



From realism to magic realism in Amy tan's *the hundred secret senses*

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Abstract

Under the pressure and strong influence of a dominant host nation and its culture, immigrants have often gone through the struggle to mark their presence and importance on the land which is other than their land of origin. Immigrants and their culture, religion, philosophies, beliefs, values and traditions are generally weighed as shoddy and insignificant in the presence of a major community and its doctrines. To shed off this dominance, to speak out the unheard, to show the unseen, to remember the forgotten, to trace the lost connections with the motherland, to acquaint the second generation of Chinese immigrants with their roots, Amy Tan has fixed the focal upon China by keeping the host nation that is America at the margins of the story. The inclinations of her stories are seen lying towards everyday life in China. She makes the presence of China felt on every second page of her novel through Chinese beliefs in ghosts and spirits, connection of the life in present with the life in previous birth, philosophy of yin eyes etc. The major portion of her novel is occupied by China and its belief system; this conveys a kind of revolt against the dominant culture of the host nation. The presence of Magic and Realism in her work is knitted together in such a subtle way that the reader finds it difficult to doubt and question the authenticity of the content. The use of Magical Realism by Amy Tan has the potential to remind the readers of ST Coleridge's "Willing suspension in disbelief."

Keywords: magical realism, Amy tan, *the hundred secret senses*

Introduction

The origin of the term Magical Realism is basically related to Germany, Central America and Latin America; the relevance of which has continued to the present day. The prominent propounders of the concept are: Franz Roh, Alejo Carpentier, Massimo Bontempelli, Angel Flores and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. 'Magical' in the term 'Magical realism' depends upon 'Realism' which renders an authentic sense to its presence. Realism in the 20th century literature is presented in the texts not by 'telling' but by 'showing' the world to the readers that surround them and the life to which they can relate themselves. The reality is not narrated by the author rather it is left for open interpretation by the reader. In this way, the reader creates his own version of reality. This particular mode of constructing the text is of utmost relevance to 'Magical Realism'. It helps in presenting the imaginative and the magical as real and ordinary because the reader is allowed to see through the text and set free to give meaning to his own sense of reality.

The terms like surrealism, fantastic, allegory are often linked with 'Magical Realism' but there are minute differences which separates them from magical realism. Surrealism is mainly presented in the form of dreams; it deals with the psychological realms which are difficult for the reader to accept as real while magical realism is more related to the material world with which the reader can associate himself. Fantastic, keep the readers in a dilemma, it puts them in a zone of belief and disbelief, ordinary and extra-ordinary, which give rise to a sort of doubt and ambiguity. In a fantastic narrative, a reader can not completely suspend the notion of disbelief; he remains in a confused state which discomforts him in selecting one out of real and unreal. According to Chanady, "In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not

disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist." (Bowers 25) In case of Allegory, readers are presented with two meanings, one is visible on the surface and second is the alternative meaning which is derived from irony; in case of magical realism there is no scope for second meaning.

Magical realism inherently constituted from the elements like transgressive, subversive, otherness, historical references, coexistence of two worlds; these elements establish a link among magical realism, postcolonial and postmodernism. According to Stephen Slemon, magical realism aptly presents the traits of postcolonial. In postcolonial writings, the narrative includes the perspectives of both, the colonized and the colonizer; it rejects the fixed ideologies set by the colonizers which are defended and proved under the light of science and rationality, and imposed upon the colonized or the weaker; postcolonial writings give ample space to the culture and context of the colonized. In an attempt to oppose the colonizers dominant culture and imposed ideologies, postcolonial writers surface what the colonized believes in, they try to express the unexpressed from the perspective of colonized. Similarly, postmodernism rejects a fixed ideology; magical realism involves references from history to set the narrative in a particular context and to question the validity of the history which is written and promoted by the people in power.

The context in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* is mostly occupied by China and Chinese culture. The geographical setting of the story begins from America and lands up in China. Even when the characters shown living in America and actions taking place in American cities; very

less is narrated about America rather the narrative remain absorbed by China and Chinese beliefs. There are two major characters, Olivia and Kwan; the former is representative of West or America which is indicative of ‘science, logics and rationality while Kwan represents East or China which suggests ‘illogical, irrationality and unreasonable beliefs and myths’. Chinese immigrants and their cultural practices were at the margins of the American society which was dominated by Protestants and English culture. Chinese belief in spirits, ghosts and connection of past life with the present are considered as irrelevant from the lens of Western countries and their culture. Amy Tan sidelined this view of West by giving prominence to East; this is evident by the presence of Chinese philosophy of yin eyes, picturesque villages and cities of China, ghosts and spirits visible to living Chinese immigrant and use of ample words from Chinese language on every second page of the novel. The narrative can also be considered as a voice from the marginalized section of American society as Chinese immigrants were kept at bay from the mainstream society; it took several years for Chinese immigrants to make a place for themselves in America and in gaining faith of American mainstream community. The element of subversive is evident in the text as the novel can be equated to a kind of revolt against mainstream American society; it neglects the host country and its culture by giving the rarest details and description about it. Throughout the story ontological magical realism is visible as it is derived from the cultural sources in which the narrative is set; in case of *The Hundred Secret Senses* the context is China and Chinese culture. The oxymoron in the ‘magical realism’ indicates several other oxymoron present in the narrative, for instance, urban (American cities) and rural (Chinese villages), east (China) and west (America), logic (represented by Olivia) and illogic (represented by Kwan). The novel can be seen moving from realism to magical realism; this journey can be best understood through the character development of Olivia. To Olivia, reality is what she could see through her own eyes and what her brain can interpret out of current situations and not what is narrated by Kwan’s yin eyes. But the construction of narrative is done in such a subtle way that magic starts appearing as real to Olivia. Her journey from America to China can be suggestive of leaving behind the realm of reality to enter into the region of magical realism where the magic and real are overlapped and intertwined in such a manner that it becomes difficult to separate the two.

The conjunction of two worlds, that is, America and China, West and East is aptly visible in Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses*. She brings her readers face to face to the Chinese firm faith in life after death, rebirth and the never dying belief in ghosts. Like her other novels, here as well, the story begins in America but the major setting moves to China. There are two sisters, Olivia, the younger one, represents American perspective for every situation; Kwan, who is the elder one, fills the novel with Chinese stories of faith, belief, superstitions, ghosts, life after death and previous birth.

The novel succeeds in bringing the readers closer to the culture and society of China as the reader is easily persuaded to believe in whatever told or narrated by Kwan. The clouds of doubts and suspicion rose when ghost stories were narrated by Kwan in the American setting of the novel; but such clouds fade away as the story enters in the context

of China. Every story of Kwan links the past with present and the life of previous birth with the present in such a subtle way that the readers fail to doubt upon whatever being narrated to them. Olivia who has always pushed away the thoughts which wanted to force her to believe in the stories of Kwan, finally submits and admits her connection with Kwan and Simon in the past life.

Amy Tan has given complete opportunity to her readers to peep inside the lives of Chinese and to see China. She takes them to Guilin and then Changmian, a village which is still miles away from the modern touch; shows them Chinese congested markets; she allows her readers to experience a risky, rough and horrifying taxi ride, she takes them to Changmian caves, acquaints them with the real customs of Chinese funeral procession, let them savor typical Chinese food and sense the chill of its weather. She offer all these privileges to allow her readers to feel and sense China in her writings.

Magic and illogical is generally associated with the non-European world while sensible and reasonable is linked with Western world. In the beginning of the novel we can see Olivia as representative of West who does not want to believe in the stories of Kwan who represents the East. In the opening of the novel there are number of instances which repeatedly tell the readers and the narrator, Olivia, to believe in Kwan but the logics and the scientific side of Olivia discards such initiatives as she was born and brought up in a country which is considerably dominated by facts and logics. It is completely uncommon to see a human being’s body working like a cell-phone battery recharger. Olivia has seen Kwan temporarily charging the battery of a cordless phone. A thing for which science has no answer becomes either magical or canny. Kwan recharges the battery but could not explain how she did it. “I’ve also seen her temporarily activate a dead cordless phone just by pressing her fingers on the back recharge nodes. She can’t explain any of this, and neither can I. All I can say is, I’ve seen her do these things.” (16)

Yet another example of Kwan’s being extraordinary and a doer of inexplicable - is her healing touch. Within seconds Kwan can tell the health problems of people. By simple hand shake she would explain the health problem or a disease that the person is going through even if the ailment is cured years before. Kwan had strange quality of healing by a simple press of her fingers or touch. People have named her touch – a healing touch. Kwan is not a doctor or a medical trainee in traditional medicines or the one who has learnt the art of healing in China; still, she possesses this quality. The mysterious touch and suspense in the novel intensifies when Kwan mentions about the regular visits of the customers after their death at Spenser’s drugstore where she works and those ghosts tease her by calling her “Dr. Kwan”. Spencer’s drugstore has the provision of home delivery but the customers intentionally visit the store for meeting Kwan to experience her healing touch and for getting relieved from the pain or ache, though, temporarily. “She knows in an instant whether a person has arthritis, tendinitis, bursitis, sciatica – she’s really good with all the musculoskeletal stuff... fever arms, sour joints, snaky leg, and all of which, she says, are caused by eating hot and cold things together...When she puts her hands on the place where you hurt, you feel a tingling sensation, a thousand fairies dancing up and down, and then it’s like warm rolling through your veins. (16)

Kwan has the ability to sense what others fail to; it insists the human brain to believe in the stories of Kwan. Olivia regularly hears strange sounds in her apartment. Her husband tries to sideline the issue by comparing the sounds with that of a piano key, mourning of doves or scraping of ice. Everyone has their own logics behind the strange sounds but it is Kwan who turned out to be correct in the end. On consulting a structural engineer, it is found that the sounds may be because of 'useless radiator pipes'. Seismic safety consultant informs that it is natural due to the settling down of wood frame. It is Kwan who straight away discards the thought of 'ghost presence' behind the sounds as expected by Olivia rather Kwan suggests that it is the presence of a living person who is full of anger. "Very strange, she said. Someone here I feel this. But not ghost. Living person, full of electricity, stuck in wall, also under floor." (108)

In China people practice a very strong belief in the presence of ghosts, life after death and the connection of previous life with the present. According to Kwan, in her previous life she was Nunumu who had the power to see the dead people. To complete what is left in the previous birth, fate organizes the events in such a way that the incomplete gets complete in the present birth. It is because of the incomplete tasks that the soul hangs in between life and death and fails to attain salvation. According to Kwan the ghosts that she mentions in her stories had a direct connection with her and her younger sister, Olivia. It won't be imprecise to say that Kwan possesses some sort of supernatural power as she kept on giving strange surprises to Olivia and the readers.

Kwan telephoned Olivia to convey the message of Lao Lu, a ghost who died a hundred years ago. According to Lao Lu, Olivia should not divorce Simon; rather three of them should visit China. He assured that everything will settle down once they arrive in China. Olivia received the shock when Kwan conveyed Lao Lu's next statement. According to Lao Lu, Olivia should not balance only the checkbooks but should also balance her life as well; Olivia was taken a back on realizing that a ghost can see exactly what she is doing while talking to Kwan telephonically.

"Tst! Chopped head off over one hundred year ago. Now look fine, no problem. Lao Lu think you, me Simon, we three go China, everything okay. Okay, Libby-ah... Lao Lu say cannot just balance check-book; see how much you got left. Must balance life too." (22, 23)

Yet another surprise came to Olivia when she listened Kwan talking about the reason behind which she is getting divorced. Olivia had never revealed the reason to Kwan or anybody else, but still Kwan knew it. The way Simon loved somebody who died before he and Olivia got married in the present birth; exactly in the same way, in their previous birth Olivia loved someone else before Simon came in her life but later they got separated and it is their destiny that has brought them together once again in the present birth. The story of the previous birth goes parallel with the story in the present.

"Lao Lu, you also know him, but not in this lifetime. Lao Lu said that you must stay together with Simon. This is our yinyuan, the fate that brings lovers together... Because in your last lifetime together, you loved someone else before Simon. Later, Simon trusted you with his whole life that you loved him too." (127)

Coincidence can happen once or twice but when it frequently takes place then one is insisted to believe in the

planning of fate. It was Olivia's fate that took her, Simon and Kwan to China in order to reunite them. The way Olivia and Simon separated in the present birth similarly they were separated in their previous birth. "Libby-ah, this afternoon I talking to my friend Lao Lu. He agree, you must go China – you, Simon, me together. This year Dog Year, next year Pig, too late. How you cannot go? This you fate waiting to happen!" (139) The manner in which the story unfolds, it appears that the fate was working to complete what was left incomplete. Such a working of fate in the novel further increases the presence of magical realism and curiosity in Chinese beliefs.

Amy Tan does not show America as deeply in her novels as she presents China. It's very rare that her characters are shown experiencing a luxurious drive on the well-constructed metal roads of America. Contrary to this in *The Hundred Secret Senses* there is a long description of a taxi ride in China which followed not only the experience of bumpy roads but also includes the incident of a bus accident due to rash driving and the lack of immediate medical aid; a talk upon Chinese law, according to which if a vehicle runs over somebody, it is always considered the drivers fault no matter if the other has acted careless. Chinese immigrants took a ride in Rocky's taxi which gave a real road experience in China. "He routinely passes slower vehicles, clicking his fingers to the music. Each time he accelerates, the owl opens his wings slightly... I'm gripping my knees, then sucking air between clenched teeth whenever Rocky swings into the left lane to pass." (181)

Further Amy Tan has given an elaborated picture of a Chinese village, Changmian. She didn't do the same for any of the cities or countrysides in America. Olivia and Simon were spellbound and for a moment became speechless on looking at the beauty of Changmian. The village was far away from any modern touch, there were no electric lines or tin roofs. It was cupped between two mountain peaks with clean rows of white-washed houses and tile roofs organized in the traditional pattern of dragon coils, ponds carrying the crystal clear water for irrigation; the village tremendously holds its purity without the least sign of modern pollution. They felt as if they were in a trance, as if they have entered a fairyland where everything is drenched with purity. It possessed every view that the tourists wish to see, a sacred Chinese village still entangled in the past, free from the modern fast-food points, vehicle-junk by the roadside and heaps of plastic waste. According to Olivia, Changmian is a perfect Chinese village worth to be visited by tourists. They were so captivated by its beauty that first they were not willing to believe that Changmian is a real village, they took it as an artificial replica of a Chinese village from the past. They were mesmerized by its purity to extent that Simon and Olivia compared it with Chinese Nirvana.

"I feel as though we've stumbled on a fabled misty land, half memory, half illusion. Are we in Chinese Nirvana? Changmian looks like the carefully cropped photos found in travel brochures advertising 'a charmed world of the distant past, where visitors can step back in time.'" (185)

The element of 'Willing Suspension in disbelief' used by S.T. Coleridge in his poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* seems to perfectly suit Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Throughout the novel the character of Kwan captivates the logical sense of the readers with the help of her spell that she created with her ghost stories. Her stories related to ghosts and after life fits in so well that the

scientific or logical sense of human beings is left with no choice other than giving up contradictory thoughts and willingly accept and believe in whatever being narrated.

The role of hope, dream and wish also covers a significant part of Chinese culture. China is a country with umpteenth number of belief systems. People earnestly believe in the working of wishes. Kwan believed that one must dream, must make wishes, to stop dreaming and wishing is like stop making the attempts to change the fate.

Before leaving for America, Kwan too made three wishes and three of those got fulfilled. First, she got a sister whom she loved dearly, second she got a chance to visit China with her and third she wanted Big Ma to accept that she was sorry for sending her away. Big Ma did say her third wish, although, she said so after becoming a ghost. "She said she was wrong about the story of Young Girl's Wish. She said all my wishes had already come true. She was always sorry she sent me away. But she could never tell me this." (188)

By the end of the novel the suspicion and enigmatic nature of the story reached its zenith. The doubts seem to fade away as the scenes are so tightly intertwined with evidences that the readers willingly believe in the connection of present life with the birth in the previous life. All the logics and reasoning of the scientific mind failed when Kwan brought the music box of Miss Banner which she had hidden in her previous birth.

Chinese believe, whatever happens has a reason behind it. So far Olivia took the stories narrated by Kwan as mere stories or just Chinese superstition. But while waiting for Simon near the archway, she realized that she has started believing in what she has always tried to ignore. To her the fictitious stories of Kwan started converting into real life stories. In the lines quoted below, the newly roused faith and belief in Olivia is exactly depicted which was missing when she was in America.

"But in spite of all my logic and doubt, I can't dismiss something larger I know about Kwan: that it is not in her nature to lie. Whatever she says, she believes is true. Like what she said about Simon, that she hadn't seen him as a ghost, which means he's alive. I believe her. I have to. Then again, if I believe what she says, does that mean I now believe she has yin eyes? That she was Nunumu? And if that's all true, the stories she told throughout these years...well, she must have told me for a reason." (288)

Olivia understood the miracle of hope, belief and faith. She said, "And that's fine, because I now believe truth lies not in logic but in hope, both past and future. I believe hope can surprise you. It can survive the odds against it, all sorts of contradictions, and certainly any skeptic's rationale on proof through fact." (319) Amy Tan has tried to bring the attention on hope, faith and belief which are the integral part of Chinese culture and society. It was no less than a miracle that the arrival of Kwan in Olivia's life was with a purpose, with a reason and it was to complete the promise that she made to Miss Banner in her previous life. She came to reunite the lovers from past life. She came, reunites and left miraculously in the lap of Changmian caves. Before visiting China, doctors declared Simon as infertile and therefore Olivia can never expect a baby. But the miracle took place, after their return from China, Olivia was three months pregnant and Simon's medical reports turned out positive. Yet another miracle took place which just cannot be ignored was that the marriage of Simon and Olivia was on the verge divorce in America, it came back on its track after their visit

to China. She admitted this fact when she said, "...No matter who Kwan really is, sister or not, I'm glad that she suggested we come to China." (256)

Magical Realism has proved to be a reliable tool for the writers to give voice to the weak or marginalized. Amy Tan has kept her land of origin and its culture at the forefront in the novel by keeping the host nation and its culture at the margins of the story. Magical realism has given an opportunity to the writers to revolt against the dominant culture and its fixed ideologies through their writings.

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