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Contrapuntal Reading on Interference of the Past in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*

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ABSTRACT

This essay looks closely at interference of the past in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* as narrative mode in the interweaving of focalisation between Olivia and Kwan, the two main characters in the novel. Olivia is presented as having constant internal conflicts with Kwan. Kwan, being constantly presented as Olivia's care giver, does not show any dislikes toward Olivia. Olivia is also presented as having a strenuous tension with Simon, her husband whom she is about to divorce. Different from Olivia's narration, the openings of several of Kwan's narration are in dramatic monologues. In one example of Kwan's dramatic monologue, Olivia's verbal reaction never appears in print; but is inferable from what Kwan says. The employment of this discursive technique gives an effect of keeping Kwan's interlocutor (Olivia) unheard. This indicates that Kwan is demarcating her narration from Olivia's, since her narration only voices the voice of her friends from the past. This leads to an interpretation that Kwan's narration is of different zone from Olivia's, which in a way makes sense since what is narrated through Kwan has its source from Yin World. In tackling with how Olivia's and Kwan's focalisation interweave and how it is significant to the discussion, Edward Said's concept of contrapuntal reading is adopted to track down harmonisation created from shifts of focalisation in the narrative. This essay aims to analyse how such harmonisation is reached and how it is significant to the novel's main issue, that is, identifying Chinese American in multicultural America.

Keywords: narrative mode, shifts of focalisation, contrapuntal reading, multicultural America.

Introduction

Contrapuntal Reading within Narrative and Postcolonial Studies

The term “contrapuntal” is very common in music composition, particularly in classical music. In a very general sense, “contrapuntal” leans toward a definition that shows counterpoint, or contrasted element. In classical music, contrapuntal composition means a composition that shows relation between one or more notations that contour- and rhythmic-wise stand on its own, yet they are at the same time interdependent in order to reach harmony. There is usually a theme or a main subject presented at the beginning of the composition in a contrapuntal composition, which is further imitated, modified, and resurfaced repeatedly on the next part of the composition. In the study of literary works, particularly prosaic literary works, in a heteroglossia novel, polyphony in the narration is presented because throughout the plot we can see the many voices of the characters. Such polyphony, like the analogy in classical music composition provided at the beginning of this paper, will, in the end, create harmony.

The term “contrapuntal reading” applied in this paper is adopted from what Said proposes in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). On the first half of his book, Said supplies an introduction that implies his persuasion to the reader to read 19th century canonical European literary works as works of literature that have the tendency to present polyphonic background which actually is there to present glances over European expansion on that era. Said further adds that to 19th century Europe, empire functions as codified presence in works of fiction. An example put forth by Said to explain such a premise is the signification of reference on Antigua in *Mansfield Park*, Australia in *David Copperfield*, and West Indies plantation in *Jane Eyre*. Generally, Said’s argument is that contrapuntal reading makes possible a reading on texts to pinpoint significant matters that in a glance seem insignificant. In other words, in the context of the unity of many voices in an orchestra, the background voices contribute significantly as constructive element of harmony in the music composition.

An argument relevant to contrapuntal reading is one of which is proposed by Genette. On the narrative level of Genette’s narratology, contrapuntality can be seen in alteration, which basically means shift in focalisation in a plot. Genette theorises that shift in focalisation

can also be analysed as a momentary infraction of the code which governs that context without thereby calling into question the existence of the code—the same way that in a classical musical composition a momentary change in

tonality, or even a recurrent dissonance, may be defined as a modulation or alteration without contesting the tonality of the whole (1980: 195).

To put it in a different sense, the modulation created as the result of the presence of repeated minor voices in a classical music composition is in fact a constructive element of the relevance between notation and chord which create harmony.

On the basis of such theories, the study pursued in this paper heads towards the tracing of harmony or focal point created in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Identification of minor voices which are presented as the background of major voices in the novel is reached through the use of Genette's narrative study, that is, focalisation. Focalisation-wise, the novel's plot is presented using external focalisation from two viewpoints of first-person narrator. Because there are two viewpoints, then there are two narrations belonging to the two main characters, Olivia and Kwan.

Discussion

A Narrative View on the Novel

The Hundred Secret Senses is a story of two sisters, Olivia and Kwan, with very different cultural background and way of thinking which is mostly set in contemporary America (San Francisco), with one part towards the end where it is set in China (Changmian). Olivia is a mixed-race Chinese American who is described as very modern in thinking and very rational, having been born and bred in the U.S. Whereas Kwan, Olivia's half-sister who comes from China, is the exact opposite. She is described as traditionally bound to Chinese virtues, and on top of that, she has the ability to see the ghosts who dwell in the World of Yin. She manages to do so because she has Yin eyes.

The encounter between the two takes place after the death of Olivia's father, Jack Yee. He mentions that he has a daughter in China, and asks Olivia's mother to get her to America and look after her. And so, ever since Kwan enters into Olivia's life, Olivia experiences a gradual change, which she mostly dislikes because the process, according to her, is annoying. Having shared the same bedroom, every night Olivia has to put up with Kwan's stories about her experiences in China, in Chinese. Olivia is, as she herself describes it, infected with it: "I absorbed her language through my pores while I was sleeping. She pushed her Chinese secrets into my brain and changed how I thought about the world. Soon I was even having nightmares in Chinese" (Tan, 1995: 11). This is how Olivia gets to understand Chinese, which she finds useful during her visit to China.

As the story goes, the reader is presented with several conflicts experienced by the characters. Olivia is presented as having constant internal conflicts with Kwan; she hates her being in the house, being part of the family, being a Chinese who does not speak English well, being a person who admits she has Yin eyes, and being the half-sister who always looks after her. Kwan, being constantly presented as Olivia's care giver, does not show any dislikes toward Olivia throughout the novel. Olivia is also presented as having a strenuous tension with Simon, her husband whom she is about to divorce. The main cause of the tension is Simon's former relationship with her deceased girlfriend, Elza. Olivia often fears that she is not fit to replace Elza, and that Simon still lingers in his memories with Elza. The tensions gradually build up to the point where Olivia thinks that she and Simon should separate.

A while back before they decide to have separate lives, they make a wish list on things that they can do together, things "which would allow [them] to define what [Simon] called the creative parameters of [their] life" (Tan: 116). One of them is to offer to write and photograph a story on village cuisine of China, which can be used as the model for future food and folk-culture articles, a book, a lecture tour, or a cable TV series. They send the proposal, and receive an offer from a travel magazine (*Lands Unknown*) to do a photo essay on village cuisines of China. This enables Olivia and Simon to travel to China with expenses covered by the magazine. And this trip to China with Kwan, shapes a significant meaning to the entire cycle of the story.

The road to marriage is one focus worth discussing from this novel. Olivia's mother chooses to marry a non-Anglo race on political ground: "' When Jack and I met,' she still tells people, 'there were laws against mixed marriages. We broke the law for love'" (Tan: 3). Despite the fact that she ignores to mention that those laws do not apply in California, it can be seen that her intentions are clear; she wants to show that she is a liberal. After Jack Yee's death, her partner who comes next on the list is Jaime Jofré. This time, her ground is simple. She is drawn to him because to her, he is passionate. And she thinks so because Jaime speaks with an accent, and thus makes the words that are coming out of his lips sound more ardent, because he struggles to find them. Even though Jaime is of Anglo race, there is still this element of foreignness that bases her choice. Two years after Jack Yee's death, mother marries Bob Laguni, whom she mistakes as Mexican. Kevin, Olivia's brother, calls this marriage as their mother's "fluke in [her] history of dating foreign imports" due to the fact that Bob is actually Italian.

Olivia's marriage to Simon is not solely based on romantic drives either. They have, so to speak, the Internal Revenue Service to thank for leading them to the altar. After living together for three years, working in the fields of human services and not earning much, they both agree that they should file a joint return to save a three

hundred forty-six dollar a year tax. According to Olivia, the ‘marriage proposal’ came from Simon. Simon, on the one hand, is just being practical; they have been working and living together for quite a while, and he enjoys her company. This is a good enough reason for them to live as a married couple. And by being so, they have the right to be favored to pay tax less. Olivia, on the other hand, always values her relationship with Simon as more than just two people who have gotten used to each other’s presence. Nevertheless, she accepts the proposal.

As can be seen from the illustrations, the backgrounds that lead the characters to tie the knot are continuously related with how the world around them is shaped. Mother once tells Olivia that she dreams she would one day grow up to be different—thin, exotic, and noble, a longing that can erase what she addresses herself as ‘American mixed grill, a bit of everything white, fatty, and fried’ (Tan: 3). Instead of turning to *be* different, she takes the path that at least allows her to *look* different by choosing foreigners (except Bob Laguni) as her partners. Jack Yee and Jaime Jofré in this case are just projections of her other self. In most cases, the fact that one is chosen because s/he provides the projection of the other is common, since partners do instinctively connect because they have what the other half lack. But mother’s case is of a larger scale and race-oriented. If not race, it is nationality. Her adventure in romance shows that she gradually moves to choosing a non-American, not non-Anglo race as she mentions in the earlier phase of her marital relationship. And this pins down a point that she is genuinely looking for something foreign.

Jack Yee is most definitely foreign to mother’s American eyes. Yet he gradually turns into an average American father after living in mother’s household, a ranch-style house in Daly City. Jack’s migration to the U.S., like many other Chinese immigrants in America, is prompted by Communist movement that took over China in 1949. He is college-educated, he speaks English, and this helps him to pursue a career in the Government Accounting Office. Having a government-employee father, a mother who goes to PTA meetings, and children who speak English and eat take-out Chinese foods, the Yees are thus the portrait of a modern American family. In terms of wanting to be different, mother just simply cannot transform into this other figure she desires to be. Yet the idea of it cannot just be cast away. So, a middle ground is provided here: however American the Yees are, what they have still fits within mother’s criterion of a family that *looks* different.

Difference in family name is also an issue here. Different from Olivia, her brother and mother, Kwan keeps her Chinese family name Li. Olivia, at one point in her narration, is considering of changing her last name to Yee, her father’s family name. She has been a Laguni ever since her mother remarries after father’s death. She tells this name change to Kwan, and Kwan immediately insists that she should not

take Yee because to her knowledge, that is not their father's real name. Kwan then fills Olivia in with the story on how father ended up with that name. It was told that during civil wartime in China, in 1948 when the Nationalist and Communist were fighting over China, father gets his hand on a stolen suit coat he takes from a drunkard. In the lining, he finds a stack of papers—official documents for immigrating to America. On the first page there was a name written in Chinese: Yee Jun. below that, it was in English: Jack Yee. This is easy ticket to America, to flee from China to seek a better life. Olivia feels the need to change her name because she feels that she has never had any sort of identity that suits her. At the ending of the novel, Olivia reveals that she decided to take Kwan's last name, realising '[w]hat's a family name if not a claim to being connected in the future to someone from the past?' (Tan: 320). This act of referring back to the past—as can be seen from the analysis that follows—is the core issue that this novel mainly tackles with.

Focalisation and Contrapuntal Reading

In terms of focalisation, the novel bears two narrations told by the two main female characters in the story: Olivia and Kwan in first person point of view. These two narrations, consequently, are the voices of Olivia and Kwan. These half-sisters are united as a result of Olivia's father's dying wish to have his other daughter from his Chinese family whom he left in China, to live with his American family in San Francisco. The relationship of the two is like water and oil since Olivia constantly resists everything about Kwan and her Chinese past. The tensions are obvious; Olivia is embarrassed because Kwan does not speak fluent English, Olivia distastes the fact that each night Kwan always tells stories about her experiences in China, and Olivia refuses Kwan's presence near her. Olivia's narration provides series of events which revolve around her love life with Simon, Olivia's husband. Kwan's revolves around her life in China which in the end leads to her unaccomplished intention to unite her friends, Miss. Banner and Yiban. The following is the summary of the two narrations:

Olivia's Narration	Kwan's Narration
Set in contemporary America.	Set in nineteenth century China.
Presents the story of her precarious relationship with Simon which accumulates to divorce settlement.	Presents the story of her life in China which reaches to one main issue: her unaccomplished mission to unite Miss Banner and Yiban.
The reunification of Olivia and Simon completes Kwan's unaccomplished mission to unite Miss. Banner and Yiban.	

Alteration occurs in changes of focalisation from Olivia to Kwan, and then Kwan to Olivia, and so forth. Different from Olivia's narration, the openings of several of Kwan's narration are in dramatic monologues. In dramatic monologue, according to Chatman (1972), it is shown that a character is talking to another character whose voice is intentionally silenced. When such a technique is applied, during the monologue, it is as if the character is having a dialogue with another character he/she is talking to, but the fact is that this other character is not there. The following are two examples from Kwan's narration that can illustrate such a technique:

Libby-ah, are you sleeping? Okay, sorry, sorry, go back to sleep, it's not important ... (Tan, 1995: 39)

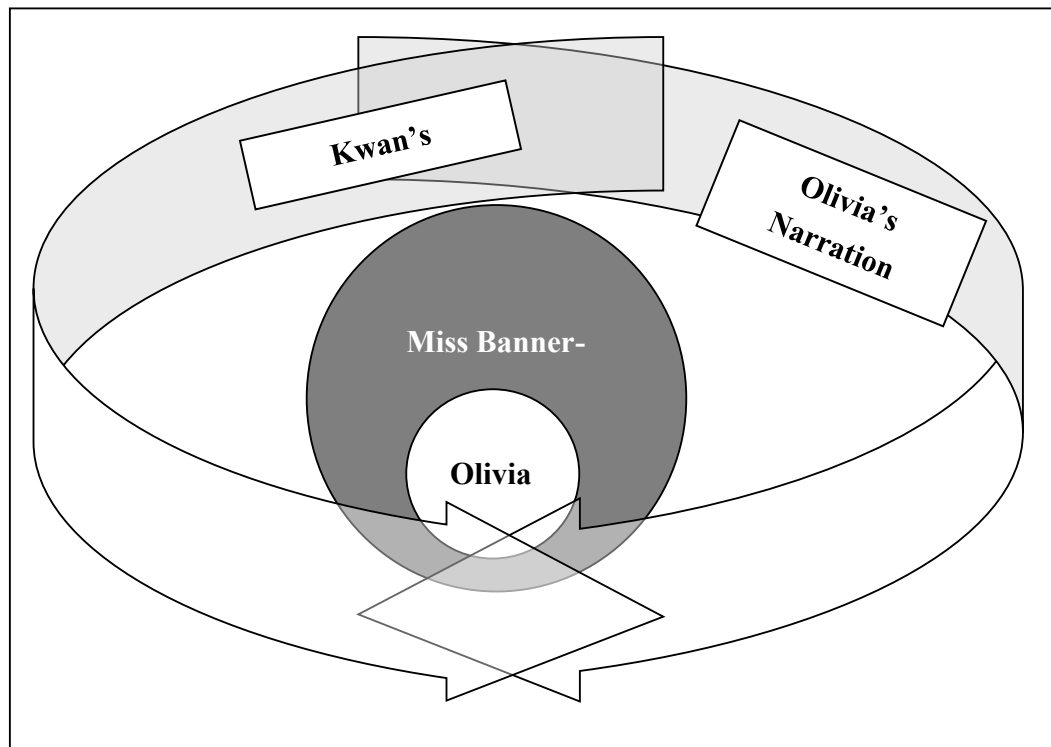
Libby-ah. Libby-ah? Can I turn on the light? I want to show you something ... Okay, okay! Don't get mad! I'm sorry. I'm turning it off. See? (Tan: 50)

On the first example, dramatic monologue is shown on the second sentence, which implies that after Kwan asks whether or not Olivia is asleep, Olivia responds. Her response, which is not included in the monologue, causes Kwan to apologise for waking Olivia up and tell her to go back to sleep. On the second example, dramatic monologue is shown from Kwan's statement: 'Okay, okay! Don't get mad!' which implies that after Kwan is asking Olivia's permission to turn on the light, Olivia is mad, and therefore causes Kwan to apologise.

In dramatic monologue, as Chatman explains, 'one character speaks to another, a silent listener,' because 'the essential characteristic of the dramatic monologue as of dialogue in general is that the speaker is not principally involved in recounting, since in that case, he would become a narrator, and the scene only the frame for a secondary narrative' (Chatman, 1972: 113). In the two examples of Kwan's dramatic monologues, Olivia's verbal reaction never appears in print; but is inferable from what Kwan says. The employment of this discursive technique gives an effect of keeping Kwan's interlocutor (Olivia) unheard. This indicates that Kwan is demarcating her narration from Olivia's, since her narration only voices the voice of her friends from the past. This leads to an interpretation that Kwan's narration is of different zone from Olivia's, which in a way makes sense since what is narrated through Kwan has its source from Yin World.

In the context of contrapuntal composition, Olivia's precarious relationship with Simon seems to be the main subject composition of the novel, whereas Kwan's story of her life in China and her unaccomplished mission to unite Miss Banner and

Yiban is the one surrounding that subject composition. The two narrations are interrelated, one completing the other. Olivia's narration in the present time and Kwan's in the past in this case intertwine and create harmonisation to the plot. The mapping to illustrate this can be as follows:



China which is constructed in Olivia's perception is China as it is perceived by Kwan, that is, China as experienced by her friends in Yin World that she is able to have access to. This goes to show that Kwan's story on China is highly unreliable. And this emphasises the vulnerability of everything relating to China which is passed down to Olivia from Kwan. Such a condition is implied at the ending of the novel, when Olivia unearths the duck eggs buried by young Kwan in Changmian:

I pulled out a blackened egg, then another and another. I hugged them against my chest, where they crumbled, all these relics of our past disintegrating into gray chalk. But I was beyond worry. I knew I had already tasted what was left (Tan: 318).

The relics of Olivia's and Kwan's past crumble due to its vulnerability. But despite all this, it is implied that what truly matters is that Olivia at the very least has had the privilege to get to know, to connect with her Chinese heritage.

The unreliability of Kwan's story is also apparent from the time setting of the narration. It is set in the nineteenth century, which is highly impossible to accept since she is retelling them in the present time. There is a point in her narration where Kwan asks Olivia if she remembers the time when she died. And there is also a point where she mentions a story of a dead girl who was washed away by the floods that struck her village, and that when Kwan was looking at the dead body, she was actually looking at her own, which indicates that Kwan's body is replaced with the dead girl's. As the story unfolds, it is revealed that Kwan seems to have undergone reincarnations. She first dies at a very young age and her body is replaced by the drowned girl's, that is, Du Lili's daughter, Buncake. Before Buncake and Kwan go their separate ways to the worlds of immortal and mortal, Buncake tells Kwan that she will be reborn seven years from then, and she asks Kwan to wait for her. Since they swap body, it makes perfect sense to Olivia why Kwan does not resemble her, her father or brothers in any way.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that harmonisation is achieved through interference of things in the past to the things told in the present time. 'The past continues to speak to us' (Hall, 1994: 395), and this is why Kwan's narration inevitably interferes with Olivia's. Memory about China from Kwan's narration constructs Olivia perception on China. If China is associated with anything in the past and America with anything in the present, it can be said that the interaction between Kwan and Olivia is like a mother talking-story to her daughter, since according to Hall, 'our relation to [the past], like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth (Hall, 1994: 395).

Olivia constantly looks for rational explanation on anything that does not make sense to her. She questions why Kwan does not resemble her family, she is convinced that it cannot be possible that the sounds she hears in her new house is coming from a ghost in the wall. 'I'm not Chinese like Kwan,' Olivia remarks. 'To me, yin isn't yang, and yang isn't yin. I can't accept two contradictory stories as the whole truth' (Tan: 223). Yet towards the ending of the novel, when she starts witnessing and experiencing inexplicable incidents in Changmian, Olivia breaks down her barricade; she compromises with her Chinese circumstances.

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