

**LANGUAGE IN INDIA**  
**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**  
**Volume 10 : 7 July 2010**  
**ISSN 1930-2940**

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**Breaking the Good Mother Myths –  
A Study of the Novels of Amy Tan**

**Sushil Mary Mathews, Ph.D.**

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**Myths of the Perfect Mother**

"The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy," (237) writes Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Paula Caplan, in *The New Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (2001), speaks of the dangerous myths about mothers that have pervaded the culture and created or aggravated many of the problems between mothers and daughters.

The myths of the perfect mother give rise to impossible expectations and set mothers up for failure. These included the myth of the imperfect female body, the myth of the ideal mother and the myth that working mothers are not good for their children. These myths of mothers and their relationships with their daughters are rooted in mid- nineteenth century and this continued in psychoanalytical theories on child rearing which gave rise to the child expert in the 1950s. Most of these myths have been constructed in a patriarchal society and are responsible for destroying women's self respect and respect between mothers and daughters.

**Three Myths**

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There are three myths that stand out. The first popular myth is the story of Oedipus and Jocasta. The second widespread myth is that of Electra, daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon and sister of Iphigenia and Orestes. The third, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (acclaimed to have been composed in the sixth or seventh century) is the oldest known version of the mother-daughter myth of Demeter and Persephone.

The mother-daughter relationship which has an emotionally charged content can be explored by examining conflict and how this is resolved. The conflict is constructive and the daughter gets a safe training ground for independent living. It also explores the damaged sense of self experienced in the mother-daughter relationship within a patriarchal culture.

Malinowski in his *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1974), states that myth, “vouches for the efficacy of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization;” (101) Joseph Dorairaj in his book *Myth and Literature* (2003), talks about demythologization and states that it is “a literary enterprise that aims at endowing a literary artifact with a contemporary dimension, i.e., relevance and applicability to the present.”(94-95). He further opines “Demythologization, which aims at decontextualizing a classical myth and subsequently recontextualizing it in a given context taking into consideration the given horizon of inquiry, is fraught with wide ramifications”(141).

### **The Goal of This Study**

This study attempts a study of the movement of the daughter towards the mother, after a brief estrangement. The mothers who had migrated to America tried to dictate terms and bring up their daughters in the strict cultural and familial traditions that they had learnt in China. The daughters who were born in a different country saw the easy lifestyle around and rebelled against their mothers. The daughters who were born in America have many models of motherhood around them and they compare their mothers with their American counterparts. They set for their mothers certain criteria which they feel would help them assess their mothers and they concluded that their mothers had fallen short and did not belong to the category of the good mother. The daughters did not comprehend that these ideals were just myths and the love of a mother was beyond all comparison and judgment.

### **Daughters and Mothers**

The matriarchs in the novels of Tan are shown to be fighters who did not rest till their goals were reached. They made sure that the daughters moved into understanding and broke the myths they had created. The daughters learnt to listen and to assimilate the experiences of the mother and the vast knowledge she offered. They journeyed back to

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their mothers, to life and happiness. The previous chapter dealt with the difficulties the daughters faced in life and how they were rescued by the mothers from psychological estrangement. In this chapter the daughters had to break the myths they had relied on and moved from resistance to acquiescence, to the source and origin of their power and might, their mother or the mother figure.

In the novels of Tan, the daughters believed in a few myths of a 'good mother'. It was essential that these myths be broken down for a perfect understanding between mother and daughter. Tan has clearly brought out her finding that it is always the mother or the mother figure that helps the daughter to find the right meaning of life and establish her own identity. The daughter may be late in realising this but the relationship is always repaired and replenished. It is only when the daughter turns an adult herself that she is able to understand her mother and understand that these myths have to be broken or demythologized to appreciate and respect the mother. A few of the myths that are developed in these novels are those that are created by the daughter and the society.

### **Myth 1: Good mothers trust the daughter's choice**

Following the myth of Persephone and Demeter, where the mother is unable to accept the choice of her daughter, the mothers in Tan's novels also face difficulty in directing their daughters to the right choices. This ranges from the food that they eat, the clothes they wear, their careers and their spouses. The daughters opposed this intrusion of the mother and felt that their mothers were incapable of being ideal mothers only because they did not allow them a free choice.

There are four daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* who created myths of ideal mothers from all the examples they saw around them. The daughters find the American mothers perfect. Jing mei Woo is forced to learn the piano in which she is not interested. As she grew up her mother hoped that she would have a fancy job, but her daughter was only a free-lance writer. Jing wished that her mother could just agree to her wishes and let her alone like the mothers of her American friends. But her mother was a taskmaster who refused to take a negative answer. Jing mei had to do things whether she liked them or not.

The myth Jing mei created, that her mother did not respect or trust her choice, dissolved when she discovered her mother's true motives. She learnt that her mother Suyuan Woo had lost two of her daughters during the war and she wished that Jing would be the essence of all her daughters and achieve the best. She yearned to give her what she could not achieve or give the other daughters. Jing had not been interested in learning the truth of her mother's story which she had often tried telling her and it was only after her death that she found that it was necessary to learn the truth about her mother and when she did this the myth was broken.

Waverly Jong adored Marvin “He graduated third in his class at Lowell and got a full scholarship to Stanford. He played tennis... He made everyone laugh and his own laugh was deep, sonorous, masculinely sexy” (JLC174). But once her mother Lindo saw him she told her all his negative points so much that Waverly began to hate Marvin. Later Waverly fell in love with Rich Schields who worked in the same firm with her. She had never known such pure love and was frightened if her mother would spoil it. Waverly once ventured to ask her opinion of Rich and Lindo truthfully told her that he had too many spots on his face. Waverly tried to save Rich and said that they were freckles and were a sign of good luck. Lindo simply asserted that she remembered the time when Waverly had suffered from chicken pox with many spots and had to stay at home for ten days. Lindo wanted to know if she considered this luck too. But when Waverly went home to talk to her mother, Lindo told her how she knew that they were in love and that they wanted to marry. Her mother was actually very upset that her daughter had wicked thoughts about her. The myth that she had about her mother not trusting her choices was wiped out when she sat down and talked to her mother. Waverly realised that she had still a lot to understand about her mother. Slowly Waverly understood:

I saw what I had been fighting for: It was for me, a scared child, who had run away a long time ago to what I had imagined was a safer place. And hiding in this place, behind my invisible barriers, I knew what lay on the other side: Her side attacks. Her secret weapons. Her uncanny ability to find my weakest spots. But in the brief instant that I had peered over the barriers I could finally see what was really there: an old woman, a *wok* for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in. (JLC183-84)

Olivia is the daughter in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, in which Tan portrays a neglecting mother and a half sister who takes on the role of the mother. Louise, Olivia’s mother was involved in much social work and was unable to care for the family. She visited her daughter Olivia just to tell her that she had made a wrong choice in marrying Simon. She explained this with enormous examples of men in her life. She felt that men had a lack of commitment and she explained, “Simon didn’t love you enough, because *he* was lacking not you. You are abundantly lovable. There is *nothing wrong with you*” (HSS 55). It was only this mother who needed another to carry out her maternal duties and Kwan, Olivia’s half sister came to her aid. Olivia despised the interference of Kwan but it was she who helped Olivia mend the marriage. She was able to convince her that Simon was the best choice and that it was a relationship that had gone on from the previous birth. It was only when Olivia believed Kwan and accepted her offer of help that she moved to love and accepted Kwan, after a long number of years.

Ruth, in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* was born and brought up in America and could not accept the hard and disciplined life that her mother wanted her to follow. As she grew up she felt it necessary to defy her mother and adamantly refused to give in to all the

conditions and Ruth and LuLing fought viciously over various issues. In later life Ruth fell in love with Art and lived with him and his two daughters and in the age of luxury and convenience, the couple considered commitment a hindrance. Marriage became old fashioned and living together was considered the right alternative. Ruth could not accept her mother's resistance to their living in relationship. But later she realised the importance of marriage when she saw the living example of Mr Tang and her mother LuLing. Even Art, Ruth's husband admired the relationship Mr. Tang and Luling had: "He's been in love with her since she was a little girl," Art said. "She's not just a source of temporary companionship. He loves everything about her, and that includes who she was, who she is, who she will be. He knows more about her than most couples who are married." He drew Ruth closer to him. Actually I'm hoping we might have that a commitment through time, past, present, future...marriage." (BD 348)

LuLing became a prey to dementia but she had left behind the story of her life written in the Chinese language and as Tang translated the papers he fell in love with her and she in turn reciprocated. Even in a state of ill-health the mother was able to be a guiding light for her daughter and Ruth learnt from her mother the right choice, thus breaking the myth.

Thus the first myth of the good mother trusting her daughter's choice is broken and the daughters learnt that the mothers made the best choices for them or steered them on the path of the right choice. They appreciated that the good mothers corrected them and pulled them away from wrong choices and they were happy for the pain they experienced and they saluted the mother figure.

## **Myth 2: Good Mothers always express their love**

The strongest trial for this myth was in the life of Jing mei Woo, one of the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, who learnt that her mother had to desert two of her daughters in China during the war. Jing could never accept the fact that a mother could just leave behind two babies. She used this as her trump card to always exasperate her mother. Jing later dropped out of school and had a mediocre job of writing brochures, and when she was slighted at a party by her friend for her bad job, her mother seemed to take her friend's side and criticised her daughter's work. Her mother had hosted the Chinese New Year Dinner and invited all her friends and their children. During the meal Jing realised that she was constantly humiliated by Waverly, Auntie Lindo's daughter. She insulted her about the free lance work she had done for their company saying that Jing did not have enough style. Jing felt very small and she had to accept that she was just a copywriter who worked for a small advertising agency. "I felt tired and foolish, as if I had been running to escape someone chasing me, only to look behind and discover there was no one there" (JLC207).

After dinner Suyuan Woo presented Jing with the jade pendant that she had always worn. She said that it was her life's importance; Jing pondered aloud if she had given it to her only because of the disaster at the dinner but her mother told her that Waverley was no good and assured her that she was the best. Jing later learnt the true circumstances that her mother underwent and the yearning she had for her daughters always. This proved Suyuan's love for her and she also understood that her mother loved the lost daughters also and was always hoping to trace them. She learnt that in all situations her mother had always showed her a tough face which was for her benefit and that it was not always necessary for an ideal mother to always portray love.

Lindo Jong remembered that she had been betrothed when she was two years old, and after that every time the family spoke of her they referred to her as if she belonged to someone else. "My mother would say to me when the rice bowl went up to my face too many times, 'Look how much Huang Taitai's daughter can eat'" (JLC 51). Later, when she was twelve, there was a great flood that completely destroyed their family and they decided to leave the place and find a living elsewhere. They decided to leave Lindo behind as she was twelve and old enough to leave her family. Lindo, as a child, found it difficult to understand that there was love in the family as they never expressed it. As the family was leaving, her mother took her away alone and gave her a necklace of red jade that was for good luck. Lindo remembered, "When she put it around my neck, she acted very stern, so I knew she was very sad"(JLC53-54). Soon she understood that her mother wished the very best for her and loved her. She remembered "My mother did not treat me this way because she didn't love me. She would say this biting back her tongue, so she wouldn't wish for something that was no longer hers"(JLC 51).

Pearl and Weili, the protagonists of The Kitchen God's Wife maintained a comfortable distance and they felt that they could not reach out to express love for each other. Pearl had a strict childhood where her mother seemed to know everything and this in turn irritated and troubled the child. As she grew up she maintained a distance and stayed clear of her mother's paths. It was later when she learnt her mother's past that she could see the tender, loving and caring mother she had though she also learnt that she had lost a lot of babies in infancy and also aborted many. Love had different meanings she learnt. Weili loved the children so much that she did not want them to be born to suffer in this world. Pearl also understood the depth of her mother's love for her when she saw the mother ready to do her best to restore Pearl's health, everything else shrunk in importance for her mother and she was only concerned about the welfare of her daughter. The second myth tumbles when the daughters understand the depth of the unconditional love they had and when they realised that love did not have to be always expressed. As Shakespeare expresses in *Julius Caesar* (1623)

When love begins to sicken and decay,  
It useth an enforced ceremony.(4.2.20-21)

### **Myth 3: Good Mothers do not always have the last word**

The second section of *The Joy Luck Club* is entitled ‘The Twenty - Six Malignant Gates’. The Chinese mothers regarded this as a book with all the warning they needed for the protection of their children, failing which, they believed, the evil would strike them. The anecdote in the prologue to this section portrays a mother who told her daughter not to ride her bicycle around the corner because she would fall down and cry and the mother will not be able to hear her. She said this was written in the book. The daughter however did not believe her, she accused her mother of ignorance and tried to get away in a hurry but fell even before she reached the corner.

Lena St. Clair’s narration in the second section of *The Joy Luck Club* is titled ‘The Voice from the Wall.’ Even as a very young child she was worried about all the unspoken terrors. These terrors she felt chased her mother and devoured her until she disappeared and became a ghost. Her mother told her stories like how her great grandfather had been killed by a ghost, how her future would be destroyed if she lingered after school, and that she would be caught by bad men. It seemed that her mother knew everything and was always right. “I knew my mother made up anything to warn me, to help me avoid some unknown danger. My mother saw danger in everything, even in other Chinese people” (*JLC*105). It was only as she grew up and started life on her own that she could comprehend the wisdom of her mother’s words. She later understood that her mother was just helping her in the right path by inducing fear about the wrong things in life.

When Pearl was young she yearned for freedom, and at school all the students were preparing for the “Sadie Hawkins Day Dance” and Pearl wanted to go with a boy just as all the other children. But Weili told her, “You want to follow a girl who has no sense? You want to listen to her mother? That mother doesn’t even have concern for her daughter!” (*KGW* 84) Pearl, when she was an adult, did not tell her mother that she had an illness because she would search endlessly for the causes. Pearl’s father had died when she was fourteen and even after long years her mother would search for reasons. So Pearl felt it was better to remain silent than to embark on the issue. Pearl had brought up the topic of her multiple sclerosis once and told her mother that the doctor had said that it was not cancer. But her mother immediately had another story to tell her, how she had told one of her customers to check a mole on his face and he had neglected it, but it turned out to be cancer. That man, she said had suffered a lot and died. Later however Pearl understood that her mother had always spoken and acted for her well being. She learnt that her mother spoke all that she knew because she felt that it would help the daughter in some way. Pearl felt in her heart that her mother had always been right and all that she did was always for her benefit.

The mothers who had come to America from China carried their painful past with them and they wished to protect their daughters from the same experience and that was the reason they always stayed in control and had the last say. Matters concluded her way,

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there could be no other and though the daughters resented this boasting, nagging and dominance, wisdom dawned with age and understanding and the myth is broken.

#### **Myth 4: Good mothers keep up with the times**

‘Feathers From a Thousand Li Away’ is the first section of *The Joy Luck Club*. It was the story of a woman who left China for America. She dreamt of a bright and prosperous future for her daughter, very different from the one that she had. She hoped for a beautiful beginning and to symbolise all her emotions she carried a swan on her journey. She had bought the swan from a vendor who told her that the swan was once a duck that stretched its neck in the hope of becoming a goose and now it had become a swan more beautiful than what it had hoped for. But when she arrived the immigration officials pulled her swan away leaving her with just a feather for memory. She was confused and even forgot why she had come. Her daughter grew up speaking only English. She wanted to open her heart to the daughter but she had to wait year after year in the hope of telling her daughter all this in perfect American English.

This episode pictured the agony and the trauma the mothers underwent in spite of having come away from China where they hoped their sorrows would remain. Their daughters grew up speaking English just as the mother wanted, but now they found a ridge between them that they could not cross over. This problem created the myth of a good mother, whom the daughters wished would be someone they could be proud of in front of friends and acquaintances.

The daughters of the members of the ‘Joy Luck Club’ felt ashamed of the manners and etiquettes of their Chinese mothers. Jing-mei saw her mother as a strange old Chinese woman who did things to embarrass her. She haggled with store owners, picked her teeth in public and wore awful colours.

Rose remembered that they were "a Chinese family trying to act like a typical American family at the beach"(JLC122). An-mei, the mother wore clothes that did not match her and talked with a terrible accent. Rose was embarrassed that her boyfriend would have to see her before the wedding. She only saw her mother as one who boasted of her culinary prowess. Rose grew up thinking that her mother was an unimportant person who did not know the outer world, but the myth was broken when she learnt of the strength that her mother possessed, how she had been through myriad experiences that had moulded her to raise strong and confident daughters.

Lindo remembered how her mother once told her that her features could lead to good or bad circumstances. She described each feature of her face and told her how good they were. She said how ears with big lobes were full of blessings and how people with such ears could hear fortune calling out to them. Lindo had just the right ears but she had to listen to opportunities. Her nose was straight and smooth and her mother felt that this was

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a good sign because girls with crooked noses were sure to face misfortune as they always followed wrong things. Her chin was just the right size and it signified an adequate longevity. She told Lindo that she would have some hardships in early life as the hairline was low on the forehead. Her eyes were eager and honest; they followed the gaze of the mother and showed respect. So she would be a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law. Her mother told her how they looked very similar and Lindo tried to make it more so trying to follow her gestures and moves. But her daughter Waverly did not feel that way. She did not feel that her mother was beautiful or kept up with the times. Waverly had tried telling her mother about her marriage with Rich but she had never got a chance and she told Rich:

“You don’t understand. You don’t understand my mother.”

Rich shook his head. “Whew! You can say that again. Her English was *so* bad. You know, when she was talking about that dead guy showing up on *Dynasty*, I thought she was talking about something that happened in China long time ago.”(JLC 179)

She felt that her mother was very old fashioned and she even took her mother to her beauty parlour, just before her marriage. Mr. Rory the hair stylist observed that they looked alike but Waverly did not want to believe it, she did not want to be identified with her mother, she liked to be different, with more of the American style in her and Lindo also felt that Waverly was a little Chinese only in her looks, on the surface alone. Lindo felt that she had not succeeded in teaching her the Chinese character. She had wanted her “...children to have the best combination of: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these things do not mix?”(JLC 254)

As she looked at her daughter she saw they had the same face, the same sorrows and fortunes and the same faults. And she knew she could not let her be that way. She helped Waverly understand and appreciate her rich heritage and slowly Waverly was able to let go of the myth and accepted that her mother was the best. She even decided to go to China for her honeymoon and Lindo was going along. Waverly dreaded the idea. “Yet part of me also thinks the whole idea makes perfect sense. The three of us, leaving our differences behind, stepping on the plane together, sitting side by side, lifting off, moving West to reach the East”(JLC184).

Olivia was happy in her home basking as the only daughter to her parents, but Kwan soon came in and Olivia viewed her always as her opponent. Kwan was fresh from China and did not know the culture and manners of America. Olivia described Kwan, “She’ll wear a purple checked jacket over turquoise pants. She whispers loudly in a husky voice, sounding as if she had chronic laryngitis, when in fact she’s never sick” (HSS 21).

Olivia was embarrassed to be with her, as all the other children used to make fun of Kwan and one of her brother’s friends said: “Is that dumb Chink your sister? Hey Olivia,

does that mean you're a dumb Chink too?" I was so flustered I yelled, "She's not my sister! I hate her! I wish she'd go back to China!" (HSS12)

Olivia disowned her many times and never helped Kwan with her English though she used to earnestly request her. Olivia and Kwan grew up with their differences and Olivia felt that the many years that Kwan spent in America had not helped her change much, she remained the same. It was a very long time before Olivia could learn the deep love and devotion Kwan had for her, and to understand the love that Kwan returned for every bitter act of hers. The mother figure Kwan may be old fashioned but Olivia was forced to learn that she had been the perfect mother to her, who cared for her in the absence of her mother and took love to the farthest ends of their lives.

As the daughters grew up and often became mothers themselves, they became aware of the greatness of their mothers and did not bother about the differences in language and styles and understood that there were things more important than all this and that they received the strength and values from their mothers.

### **Myth 5: Good mothers do not have shady pasts**

The first chapter of the novel carries the same title 'The Joy Luck Club'; it gave the story of Suyuan Woo as recalled by her daughter Jing. Her mother enjoyed relating the events of the past and the formation of the club when she had completed all the chores of the house. Suyuan had been married to an officer with the Kuomintang and when the war began he brought Suyuan and their two daughters to Kweilin because he thought they would be safe there. Suyuan described how "I sat in the dark corners of my house with a baby under each arm, waiting with nervous feet. When the sirens cried out to warn us of bombers, my neighbors and I jumped to our feet and scurried to the deep caves to hide like wild animals" (JLC 22). She was ordered to leave quickly for Chunking as the Japanese had arrived.

It was Jing's father who told Jing the rest of the story. Suyuan did not have the strength to carry the babies any further. When she realised that she would die of her sickness, or starvation or the war, she carried her babies till she was delirious with pain and fever. So she laid the babies on the side of the road, "And then she knew she could not bear to watch her babies die with her" (JLC 282). She left the babies with money and an address, but did not know which way or how long she walked. When she awoke she found herself on a truck with several other sick people. American missionaries had rescued her and she reached Chunking only to learn that her husband had died two weeks back. She grew delirious with madness and disease. "To come so far, to lose so much and to find nothing" (JLC 283). When Jing heard this story of her mother's past she was able to break the myth and love her mother.

Ying Ying's daughter Lena saw her mother as a person who always had reason to feel scared and under a threat. She knew that this was her mother's second marriage, but nothing had prepared her for the truth that her mother revealed to her when she lost a baby. Lena was the only one who could follow her mother's language and she listened in horror as her mother related how this was the right punishment she had got for the uncaring act of her yester years. Lena had to share this great guilt of her mother and she could not reveal this to her father who trusted them completely and did not know anything. Lena however later learnt of the sad marriage that her mother first had, and then she realised that her mother was the one who loved her and wanted the best for her.

The two generations of mother and daughter in Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* portray daughters who got to know of the past of their mothers late and then adored them. LuLing learnt the meaning of mother after she lost her. LuLing was the only reason that Precious Auntie had to live and she loved LuLing very much and cared for her. The treasured past of her mother, had been handed down to LuLing engulfing her in its pain, sorrow, strength and the curses. LuLing had a wrong understanding of her mother and she learnt the truth too late.

The same curse seemed to affect the next generation too and it was only after LuLing was diagnosed with dementia that her daughter Ruth tried to learn about her mother past. After the death of her mother LuLing had lived in an orphanage where she became a widow and later after so many excruciating experiences she travelled to America. Ruth had always viewed her mother as a person who ordered her around and had a great fear of the curses and Ruth guessed that there should have been something that was terrible that she wished to forget and evade. When Ruth read the document that her mother had given her she learnt about her mother's past and then she regarded her with pride and gratitude.

### **Myth 6: Good mothers do not interfere in their daughters private lives**

John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lillies* (1865) exhorts women, "There is not a war in the world, no, nor an injustice, but you women are answerable for it; not in that you have provoked, but in that you have not hindered. ... There is no suffering, no injustice, no misery in the earth, but the guilt of it lies with you"(32). The mothers from China felt it their prime duty to take care of their daughters so that they would not fall short of the institution of motherhood. But the American born daughters saw this as an interference and hindrance.

Rose Hsu found that her mother made a point on every part of her life. "You are getting too thin," my mother said in her pained voice..."I'm fine," I said, and smiled for proof. "And besides, wasn't it you who said my clothes were too tight?" "Eat more," she insisted... (JLC 187) An-mei also wanted to talk about Rose's marriage and she seemed to know the problem and said, " 'He is doing monkey business with someone else.' Monkey business? Ted? I wanted to laugh-her choice of words, but also the idea!"(JLC

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188) It was her mother who in the end helped her fight her marriage. She did not give her a choice but told her to speak for herself and when Rose listened to this piece of advise, she triumphed. Her mother was in the end given the freedom to heal the wounds in every aspect of her life.

Pearl felt that her mother had always controlled every part of her life. Even when her family visited her mother Weili, they were not allowed to stay in the hotel, Weili declared that it was a waste of money. Pearl's mother was also always eager to outdo her with a better price on any item at a store near her home. Weili asked Pearl, "Four rolls of toilet paper, how much?" "One sixty-nine," I answer right away. "You see!" she says. "My place only ninety-nine cents. Good brands, too. Next time, I buy you some. You can pay me back" (KGW 49).

When Pearl's children were too eager to see what presents she had got them, Pearl was proud that her younger daughter who was just two was talking complete sentences but Weili reprimanded her, "What good is it to have her be this kind of smart? You should teach her manners, not to ask too much, same way I taught you" (KGW 82). When Weili knew that her daughter was sick, she took extra care and admonished her husband to do the same too.

My mother looks at me, frowning. "Ai-ya! This dress is too thin." She pinches the fabric. "too cold is not good for you. I already told you this. You have to listen to me." She pulls Phil's sleeve. "Take this off. Give her your jacket. You have to be a better husband to her. If you don't pay attention, how will you help her pay attention too?" (KGW 403)

Pearl however became peaceful when she let in her mother into all quarters of her life, she felt blessed without the nagging pain of the guilt of separation she experienced and she felt whole again in the presence of her mother.

Ruth's mother believed "A daughter should have no secrets from a mother" (BD139). But Ruth liked to keep LuLing out of her life because of the many differences they had. Ruth had moved in with Art and they believed in a live in relationship and though they seemed to have a good relationship, they both knew that it was not complete and LuLing emphasised her belief in the sanctity of marriage. Art's parents did not like Ruth, and the children who had adored her as infants now seemed to look down on her. Her mother had felt that this relationship was not right and made her thoughts very plain, "Long time 'go you first meet him, I tell you, Why you live together first? You do this, he never marry you. You remember? Oh, now you thinking. Ah, Mother right. Live together, now I just leftover, easy throw away. Don't be embarrassed. You be honest" (BD 304).

Ruth's stay at her mother's helped her to reassess her life. She was worried about Art and herself. She sensed that it was she who was always accommodating. "And now that they

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had been apart, she felt unweighted, untethered. This was what she had predicted she might feel when she lost her mother. Now she wanted to hang on to her mother as if she were her life preserve” (BD 304). The time she spent with her mother helped her regain life and love, and her mother moved from the margin to the center of Ruth’s life. Tan has thus, in her *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, shows the power that can be derived in the present with knowledge of the past. The daughters were able to lead better lives when they excavated the past of the mothers. They could understand the emotions, thoughts and the fears that their mother’s lives were built on and they learnt to appreciate and applaud the matriarchs.

The mothers had handed over their legacy to their daughters. They helped them shape their lives. They hoped that their daughters would not fall into the same snares like they had, they wished to guide the footsteps in a smoother path, but they did it by handing out warnings. The closeness of the mother and grandmother is felt by most of the daughters. Together they believed they could shape not only the future but even the past. The legacy is their offering “They can choose not to hide it, to take what’s broken, to feel the pain and know that it will heal. They know where happiness lies, not in a cave or a county, but in love and the freedom to give and take what has been there all along” (BD 352-53).

The novels of Tan portray the lives of the daughters enriched and strengthened when they decided to assimilate the rich past of the mothers. The mothers also waited for the return of their daughters, which they knew was inevitable. They were aware that the daughters needed their support and that they lacked the courage to face obstacles and problems in life. The mothers were willing to wait and sometimes the waiting proved to be dear. There is also a transition seen in the mothers from traditional to contemporary.

The mothers at first tried to shield the daughters from the truths of her past as she believed that it would hurt her, she however encountered resentment and anger and it was only openness that brought true understanding and harmony.

The mothers shared the story of the family history and their lives, and the daughters who resented the mother’s expectations and values, slowly grasped the personal histories of the cultural heritage. In the mixed culture, it became imperative for the daughter to understand her family history and her mother’s life story in order to find her identity and voice.

The conflict between mother and daughter is also considered constructive as it helps in the separation of the daughter from her mother. The daughters, who had segregated themselves from the companionship of their mothers, broke the myths they had made and moved from resistance to acquiescence, accepting the rich legacy handed forth. The end of the relationship is the victory of this alliance in a patriarchal society.

*The Hundred Secret Senses* ends with a revelation that Olivia has:

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I think Kwan intended to show me the world is not a place but the vastness of the soul. And the soul is nothing more than love, limitless, endless, all that moves us toward knowing what is true. I once thought love was supposed to be nothing but bliss. I now know it is also worry and grief, hope and trust. (HSS 358)

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Sushil Mary Mathews, Ph.D.  
Department of English  
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women  
Coimbatore -641004  
Tamilnadu, India  
[sushilmary@gmail.com](mailto:sushilmary@gmail.com)