

Healing through Attachment: A Study on Amy Tan's The Hundred Secret Senses

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: January

Year: 2026

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Divya, R., and Kanchana C.M. "Healing through Attachment: A Study on Amy Tan's The Hundred Secret Senses." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2026, pp. 113–17.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-i3-Jan.10559>

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of compatibility in a relationship and how one's childhood experiences create an impact in their latter part of life. It examines Amy Tan's The Hundred Secret Senses through the integrated lens of attachment theory and contemporary neurobiology. Tan's novel portrays interpersonal relationships between Olivia, a Chinese American woman, and her half-sister Kwan. Their bond offers a study of how early emotional bonds influence self-perception and one's reaction with their environment. Attachment theory, first developed by John Bowlby and expanded by Mary Ainsworth, argues that the patterns of security or insecurity formed in childhood become internal layouts for later relationships. In recent decades, neuroscience has provided evidence that early attachment experiences during early childhood have a profound effect on brain development. This insight corresponds with attachment theory which highlights the importance of early bonds in shaping an individual's emotional and psychological well-being. When the characters Olivia and Kwan in The Hundred Secret Senses are looked through a neurobiological standpoint, the emotional distance, anxieties, and misunderstandings between them become more than personal attributes. They reflect the persisting imprint of their early attachment environment. Olivia's avoidance and ambivalence resonate the neural effects of inconsonant caregiving while Kwan's dedicated warmth mirrors the foundational impact associated with secured attachment and healthy emotional stability. By combining attachment theory with neurobiology, The Hundred Secret Senses demonstrates how relationships which are firmly grounded by loyalty, caregiving and emotional presence can influence not only psychological well-being but also mould perception and behaviour. Tan's narrative eventually infers that healing and reconnection befall not just at the position of story or memory but at the position of the nervous system itself.

Keywords: Contemporary Neurobiology, Secure Attachment, Ambivalent Attachment, Sisterhood, Motherhood

Introduction

This paper examines Amy Tan's The Hundred Secret Senses through the integrated lens of attachment theory and contemporary neurobiology. Tan's novel portrays interpersonal relationships between Olivia, a Chinese American woman, and her half-sister Kwan. Their bond offers a powerful study of how early emotional bonds influence the self-perception of individuals and their reaction towards environment. By combining attachment theory with neurobiology, The Hundred Secret Senses

demonstrates how relationships which are firmly grounded by loyalty, caregiving, and emotional presence can influence not only psychological well-being but also mould perception and behaviour.

The attachment theory postulates that connection is an ingrained human need. Bowlby states that infants are reliant on caregivers not merely for physical survival but also for emotional guidance. He emphasises how early childhood attachment plays a crucial role in one's mental health and how it reflects in their life. He states:

“A child would initially form only one attachment and that the attachment figure acted as a secure base for exploring the world. The attachment relationship acts as a prototype for all future social relationship so disrupting it can have some severe consequences” (McLeod 1).

Bowlby states that when a child experiences steady and constant caregiving, secure attachment is exhibited, which is distinguished by emotional balance and having trust in others. On the contrary, derelict and unstable caregiving exhibits insecure attachment which displays anxiety and confusion in relationships. He names these patterns as internal working models which perceive individuals and others in relationships.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia depicts the paradigmatic anxious-ambivalent child grown into adulthood. She displays mistrust, intimacy avoidance, and detachment throughout the novel. Her marriage mirrors ambivalence and she limits her friendships. On the other hand, Kwan emits the symbol of secure attachment such as emotional availability and devotion. Her persistent love for Olivia, trending on selflessness, resonates the caregiver behaviour who provides guidance and love.

Contemporary neurobiology strengthens this reading by disclosing the biological mechanisms through which these interactive patterns become assimilated. Memory systems like the hippocampus and amygdala are places where emotional memories, especially those certain to attachment figures, are combined through hippocampal and amygdala networks (Phelps, 2004). These neural patterns create lasting traces that shape narrative identity.

In recent decades, neuroscience has provided evidence that early attachment experiences during early childhood have a profound effect on brain development. Neuroscience research indicates that emotionally approachable relationships promote neural plasticity, allowing adults to re-learn emotional security (Siegel, 1999). Emotional companionship with caregivers boosts the development of critical brain regions which are responsible for stress response, memory, empathy, and emotional stability. The amygdala, one of the key structures of neurobiology, is in control of generating fear responses, emotional memories, and threat perceptions. “Childhood environments characterised by rejection, emotional neglect, or inconsistent caregiving can produce amygdala hyperactivation, resulting in heightened sensitivity to interpersonal stress” (*The Developing Mind* 212). This structure illustrates the behaviour of Olivia in the novel. Her discomfort with closeness emanates from her amygdala which deciphers closeness as a threat: “I don't let people in too close. That's how you get hurt” (63).

Limbic Arousal and Childhood Attachment

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia's emotional withdrawal and hypervigilance to abandonment are clearly portrayed through the account of attachment theory of how childhood relational experience triggers the brain's limbic arousal response. Schore argues that “early caregiving patterns train the right-hemisphere limbic system to either soothe or intensify arousal states, leading insecurely attached individuals to experience even mild interpersonal stress as a threat that triggers amplified limbic arousal” (*Attachment, Affect Regulation, and the Developing Right Brain*).

When Kwan arrives in China, Olivia was five years old and Kwan showers her affection in endless ways, but Olivia does not reciprocate her love and always makes fun of Kwan's supernatural beliefs and her broken English. When Kwan narrates ghost stories, Olivia becomes hypervigilant. The stories about yin people keep her awake throughout the night expecting paranormal activity. Even though Kwan narrates such stories to comfort her, Olivia's body reacts with racing heart and nervous anticipation. These are typical limbic arousal

responses ruled by the amygdala. Even as an adult, Olivia still remembers the anticipation of danger more vividly than the content of the stories, exposing that the memory was encrypted obliquely, which is the trademark of amygdala storage.

Amygdala-Triggered Avoidance

Amygdala-triggered avoidance is seen in another incident in the novel when Kwan invades Olivia's personal space. Olivia's childhood trauma starts when her mother was not ready to give care soon after her father's death, which results in maternal deprivation. That particular incident becomes the root cause for her mental instability. According to Bowlby, attachment is a strong emotional bond that a person or animal forms with another individual whom they perceive as more powerful or wise (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1952). Kwan's deep, almost mystical connection to her ancestral world provides her with inner stability and resilience. When she expresses her love and care through physical touch such as hugging, holding hands, and brushing her hair, Olivia shows her instinctual discomfort. She says, "she embarrassed me with her love" (27). She freezes and pulls away immediately. LeDoux states that "hyperresponsivity of the amygdala has been associated with the symptoms of hyperarousal and avoidance" (151). Olivia feels vigilant as though intimacy is a threat. She undergoes physical tension when someone tries to get close to her: "I wanted her to stop hugging me... I felt smothered by her" (33). This happens because her brain had encoded emotional closeness as a threat signal in her childhood attachment system.

Tan's use of "secret senses" in the novel proves that the concepts of spirits work on one's individual subconsciousness mind and creates an emotional memory that is stored. Emotional experiences tied to attachment figures activate the amygdala, which develops hippocampal consolidation (McGaugh, 2004). Tan brings out the concept of a neuro-phenomenon through cultural metaphor and proves that memories are not dormant but alive in relational contexts.

Neural Reconsolidation and Memory

Olivia's struggle with Kwan's spiritual memories can therefore be read as resistance to the biological reprocessing of emotionally burdened memories. When she resists remembering, her stress networks remain activated. As she gradually accepts Kwan's reframing, we see narrative evidence of neural reconsolidation and new interpretation of old memories that changes emotional valence (Nader & Einarsson, 2010). Olivia's shame response towards Kwan's English indicates neurobiological fear reaction. LeDoux argues that "the amygdala is essential for the acquisition and expression of conditioned fear. Its activation triggers behavioural and physiological responses characteristic of fear" (151). Kwan's letter is filled with cultural references and vulnerability which triggers Olivia's brain's fear system. Her resentment towards Kwan's imperfect English is beyond embarrassment—it is a neurobiological fear response that she fears being perceived as distinct, not accepted by her peer group, or publicly shamed.

Dorsal Vagal Shutdown and Relational Conflict

Olivia's freezing response during conflict with Simon, her husband, is associated with dorsal vagal shutdown. She hides her true love towards Simon because of her childhood trauma. Though she is independent, her self-doubt does not allow her to be emotionally attached with anyone. In a situation when Olivia and Simon have a problem in their marriage, Simon seeks to have a conversation with Olivia. Whereas Olivia keeps away from the conversation: "He wanted to talk, but I said I was tired. I didn't want to start a fight, or maybe I didn't want to feel anything at all" (The Hundred Secret Senses, pn. 6). Porges infers that "when the threat is perceived as inescapable, the dorsal vagal complex may be recruited, producing a shutdown response characterised by decreased heart rate, hypoarousal, and behavioral withdrawal" (130). Olivia's response is not a reasonable avoidance but a biological shutdown—a defence mechanism built by the amygdala considering the situation as a threat.

Kwan as External Regulator and the Journey to China

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan is portrayed as an external regulator enabling her emotional steadiness, which corresponds with neurobiology and attachment theory. Unlike Olivia's avoidant propensity, Kwan personifies the attributions of a securely attached person who is coordinated, compassionate, and emotionally available. Kwan's motherly care provides a chance for attachment healing. Though Kwan is not a primary caregiver, she fulfils an attachment role by offering unconditional love. "A securely attached child will store an internal working model of a responsive, loving, reliable care-giver, and of a self that is worthy of love and attention" (Bowlby 245).

When Simon and Olivia misunderstand each other, Kwan urges both to travel to China and asks them to visit the village of Changming, setting an opportunity for both of them to connect and share their past. According to Kwan, this journey is not just a vacation or pilgrimage; it is an otherworldly mission of emotional healing and reconnection. She believes that the trip will help Simon and Olivia not only to see life rationally but also to understand with heart and soul. Mitchell and Black in *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* point out that according to Bowlby, "the root of adaptive behaviour is the 'child's tie to the mother' which he called 'attachment'" (136). The trip to China is a representation of an emotional pilgrimage for Olivia, where new relational experience repairs insecure attachment. Olivia starts to trust Kwan, which enables emotional stability and leads to the outcome of secure attachment behaviour. When Olivia reconnects with Kwan, her brain reduces the amygdala reactivity to emotional stress, which transforms her from an insecure attachment to a secure attachment individual.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia's healing is displayed through attachment theory and neurobiology. Her childhood trauma makes her an avoidant in attachment where the amygdala responds promptly to threat resulting in being cautious of closeness. Kwan's steadfast presence eventually gives the safety Olivia never experienced in childhood. Attachment theory deems that a dependable relationship can reconstruct emotional patterns while neurobiology exhibits that the indications of safety from a reliable person can soothe the amygdala and help overcome fear. Through Kwan, Olivia repairs her emotions, resolves her trust issues, and embraces the fragmented pieces of herself she once rejected. Tan's narrative eventually infers that healing and reconnection occurs not just at the position of story or memory but at the position of the nervous system itself.

Overall, this paper proves that in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Amy Tan not only discusses two sisters but a representation of attachment and neurobiological embodiment. Through the lens of attachment theory and contemporary neurobiology, the text reveals how relationship patterns are encoded in memory and shape emotional regulation and personal individuality. Tan's novel suggests that healing is neither purely psychological nor solely spiritual but arises through the intertwined mechanisms of relational attunement and neural integration.

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