally, one finds it crucial to make a clear distinction between past and present, because one cannot speak about what it is without understanding the happenings that took place. It is also important to mention that (Hamilton 1996, p. 153) "current new historicism distinguishes itself by its heightened consciousness of criticism's institutional past, and of how its methodological changes might have served particular cultural interests". What new historicism tries to blend in is the unchangeable past the changes that might have taken place according to requirements imposed by a certain cultural background. Another way of interpreting new historicism in contemporary literature would have to do with the following quote: "new historicism recasts history as a battle over fictions, a battle of communication" (Hamilton 1996, p. 172). In other words, new historicism is not necessarily concerned with the accuracy of events, but with the act of

writing, and more importantly with the acknowledgement of fictitious characters into the sphere of literature.

In order to prove that some new historicist approaches can be applied to Tan's fiction one must also discuss historical events related to Asian American assimilation, as it is important to take into account real events and their new interpretations. According to Cuong Nguyen Le assimilation can be classified into several categories. It can either be behavioral, meaning that the person accumulates norms related to the host society and starts to act accordingly. Assimilation can also be structural as "the racial/ethnic minority or immigrant and his/her descendants in later generations enter and become integrated into the formal social, political, economic, and cultural institutions of the host country […] and develops numerous long-lasting personal friendships with the members of the majority group" (Le 2007, p. 23). On the other hand, the critic claims that there are other three ways of understanding how assimilation works. The first view has to do with the passage of time and the integration of generations into the American society. The second one deals with the revival of old traditions as C. N. Le (2007, p. 23) claims that it "emphasizes the resilience of ethnicity". The third way of assimilation is best portrayed by the Asian American quote: "what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember" (Le 2007, p. 24). No matter the type of assimilation, one must recognize that it occurs, willingly or not. For example, Tan's characters achieved behavioral assimilation as the daughters are American citizens and deny almost entirely their Chinese heritage. In exchange, the mothers try to make their way through structural assimilation: they marry American or Chinese-American citizens, they take part in their daughters' contests, and more importantly, they decide to talk about past events.

An important remark seems to question themes and motifs present in any work of fiction: "all sorts of historical narratives—progressive, altruistic, fatalistic—have employed the full range of associated discriminations—race, colour, gender, religion, social practice, primitivism—to justify almost any behaviour of one group of people towards another" (Hamilton 1996, p. 178). One could realize that through fiction ethnic groups, in particular, tried to shape a new identity that would have elements from both the countries of ancestral origin and the ones in which they lived. At this point one should question if there is any strong connection between new historicism and cultural difference. A sensible answer would be positive, but one should not mix the historical difference with the cultural one. Even though one experiences cultural difference in a particular period of time, he/she should be aware of the fact that culture is strictly connected to ethnic groups, whereas he/she should know that history is more concerned with the social environment of a particular country.

When discussing contemporary ethnic studies one should also pay very close attention to the introductory part of *Practicing New Historicism*, in which Greenblatt along with Catherine Gallagher (2000, p. 11) claim that "women's studies, and the feminism that motivated its formation, has served as an important, if little acknowledged, model for new historicism in that it has inspired its adherents to identify new objects of study, bring those objects into the light of critical attention, and insist upon their legitimate place in the curriculum". In other words, new historicism is not limited to only one branch; instead it comprises a multitude of fields: the field of women's studies is only one of them and it represents an important part of the historical context. For these reasons Hamilton (1996, p. 191) claims that: "Women's studies is now a vast academic studyarea. […] It also, in some forms, questions its own mode of representing the past, seeing the conceptual tools it inherits as part of the oppression it aims to resist". The core idea that makes sense of all women's writings remains the same – through their stories the reader imagines and indirectly experiences discrimination as well as injustices brought to women. It is also very plausible that together with the act of writing, women re-interpret past events, as they try to connect with the countries of their mothers. They are not familiar with what happened years ago, but still tell stories about that period. This problem could make any reader question how real the events are. However, one answer is undisputable: history – be it personal, social, political or cultural – should be viewed as plain fiction.

Nevertheless, it is of extreme importance to note that gender studies also gain ground when discussing Amy Tan's fiction. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* brings to light an entire history of Chinese literature, highlighting women's position in society in contrast with important historical events. However, according to the Chinese history, ambiguity is believed to be the common

quality of literature, "when it seeks to grow independently of political control" (Wang 1993, p. 200), because China is still in the process of rapid social change. According to the same source, the term "gender" is closely related to "feminism" and is supposed to target women who have been deprived of their creativity and who have encountered misogynistic remarks during their lives. Moreover, women's incapacity and "inferiority in matters of experience, education, intellect, and imagination" point out the sexual differences between the two opposites and, more importantly, the male cultural dominance (Showalter 1993, p. 404). In addition, feminism is believed to be a commitment to the political and cultural equality of women and also, a "belief in the importance of gender as a fundamental variable in the creation and interpretation of literature by both women and men" (Showalter 1993, p. 404). In other words, when talking about Tan's work one should emphasize two most relevant theories at the heart of gender studies, namely the social and cultural one.

Firstly, Tan's women are portrayed as being oppressed both by class structure and by their social imposed gender roles of worthless females who entirely depend on male domination. In this particular case, Tan's characters try to challenge their status by rebelling against patriarchy, as they are believed to suffer oppression simply because they are women. Secondly, the female characters in Tan's novels seem to emphasize the differences between men and women, by bringing to the fore biological differences, such as independence /vs/ interdependence, competition /vs/ cooperation, domination /vs/ submission. To put it differently, women that are portrayed in Asian American novels, especially in Tan's writings, seek individual change in contrast to the society in which they live. By gaining voice and talking about past events that haunted their youth, these women are representatives of counter-culture; not only do they rebel against the socially imposed norms of the society, but they also become a model for every female who sees herself as different in a certain cultural space.

In trying to discuss gender and ethnic studies, one finds it crucial to mention that these two areas of interest are present in all Tan's novels. The characters experience oppression and discrimination both because they are women and also because they are representatives of a certain ethnic group. If the mothers struggled to survive in feudal China, where they were constantly humiliated by men and also by their social status, there are instances when the daughters experience sexism and racism in the United States, as they are judged by their appearance and by the ways in which the mothers treat them. For a better understanding, one should refer to the introductory part from *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* where it is clearly stated that: "the constitutive power of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other forms of social identity has, finally, suddenly, been recognized as a relevant aspect of almost all projects of inquiry" (Alcoff 2006, p. 5). To put it differently, there are numerous aspects that could contribute to the formation of one's identity. When reading Tan's interpretation of Chinese-American literature, it is of great importance to take into consideration not only the characters' gender and race, but also the social class with which they identify, their own perception concerning their ethnicity and their sexual experiences. These are all aspects that contribute to the formation of one's identity in society. For these reasons Alcoff (2006, p. 6) further argues that: "race and gender are forms of social identity that share at least two features: they are fundamental rather than peripheral to the self […] and they operate through visual markers on the body". Thus, any representative of a group, in this case a woman, would put emphasis on the impact of both mental and visual perceptions. One's race and/or gender would contribute to both her interior and exterior appearance.

In other words, Tan's characters bring to light not only aspects related to their femininity or masculinity, but also aspects connected to their ethnicity as seen from a new historicist point of view. When thinking about literature discussed from a new historicist perspective, one should also bring to the fore John Brannigan's work, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (1998, p. 81), which reveals that: "New historicists have made the study of literature in relation to history less a matter of supplying incontrovertible historical facts as background information to illuminate the themes, forms and contents of literary texts, and more a matter of addressing the role that discourse, including literature, plays in negotiating and making manifest the power relations and structures of a culture". Accordingly, the presented novels seem to reveal not only the power of one's culture over another, but also the power of a woman over her own life. Living in a patriarchal society in which the rule of the father is still applied, female characters rely on their historical background in order to prevail. Not

only do they present how pain was inflicted on them, but they also give the reader an overview of how they managed to surpass their injustices, by constantly drawing parallels between Western and Eastern societies, Old and New worlds.

2. MEMORY AND FAMILY HISTORY

Although the relevance of memory in connection to historical facts related to family and implicitly in the construction of gender roles and cultural practices seems to be an issue of extreme importance in all of Tan's novels, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* together with *The Hundred Secret Senses* could best illustrate the issues mentioned above. Both novels have as core idea the bond between female characters and the power of surpassing critical moments in life through storytelling. The problems that arise together with the decision of breaking silence through tales are closely linked to doubting facts related to the ways in which female characters remember past events, as other characters question the relevance of such recollections. Because the story tellers choose to narrate in a Chinese manner, in this way making the reader aware of several concepts related to this particular culture, it is crucial to mention that apart from storytelling, this study will deal with memory issues, as well as unfounded fears and false beliefs related to death, as seen from both Chinese and American perspectives. One should also bring to light the presence of ghosts and their impact on memory as well as the importance of superstition and the influence on the characters' choices in life. Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* tells the story of LuLing who tries to communicate with her daughter indirectly, through manuscripts, in this way bringing to light aspects related to her life as a child in China, as she was raised by Precious Auntie. Only after reading the translated story of her mother, does Ruth realize that the events LuLing presented were equally concerned with the relationship between LuLing and Precious Auntie and the one between Ruth and her mother. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that together with LuLing's process of remembering events from China, Ruth acts as a mediator between the yin (i.e. the world of ghosts) and the living world, being in this way the bridge between her mother and Precious Auntie. Similarly, *The Hundred Secret Senses* presents two half-sisters who succeed in strengthening their relationship after revealing key moments in their lives. Here, Kwan is portrayed as being the mediator between the two worlds as she constantly connects present events with the ones that took place in her past life. Because Kwan is believed to have "yin-eyes", she is able to see and talk to ghosts, which undoubtedly frightens her sister, Olivia. One should add that as Kwan plans the trip to China, Olivia gradually becomes aware of both her relationship with her sister and the one with her estranged husband, Simon.

Although Tan's novels usually open with sections narrated by daughters, the first pages from *The Bonesetter's Daughter* are presented by LuLing, a Chinese-born woman who is Ruth's mother and is suspected of suffering from dementia. LuLing talks about a day from her youth in China and mentions Precious Auntie who showed her a piece of paper with her name on it. As the narrator remembers everything except that name, she starts to share unique experiences related to her life. The very first words of the novel link to the fact that LuLing tries to make a clear distinction between truth and imagination as she claims that "These are the things I know are true"[1]. She mentions her two dead husbands, her daughter and when she is about to talk about her nursemaid, she realizes that it is hard to remember her real name. As the story evolves, the reader finds out that Precious Auntie is the daughter of a famous bonesetter and that she usually "talked" about herself as being a fire-eater. The reader can only infer that something tragic occurred to her, as her face is burned and she can speak only through her body language and signs. Hence the novel is more about Precious Auntie (or Liu Xin by her real name), her personal history and implicitly, her influence on LuLing and her daughter, than about any typical mother-daughter relationship. One should further add that: "the three generations of women are spiritually collected by the ghost of Gu Liu Xin. The spirit of the dead grandmother guides both the plot development and the central theme of the novel, reclaiming the silenced voice of women" (Pu 2006, p. 7). In other words, one could also claim that Precious Auntie is the central character in Tan's

[1] Amy Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, (New York: Random House, 2002): 1. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

novel, because through her life story, LuLing and Ruth succeed in strengthening their relationship. Moreover, as her story develops the reader clearly sees that although she was enforced to be silent, Precious Auntie regains her voice through her daughter and granddaughter. Just as the title suggests, the story of the bonesetter's daughter is meant to reveal aspects related to a dramatic life and heal scars through the power of talking about past events.

Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* also explores memory combined with guilt and shame, as Olivia reminisces about her childhood life immediately after her father's death. She claims that: "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"[2]. Of course, Olivia contradicts herself when she recognizes these facts, as she is prepared to reveal "without knowledge" a family secret from the very beginning of the novel. She is well aware that through this revelation of secrets, she detaches herself from any guilt and seeks forgiveness from any reader. In fact, Su-lin Yu (2000, p. 148) rightfully considers that: "the unfolding relationship between Olivia and Kwan shows that Olivia's repulsion toward her sister comes from their racial and cultural difference rather than winning the parental attention and affection". As it was expected, Olivia is not able to understand and to create a connection to Kwan's identity as a Chinese yet. She constantly rejects all aspects that define her sister and her identity as a female and as a sister. She prefers to mock her understanding of English, as she is terrified of Kwan's ability of being a ghost whisperer.

Olivia further argues that she was constantly embarrassed as a child because of the discrepancy between herself and Kwan. She is not able to understand the family structure from China, or the relationship between women, in this case, sisters. For these reasons, the American sister explains: "By the first grade I became an expert of public humiliation and shame. Kwan asked so many dumb questions that all the neighborhood kids thought she came from Mars. She'd say: 'What M&M?' 'What ching gum?' 'Who this Popeys Sailor Man?' 'Why one eye gone?' 'He bandit?'" (Tan 1996 p. 10). Given the fact that Kwan comes from a different cultural space, Olivia chooses to criticize her sister instead of initiating her into the American way of life. More importantly, she seeks understanding and forgiveness from her readers. Thinking about how she managed to relate with Kwan, Olivia claims that as she was "infected" with Kwan's mother tongue, the Chinese sister learned to speak English from Olivia. Apart from the fact that she recognizes she has not done a good job in teaching, Olivia says: "She pushed her Chinese secrets into my brain and changed how I thought about the world. Soon I was even having nightmares in Chinese" (Tan 1996, p. 11). Here the American sister acknowledges that her identity as a Chinese-American begins to shape in the sense that she unwillingly incorporates elements related to both the country of her family origin and the one in which she lives. Moreover, it should be mentioned that without knowing, Olivia gradually gains structural assimilation, as she becomes a part of the Chinese culture, while she gets more and more familiar with it through Kwan. In a similar way, Olivia's sister aspires towards the same kind of assimilation, but fails in developing relationships other than the one with her sister and Simon.

When talking about *The Bonesetter's Daughter* one should point out that a considerable part of the novel takes place in America and it presents the problematic relationship between Ruth and her mother. While Ruth denies almost entirely her Chinese heritage, which links to behavioral assimilation, LuLing aspires towards structural assimilation, meaning that she marries once again in America, she "tries" to have a healthy relationship with her neighbors and her daughter, and, more importantly, she decides to talk about her past life, in this way demonstrating her effort of relating to her daughter. Nevertheless, in order to prove that the mother-daughter relationship is problematic primarily because of the two different types of assimilation, one finds it of great importance to mention LuLing's way of complaining. Because she is unaware of her way of speaking, LuLing is believed to constantly complain and rely on her daughter's help. Furthermore, although LuLing has gradually become proud of learning English and dealing with situations unfamiliar to her culture of ancestral origin, Ruth thinks differently. For instance, she is constantly annoyed by the fact that she has to be obedient and solve her mother's problems and decides to confront her in an American way

[2] Amy, Tan. *The Hundred Secret Senses*, (London: HarperPerennial, 1996): 3. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

by suggesting that LuLing should take care of everything that bothers her. Hearing all this, the mother remains silent only to begin talking about her wish of dying: "You wish I dead? You wish no mother tell you what to do? Okay, maybe I die soon!" (Tan 2002, p. 54). This critical moment triggers Ruth's idea of LuLing losing her mind as she seems to do things only to annoy or embarrass her daughter. Nevertheless, one should take into consideration Xiumei Pu's statement (2006, p. 12) about a typical Chinese family: "In a traditional Chinese mother-daughter relationship, the mother has the total control of her daughter, and a good daughter is supposed to be unconditionally obedient to the will of her mother". Just as Ruth is not able to understand the way her mother deals with daily problems, LuLing is unable to cope with her daughter's individuality. She cannot accept a child who questions her actions and decisions. Hence, she responds as she was taught; by threatening her own life.

Another relevant episode is the moment when the two characters are in a doctor's cabinet and LuLing claims that her year of birth is 1916 instead of 1921, the year in which she should have been born. As the doctor demands "I want the truth, now […] not what you tell your friends", LuLing is mistakenly portrayed as having trouble with her memory (Tan 2002, p. 69). This event immediately raises numerous questions in both Ruth and the reader's mind, because she is believed to suffer of Alzheimer's or dementia. Another scenario that brings to the fore the mother's troubled mind involves the two main characters and GaoLing, LuLing's sister, as they talk about a family picture, in which LuLing looked very sad due to her biological mother's death. Her statement raises questions in the characters' mind and Ruth tries to explain that her mother is standing right next to her and GaoLing in the picture, so there is no possible way that she is dead. Nevertheless, LuLing rejects the idea and claims in a firm voice: "That not my mother! […] GaoLing *not* my sister!" (Tan 2002, p. 102). Immediately after that the characters start to question once again LuLing's memory only to relate to the fact that apart from being sisters, they are also sister-in-laws, as they were married to two brothers. However, there is more than meets the eye in LuLing's remarks. She cannot explain in English that Waipo is not her biological mother and that she and GaoLing are not blood-related sisters. Only after getting acquainted with her story, does the reader realize that LuLing is the daughter of Precious Auntie, a woman who lacked happiness and good luck.

When talking about memory one should also bring to the fore Ruth's habit of remembering ten things a day, each thing corresponding to one finger. By developing this pattern Ruth finds herself in opposition to her mother, in this way being organized and having constant control over her life decisions. Nevertheless, there are times when one has the impression that Ruth is forgetting how to be a good daughter and, more importantly, how to realize that she is needed by Art and his daughters. For instance, she lets herself convinced that LuLing should be sent to a high class mental institution, called Mira Mar Manor. Fortunately, she decides to stay and take care of her mother while she gives the manuscripts to a translator. Interestingly enough, during her stay with her mother, Art realizes that Ruth is indeed needed beside him. He recognizes that: "I didn't know what I was going to lose until you moved out" (Tan 2002, p. 345). Another scene from the novel presents Fia and Dory, Art's daughters, who clearly feel Ruth's absence, while one of the daughters asks: "Ruth […] when are you coming home?" (Tan 2002, p. 349). Just like their father, the daughters were not able to fully appreciate the efforts and sacrifices Ruth did for the three Americans. Hence, they reminisce about the moments spent in her company, as they realize that they need a mother-like figure in their lives. By regaining her sense of belonging, Ruth seems to have confidence in her actions. One could state that she now feels to be a part of both her Chinese heritage and of her American one.

The motif of belonging seems to be in opposition with the one of dying as characters resort to death not only when they are not able to find a place of their own, but also when they want to protect their loved ones. In fact, Precious Auntie had the habit of mentioning it in connection to her family's curse. Once she discovers that the bones she has inherited from her father do not belong to dragons, but to her ancestors, she frequently talks about misfortune and suicide. Even the cliff behind their house is believed to be the world's end as people talked about it in a very peculiar way: "for what lay beyond and below was too unlucky to say out loud: unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts. Everyone knew this" (Tan 2002, p. 180). In other words, the cliff is a symbol of cursed death, as it is also the place where Precious Auntie chooses to end her life. LuLing systematically blames herself for Precious Auntie's death and more importantly, for not being able to find and bury her body. She

desperately, and yet consciously, claims: "I searched for her until dusk. By then, my eyes were swollen with dust and tears. I never found her. And as I climbed back up, I was a girl who had lost part of herself in the End of the World" (Tan 2002, p. 244). In other words, together with Precious Auntie's death, LuLing felt as if she partly died with her. However, her words mean more than meets the eye, as the Chinese burial tradition demands the person's bones for funeral. If this condition is not fulfilled, than it is said that the family will meet only misfortune and disaster. From another point of view, the lost body of Precious Auntie could very well connect to the dragon bones that were used in her family for different kinds of treatment. Although they are supposed to heal people's injuries, these particular bones have brought genuine bad luck to her family. One explanation for all the unfortunate events she has witnessed is that the dragon bones inherited from her father were in fact human bones. Taking all these theories into consideration, it is sensible to add that after the related events death is the only means of escape from such a life.

2.1 *The Motif of Death and the Presence of Ghosts*

As a grown-up LuLing talks about death in this way relating to her biological mother, while at the same time creating a similar bond between herself and Ruth. If in China she had to listen to Precious Auntie's wishes of dying, in America she takes the initiative of preserving the tradition and passing it to her daughter. It should be mentioned that Ruth herself talks about death even from an early age, as she mistakenly believes her neighbor Lance got her pregnant. Surprisingly, this event is not as dramatic as the one in which Lance threatens Ruth. Because the emotional impact was indeed strong, the girl decides to lie about being able to communicate with her grandmother and persuades LuLing to move to San Francisco, where she would be miles away from Lance.

Death can also be encountered in *The Hundred Secret Senses* as Kwan is the mediator between the world of the living and the one of the spirits. There are numerous instances in the novel which link to the fact that someone's death triggers a series of irreversible events. For instance, after Olivia's father's death, the reader familiarizes himself/herself with her mother's way of paying respects to her recently buried husband. Olivia says that: "According to Aunt Betty, at the funeral, my mother vowed never to remarry. She vowed to teach us children to honor the Yee family name. She vowed to find my father's first born child, Kwan, and bring her to the United States. The last promise was the only one she kept" (Tan 1996, p. 6). One could add that past and present events revealed in the novel were in a close relation to Jack Yee, Olivia's father. As the story develops, the reader finds out that he has left his family in China, as in 1949 he chose to leave for America having a new identity. Kwan once explained that, in fact, her father left the family because Kwan's mother was about to have another child. She further expresses her belief in what usually people call "heartsickness", as she thought that her mother suffered and died from it. She claims with terrifying regret: "That poor starving baby in her belly ate a hole in my mother's heart, and they both died" (Tan 1996, p. 12). These are clear instances which perfectly depict the influence of death over the ones who survive and tell the stories. One should also think about the present being continuously haunted by crucial events that took place in the past.

The same theme of past events haunting the present can also be encountered in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* as Baby Uncle showed himself in Great-Granny's dream and threatened that if Precious Auntie is not taken care of, they will both haunt the family. Another scene that involves the possible vengeance of spirits is shown in one of LuLing's memories when she still lived in Waipo's home. It is crucial to mention one scenario which involves the belief of LuLing's grandmother haunting her mother. Young LuLing claims that: "Mother believed Great-Granny was still around, haunting the outhouse and making sure everyone still followed her rules" (Tan 2002, p. 212). To put it differently, Mother fears that even after Great-Granny's death, her spirit is still present around the house. Hence, she must pay attention to things that might upset the dead. This remark is clearly linked to the fact that superstition related to ghosts is a highly problematic issue present throughout the entire novel, as a consequence to the characters' choices in life. One could add that being haunted by ghosts surpasses the belief of having bad luck; instead it is considered a curse for the entire family.

In a similar way, *The Hundred Secret Senses* brings to light not only the ghostly presences that Kwan sees and talks to, but also some other figures that to some extent seem to be more authentic, as they had clear and direct connections with the characters. To be more specific, one should first refer to Olivia's way of perceiving things. It is of great importance to mention that even if she initially claims that she is not supposed to reveal any of Kwan's secrets, she is not able to cope with her sister's gift of seeing and talking to ghosts. Probably because she was scared, or maybe because she could not understand Kwan's ability, Olivia goes to her mother and betrays her sister's trust. She recognizes that: "The next morning I went to my mother and did what I promised I'd never do: I told her about Kwan's yin eyes" (Tan 1996, p. 13). Olivia's betrayal has, of course, considerable effects in both her and Kwan's life. Just like LuLing from *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, who is sent to Mira Mar Manor where she is treated for Alzheimer, the Chinese sister from *The Hundred Secret Senses* is isolated and sent to a mental institution where she is electroshocked. The American sister regretfully claims that: "Yet the way I remember it is the way I have always felt – that I betrayed her and that's what made her insane. The shock treatments, I believed, were my fault as well. They released all her ghosts" (Tan 1996, p. 15). Her statement does not only revolve around betrayal and guilt; it also introduces one of the most important motifs in many Asian American novels, namely ghosts. Even if Olivia is initially afraid of such presences, at one point in the novel she asks Kwan to help her convince Simon that the ghost of his girlfriend Elza is telling him to forget about her. Interestingly enough, as this scene goes on, Olivia realizes that Kwan treated everything with extreme seriousness and revealed aspects which she was not supposed to know. Furthermore, Olivia admits that she has seen and heard Elza, as she describes that: "She wasn't like the ghosts I saw in my childhood […] She was pleading, crying, saying over and over again: 'Simon, don't forget me. Wait for me. I'm coming back'" (Tan 1996, p. 95). This excerpt was thoroughly analyzed by Mary Jane Hurst as she rightfully considers that Simon and Olivia's relationship is doomed, and instead of feeling better, Olivia experiences guilt, not for exploiting Kwan's talents, but for hiding her true intentions from Simon (2011, p. 94). On the other hand, one should add that the above selected quote links to Olivia being, just like Kwan, a mediator between the two worlds. Not only does she admit that she has seen ghosts as a little girl, but she also claims feeling, seeing and hearing Elza. Interestingly enough, she can observe the difference between the ghosts from her childhood, and the one she claims to see as a grown-up, probably because she can relate to Elza. One explanation could be that both women have the same man in common, while another one could be that as a "big girl" she is no longer afraid of ghost stories, while she has a different way of perceiving reality.

Ghosts are once again highlighted in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* after Precious Auntie's death, as she visited Chang in a dream. Being shocked, he starts a fire in the ink shop he owned and causes damages to other nearby shops as well. Once again, spirits are believed to bring only bad luck and here in particular, her death seems to gain significant terrain, as together with this act of rebellion, LuLing's life dramatically changes: her wedding with Mr. Chang's son does not take place; instead GaoLing marries him. In fact, she is sent to an orphanage where she eventually becomes a teacher for the younger students and meets Kai Jing, her future husband, and Teacher Pan's son. As it was expected, the war with the Japanese started and Kai Jing unwillingly joined in. Here the reader could make similar connections with Tan's other novels which portray times of war, ways of surviving and talking about it. For instance, in *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Bibi Chen explains that her American friends interfered in Burmese affairs, while in *The Joy Luck Club* Suyuan chooses to abandon her two daughters in time of war, because she thought that she would die soon. Just like the present novel, namely *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* gives the reader an insight into World War II and portrays Weili surviving different kinds of pain inflicted on her mind and body. One should not forget about *The Valley of Amazement*, Tan's latest novel, which brings to the fore aspects related to the ways in which courtesans in Shanghai managed to get through war and overcome the division of power between genders.

2.2 Representations of History and Power

A new historicist approach to these events could make the reader think about how fictional characters managed to blend in and be part of historical events. Interestingly enough, World War II in this case, is viewed as plain fiction and it does not seem to raise any particular questions related to its participants. The reader is well aware of the fact that during that period China had to protect itself from the Japanese and, more specifically, the characters' from *The Bonesetter's Daughter* tried to keep their students away from dangers of any kind. Moreover, the power relations presented in this novel seem be connected with different representations of discourse, in this case – storytelling. For instance, the storyteller chooses to change either the ending of a story, or to constantly repeat a certain part of it, in this way gaining control and catching the reader's attention. Another type of power is inflicted on Precious Auntie, who is haunted by the coffin maker because she refused to marry him. In other words, the power of one gender over the other is clearly visible. However, there are also instances in which power relations seem to go from the male-female paradigm to the mother-daughter one. In trying to warn her daughter about her marriage to the coffin maker's son Precious Auntie commits suicide, in this way proving that in feudal China a daughter does not question her mother's actions.

Representations of power also appear in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, as Kwan seems to have control over her tales concerning her previous life; she decides when to begin and when to end them, and more importantly, she constantly warns her sister not to tell anyone. Another kind of power circles around Olivia, this time, who unwillingly takes advantage of being a "normal" American, when she reveals Kwan's secret to her mother. Another instance in which Olivia gives the impression of benefiting from being empowered is when she resorts to Kwan's talent in order to make Simon believe his former girlfriend no longer wants him. Nevertheless, one should think about the most important representation of power i.e. Kwan's decision of adapting her discourse in conformity with her sister's situation, in this way becoming a model for her Chinese culture.

In order to prove that *The Hundred Secret Senses* further lends itself to new historicist analysis, one should refer to Kwan's stories concerning her previous life, when she was called Nunumu. Being part of a northern Chinese people, called Hakka, she becomes a friend of Miss Banner's – the ancestral character associated to Olivia – an American who, during the Taiping Rebellion (1851 – 1864), falls in love with Yiban – Simon's former name, according to Kwan. By identifying and, hence, becoming part of a historical context, Kwan is able to reveal aspects that are crucial for the credibility of her stories. These revolve around bandits and all kinds of other people that were accepted by the Hakkas. One should also mention that Nunumu, Miss Banner and Yiban are not only the representations of Kwan, Olivia and Simon, but also the images of anyone who reads the story and identifies with them. For instance, Nunumu is believed to be a kind hearted one-eyed Hakka member, while Miss Banner is an inexperienced American who cannot make good decisions in life, just like Olivia.

2.3 From Ghosts to Storytelling

The motif of ghosts is further presented in the novel as Kwan takes Olivia and Simon to China in order to make them realize they are soul mates. The Chinese sister plans for the three of them to spend some time in a village which she claims was the one in which she lived her previous life, as Nunumu. The reader should also notice that as they arrive in China, "Kwan's narrative gifts blossom" (Hurst 2011, p. 97). She tells stories about how she and her mother died in a flood, and how she found herself in the yin world. More importantly, she mentions that in this world she encounters another yin person who urges her to return to the living world: "You must go back […] In seven years, I'll be born. It's all arranged. You promised to wait. Did you forget?" (Tan 1996, p. 232). Kwan further explains that, just as the yin person demanded, she was able to return to the living world, but not to her own body, as it had numerous injuries. That is her own explanation of having no physical resemblance with Olivia. Interesting is the fact that she succeeds in blending in two separate stories from two different periods of time, as the yin person is believed to be Miss Banner, Olivia in her former life, as Yu (2004, p. 151) notes: "in China, she begins to believe Kwan's tales of incarnation, and becomes less resistant to the world of yin". In other words, Olivia gradually accepts norms related to her ancestral culture, as she

begins to understand and relate to the cultural space from Kwan's stories. She no longer fears ghosts, instead she becomes more and more interested in how Kwan manages to connect past and present events.

Another story that Kwan chooses to tell is about the caves which are emblematic for the Changmian village. It is said that once there were two human-shaped dragons, husband and wife, who provided irrigation ditches for the villagers in order to protect Changmian from floods. One day, however, the Water God commanded for them to be killed. It is said that the two took their real dragon shape, as they became a part of the earth, in this way transforming into caves. When thinking about the caves, Kwan also enthusiastically says that the yin people would be very happy if you go inside the caves. She even tries to explain that each action has its consequences: "You go see inside, oh, they so happy. Now you take someone place, they can live. Then they fly to Yin World, peace at last" (Tan 1996, p. 248). What Kwan tries to explain is that if you dare enter the caves, you will most likely be stuck there forever, until someone else comes and releases you to the Yin World. In other words, the caves could be associated with the "in-between", or the space in which souls reside and look over their loved ones, just to realize that they are prepared to detach themselves from what used to belong to them. It is crucial to note that: "Kwan disappears mysteriously in the dark caves of Kweilin to secure the reunion between Olivia and Simon. After Kwan's disappearance, Olivia and her estranged husband are reunited, and she gives birth to a baby girl, who is suggested to be Kwan's reincarnation" (Yu 2004, p. 152). In other words, the reader can think of Kwan as a responsible older sister who wanted all that was best for Olivia, and who sacrificed herself. However, one should also take into consideration the possibility of Kwan being a ghost who had the mission of reuniting two soul mates.

2.4 Losing versus Gaining Voices

An equally important aspect of the selected novels revolves around the characters' loss of voice, as Precious Auntie seems to be at the heart of the events that led to LuLing and Ruth's way of life. Even if it has already been mentioned, it is of extreme importance to highlight the situation of LuLing's biological mother. One already knows that Precious Auntie referred to herself as being a fire-eater, but apart from the fantasy that lies in this story, the reader learns that her youth was haunted by bad luck. Because she refused to let her daughter marry someone from the Chang family, she decided to write a letter which contained all the dramatic events in her life. As LuLing lied about reading it, Precious Auntie wanted to know how she felt about what she wrote, but instead the daughter replied: "Even if the whole Chang family were murderers and thieves, I would join them just to get away from you" (Tan 2002, p. 241). One could clearly see that LuLing decided to rebel against her nursemaid as she had not read the letter which contained the absolute truth about herself and the Chang family. As a consequence to LuLing's stubbornness, Precious Auntie killed herself in order to protect her daughter, in this way becoming a ghost willing to haunt the family.

In fact, precious Auntie's history begins with her mother and sister's death and continues with her father's desire to grant any of her wishes. From a socio-historical point of view, Precious Auntie was believed to be a misfit, as she often wandered alone through markets and had arguments with those who tried to sell products at a higher price. She was once described as: "That strange girl did fast calculations in her head and argued with merchants. She was arrogant and headstrong. She was also educated, taught by her father to know the mysteries of the body. The girl was too curious, too questioning, too determined to follow her own mind. Maybe she was possessed" (Tan 2002, p. 192). Not only because she was a woman, but also because of the period in which she lived, people often thought that her attitude would only bring her and her closest ones misfortune. According to Pu (2006, p. 32), "Liu Xin's behavior is unacceptable by the social norms in her time. […] Liu Xin transgresses all these rules imposed on a woman. First of all, she does not have bound feet. More importantly, she learns calligraphy, calculation, and medicine, which are subjects reserved for men only". Furthermore, in order to prove that her attitude towards society is not seen with good eyes, she refuses the coffin maker's marriage proposal and decides to marry Baby Uncle instead. As to be expected, the coffin maker Chang finds out about her rebellious behavior and kills the bonesetter and Baby Uncle on her wedding day. Precious Auntie claims with sorrow: "This is a curse" (Tan 2002, p.

197). Nevertheless, as if this would not have been enough, she tries to kill herself by drinking the blue flames of hot black resin she has found around Great-Granny's house. She is not successful, however, as Great-Granny saves her life and realizes that she is with child, which immediately leads to the decision of Precious Auntie living under her roof and becoming the nursemaid of her own child, without raising suspicions in any way.

Another episode that involves the motif of losing one's voice circles around one of Ruth's experiences as a young girl, when she intentionally chose to relate to silence. One passage from the novel explains that: "Ruth was tempted to speak, but she was afraid to break the spell. One word and all the good things in her life would vanish" (Tan 2002, p. 82). One can only infer that apart from her fear of changing her good luck into actual bad luck, Ruth chooses to believe that her silence is a symbol of power. For a better understanding, one should again refer to the sandbox she used, as she was now able to say things that otherwise she would not have mentioned. Due to her "gift" she finds out that her mother reminisces about the days spent with Precious Auntie. More importantly, she familiarizes herself with LuLing's guilt, as she is still blaming herself for her biological mother's suicide. Even if Goh Vern Ann (2011, p. 27) claims that "when she discovers the truth behind her mother's life, LuLing is filled with a new sense of identity—that she is the daughter of a strong and brave woman", it should be mentioned that Precious Auntie's suicide is closely connected to the characters' lack of communication, because LuLing wouldn't listen to what her nursemaid said about marrying the son of Chang the coffin maker.

If *The Bonesetter's Daughter* portrays ways of being silent, *The Hundred Secret Senses* does the opposite. One realizes that even ghosts are able to speak and, hence, have a voice of their own, so why should the main characters be otherwise? As it has been shown, both Kwan and Olivia have powerful personalities and reveal secrets of any kind. If Kwan talks about her previous life and wants to achieve more and more information regarding the American culture, Olivia seems to be defensive towards the Chinese one, but at the same time she assumes the role of a storyteller and of a ghost whisperer by talking about her personal experiences. Furthermore, she realizes that by the end of the novel her quarrels with Simon are insignificant when it comes to the importance of family history: "The pretty arguments, snipes and gripes, they still crop up. But it's easier to remember how unimportant they are, how they shrink the heart and make life small" (Tan 1996, p. 320). One could say that she no longer has thoughts that could make her doubt her choices in life. She no longer regrets acknowledging her Chinese inheritance, as it helped in the formation of her cultural background as well as in the reconciliation with her husband. When thinking about what she has learned from her sister she finally claims that: "If people we love die, then they are lost only to our ordinary senses. If we remember, we can find them anytime with our hundred secret senses. 'This is a secret,' I can still hear Kwan whispering. 'Don't tell anyone. Promise, Libby-ah'"(Tan 1996, pp. 320-21). Without question, Olivia misses her sister, but the core idea of the selected quote revolves around perceiving and embracing life with other eyes. One should think about all the efforts done by Kwan in order to take care of her sister, both in her previous life and in the actual one. One should also relate to the fact that remembering and talking about the loved ones, who are now believed to be ghosts, could make anyone suspicious of their existence. Nevertheless, with the help of the hundred secret senses, one could relate to memory and experience to find and relive crucial moments in life. Kwan was aware of this and by now Olivia has learned that, too.

Revolving around a similar theme, it should be added that *The Bonesetter's Daughter* ends with the characters' reconciliation, as Ruth is now able to understand her mother's condition, as she no longer questions her memory and her sense of reality. Art together with his daughters are willing to accept Ruth into the family, and LuLing no longer feels guilty for her past actions due to the fact that she managed to tell her life story. Even if LuLing's condition is irreversible the last pages of the novel reveal that: "her mother often surprised her with the clarity of her emotions when she spoke of her youth, elements of which matched in spirit what she had written in her memoir" (Tan 2002, p. 393). Ruth is surprised, and at the same time, pleased to know that her mother has such vivid memories of her past. More importantly, she realizes that there is no use in doubting LuLing. Through her memoir, the daughter was able to better understand and to relate to her Chinese origin, as she familiarized herself with events lived by LuLing and Precious Auntie. One could further argue that the novel does

not only revolve around Precious Auntie's story, but it is the connection between LuLing and Ruth's stories. It is also important to mention that: "the novel is Ruth's story but also her mother's and grandmother's. All of them are rebellious women though in different forms and in the backdrop of different historical and cultural contexts" (Pu 2006, p. 48). In other words, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is a means of connecting powerful women with different backgrounds as it gradually becomes a model for the typical Chinese female. More specifically, the act of breaking maternal silence helps not only in strengthening relationships between women, but it also manages to connect distinct periods of time from two different countries.

3. INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

This study has dealt with gender issues and ethnicity, demonstrating that the construction of feminine, as well as masculine identities, are indeed highly problematic topics not only in the Asian American literature, but also in the Chinese and American history and culture. The social positions occupied by women in a patriarchal society and the racist views of a white society towards people who look and act differently hint to the fact that discrimination was and still is a powerful practice even in contemporaneity. Moreover, the interpretation of history from a feminine perspective seemed to create a world in which representations of China and America were merely viewed as products of fiction due to the cultural practices that contributed to the construction of the new historicist critical approach. In other words, the characters were the embodiment of any immigrant, in this way speaking for the masses of people who decided to better their lives by migrating to other countries. It should be noted that the reader is supposed to learn from the common lives of Chinese people in America, as these immigrants struggle with the ideologies imposed by the society in which they were born, and the ones imposed by the one in which they live.

One should put a great emphasis on the aspects from this study that led to dramatic events in women's lives as seen from a feminist and from a historical point of view. As it has been demonstrated, the important motif of losing one's voice is crucial when analyzing these two novels. Just like other works by Amy Tan, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* explore the importance of ghosts in both Chinese and American spaces. One should not forget that there were instances in which women suffered injustices, a practice which is thoroughly explored and extensively discussed in America from nowadays and not only. All these stories told and re-told by women have as main focus the desire of preserving tradition and of letting the reader know about their moments of glory and the ones full of shame. Nevertheless, the act of questioning the characters' memory was very much connected with the history of each family, as it proved that for Chinese daughters and sisters, stories and memoirs can be reliable.

Both *The Bonesetter's Daughter* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* talked about motifs related to the yin world, where ghosts seem to gain terrain, as they constantly seek to interfere with the living world in this way having the purpose of revealing family secrets and, to a lesser extent, to expose the society in which they lived. One should not forget Precious Auntie's act of rebellion when she decided to kill herself instead of seeing her daughter marry an evil man, and also the following events which had to do with LuLing forgetting about her true mother. One should also remember Kwan's stories related to her past life and how she managed to return from the dead. In other words, ghosts become heroes of these two novels and one could realize that through storytelling and the reinterpretation of historical events, spirits not only try to create panic among characters and readers but also succeed in strengthening relationships. Through their stories one eventually realizes that heroism is no longer described as a product of physical and intellectual bravery, but as something that is closely connected to economic, cultural and social humiliation. By retelling histories of their ancestors the narrators portray Chinese people as humiliated and discriminated in a patriarchal society.

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