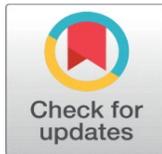
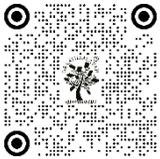


# FROM ANCESTRAL PORTRAITS TO THE YIN WORLD: VISUALIZING MEMORY AND RECONCILIATION IN AMY TAN'S THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES

Nicy Joseph <sup>1</sup>  , Dr. Shobha Ramaswamy <sup>2</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of English, Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Department of English, Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India



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## Corresponding Author

Nicy Joseph, [nicyalphonsa@gmail.com](mailto:nicyalphonsa@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Amy Tan blends memory, supernatural faith, and the reconciliation of emotions in a way that does not give rigid lines between realism and the fantastic. This result will argue that the utilization of the ghost stories and spiritual memory used by Tan is not only a cultural motif but also a visual cultural and narrative strategy whereby the identity, affect, and healing are constructed. Based on the Memory Studies, the analysis shows how personal, lineal, and collective memories that are passed through spectral storytelling function as a means of emotional attachment and reconciliation. At this point, the fact that Kwan believes in the Yin world and has strong memories of what she believed to be a previous life distorts the lines between the living and the dead and the remembered and imagined. These spectral stories serve as living archives of ancestral memory and parallel visual culture, such as images of ancestors, spirit images, and colour practices, as part of Chinese cultural aesthetics. Through the process of turning memory into a sensory and visual experience, Tan is able to blend myth, folklore, and her own history to make storytelling an act of visual cultural negotiation of loss, guilt and estrangement of emotion, specifically between Kwan and her half-sister Olivia. It is ultimately implied in the novel that emotional healing and self-understanding come about in the process of uniting the spiritual, cultural, and personal memory. This result places *The Hundred Secret Senses* in the context of memory and trauma, visual culture, and identity as discussed in Chinese American literature.

**Keywords:** The Hundred Secret Senses, Amy Tan, Memory, Supernaturalism, Emotional Reconciliation, Ghost Stories, Healing, Chinese American Literature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*The Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan [Tan \(1995\)](#) takes up a big space in Chinese American literature due to the complex interplay of realism, the supernatural, and memoirs in which identity and emotional reconciliation are redefined (Gonzalez, 207). The main theme of the novel is the poor relationship between Olivia and her half-sister Kwan, whose faith in ghosts and recollection of a former existence is a challenge to the hegemonic Western views of rationality, truth, and linear recollection. Instead of considering memory as a fixed or causal phenomenon of the past, Tan thinks about it as a stratified and culturally inscribed process that connects individual experience with ancestral legacy and emotional restorative processes (Niblaeus, 231). The memories of Kwan, which are based on spiritual belief, folklore, and the

presence of ancestors, are not considered delusions but are alternative forms of knowing that influence the emotional and psychological growth of Olivia.

The narrative style of Tan introduces memory as both a cultural and affective practice, which is highly visual and performative in essence. The image of the Yin world through ghost stories and visions by Kwan turns the recollection of the past into an imagistic experience and refers to the traditions of the portrait of the ancestors, spirit images, and symbolic representations that are characteristic of Chinese cultural aesthetics. Memory, through these supernatural stories, is recalled and is perceived and felt as well. The novel, therefore accentuates the issue of individual and shared memory, especially when mediated by cultural and spiritual customs, which comes out in the encounters of relationships and determines one's environment of self, family, and heritage.

Based on the Memory Studies, this result focuses on the conceptualization of *The Hundred Secret Senses* that memory is a means of reconciliation of emotions and identity. The supernatural in the story by Tan is not only a tool of literature but also of reaching hidden pasts and emotions other than rational speech (Sun, 116). The spectral narrative Kwan develops through her narrative makes memory suspend the traditional limits of time and space, connecting the past and the present through the images and the narratives that resonate with the audience emotionally. Though these memories cannot be proven in the context of Western epistemology, they prove to be instrumental in healing the emotional gap between Olivia and Kwan and demonstrate how memory could cross the cultural, family, and spiritual borders (Meneghin, 362).

The main themes examined in recent publications, such as spectrality, cultural memory, and female-centred narratives, are significant to diasporic fiction. Bhattacharya sees ghosts in the work of Amy Tan as cultural memory depositories and carriers of intergenerational trauma. Gibby views female ghosts as curative powers in US-Caribbean fiction by emphasizing that they could plug gaps in the past. Brewster & Weinstock see ghost narratives in American fiction as uncovering suppressed histories through spectral realism. Islam highlights how multiethnic women writers employ the use of memory narratives to reclaim the subordinated voices. Li positions grief in the fiction of Chinese American women is viewed as a tool of reclaiming identity and agency. Hasken deconstructs and unravels the cultural translation of folklore and the identity change. Lindala views indigenous storytelling as a method of reclaiming cultural truth. Pugh sees trauma in speculative fiction, showing how emotional pain comes through symbolic narratives. Such pieces help to put memory and supernatural voices in the Tan's novel in the context of their healing and continuation of culture.

The reviewed works on memory, trauma, and spectral presence in modern fiction present a progressive critique, but, at the same time, demonstrate a great deal of gaps in relation to the book by Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Bhattacharya writes on spectral presence in Tan's novel, but fails to write on Tan's memory as an emotional connection between sisters. Gibby discusses female ghosts as symbols of healing, but not within the Chinese American context. Brewster & Weinstock analysed the variety of American ghost stories according to genre, but not according to cultural specificity, which restricts the diasporic analysis. Islam writes on historical silences in multiethnic women's fiction without considering the spiritual aspect of remembering. Li writes on Chinese American fiction but does not write about spectral memory. Hasken addresses folklore migration, but without relating it to personal memory and cultural reconciliation in literature. Lindala studies the indigenous narratives in movies and does not use the same study in terms of diasporic fiction or intergenerational relations between two sisters. Pugh writes on trauma in speculative fiction but does not write about ghosts as memory agents in realistic fiction. These holes demand a keen scrutiny of the area of memory, reconciliation, and the use of supernatural narration in the Tan's novel.

This study throws light on how memory, in particular, its supernatural and emotive aspects, functions as a significant narration tool in *The Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan. Through the use of Memory Studies as the major prism, the outcome describes how the interaction between personal, ancestral, and cultural memories assists in the process of emotional reconciliation and identity formation in processing intergenerational trauma in the diasporic literature. The study is therefore going beyond the known parameters in the current literature to explore the physical and psychological expanses behind the very concept of storytelling. Through this, it critically reevaluates Tan's novel, as well as adding to the wider themes of memory, trauma, and the supernatural in the literary research.

Memory studies is a complex subject that studies the role of memory in identity, culture, and history. It covers both the personal and the collective memory and how the recollection of the previous experience is transferred between generations. This analysis applies a close textual analysis based on the theory of memory studies and the visual-cultural theory. In memory studies, special focus is drawn on a complicated association involving memory and forgetting,

questioning the mechanisms by which memory is maintained, repressed, or distorted (Kansteiner, 48). When it is applied in the field of literature, memory studies is concerned with the narrative, language, and cultural forms that influence the process of remembering and characterizing the construction of personal and group histories. This model brings a good understanding of the way that characters in *The Hundred Secret Senses* interact with their past and cultural heritage, especially in a transnational setting where memory is influenced by dislocation and migration [B and A \(2024\)](#).

In the novel by Tan, memory enables people not only to think about their personal experiences but also to relate to the past ancestral and cultural events. The theoretical orientation of memory studies allows considering the way Kwan works with trauma and loss with the help of memory, which is based on both lived and spiritual worlds. Her engagement in the Yin world shows that memory, coupled with spiritual conviction and emotional attachment, has the ability to go beyond linear time and spatial constraints, which is why it is relevant in personal and cultural reconciliation. Such memories define the changing relations characters develop towards themselves and each other, and this is the reason why memory studies offer a useful approach to studying the intricate nature of the narrative structure of the novel.

*The Hundred Secret Senses*: the ghosts and supernatural memory that Amy Tan employs in her work function not solely on the narrative meaning level but also on a visual-cultural logic that was built on Chinese aesthetics. The narration of Kwan converts memory to performative and imagistic performance and makes remembrance in line with seeing and not verifying. One of the ways the past is made visible by her ghost stories is by visual means, as it is a carrier of memory, making it sensory by repetition, vivid imagery, and emotional weight. The idea of memory is therefore produced as a combination of acting and being acted on, and storytelling is now seen as a performance of culture and not as a cognitive process.

The spectral stories told by Kwan echo the oral-visual culture and may be related to the ancestral portraits in Chinese families, where even the dead are still present in both material and symbolic ways. Similar to ancestral portraits, the ghosts of Kwan provide moral teachings, emotional continuity, and intergenerational relations, and they play out the role of mobile repositories of ancestral memory in the discourse. Tan also appeals to the visual grammar of Chinese folk art and spirit images, such as result offerings, spirit paintings, and iconography in temples, to establish an image of a porous boundary between the visible and the invisible. By way of this adaptation of folk visual language into narrative language, the supernatural is an alternative means of culturally legible remembering that favours emotional truth over empirical validation.

The use of symbolic colour associations serves to support the visual aspect of memory of the novel in a subtle manner. Red represents life energy and intensity of feelings, white symbolizes mourning and unresolved grief, and shadow represents transitional areas of Yin and Yang, the past and the present. In this visual-cultural system, Tan encourages readers to experience memory as image, mood, and emotion, and not as a historical document. Combining myth, folklore, and personal history, she performs memory as a visual event in which emotional reconciliation takes place, which proves the importance of the novel in terms of literature, visual culture, and performative storytelling.

The problems of memory and trauma are two inseparable parts of the diasporic literature since the experiences of dislocation are frequently associated with the abandonment of the familiar historical, cultural, social, and familial reference points. In this case, trauma takes a social form instead of being an individual one and is influenced by historical, political, and social factors like war, migration, and displacement. The desire to preserve the lost or upset cultural points of reference is often intergenerational in diasporic groups and affects the process of remembering and interpreting the past (Hua, 168). This is particularly crucial in the postcolonial and diasporic experience, where the traces of the pain and dislocation are still marked with the traces of the dispossession, which are often unconscious and passed through the family histories and cultural customs. The migration and culture-uprooted traumas are integrated into the characters in Tan's novel, with the most vivid recollections of Kwan's memories of her life in China and her life experiences as an immigrant in America.

In this case, trauma is not only a psychological burden but also a sort of cultural inheritance. The memories of the characters are incorporated into the universal history of the Chinese immigrants and manifested through personal experiences. Kwan thinks in supernatural powers and is accompanied by the vivid memories of past lives, and this becomes a way of coping with the emotional wounds brought about by displacement and loss of the homeland. Gradually, Olivia comes to the realization that she needs to heal herself by facing repressed memories and addressing the past trauma that her family did not resolve. Tan, therefore, introduces the memory as the product of the traumatic experience and shows how people and communities negotiate pain, loss, and alienation by remembering it as a place of suffering and as a possible source of emotional healing.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan connects memory with supernatural stories as one way to explore the way that the past keeps on shaping the present. The novel opens up a possibility that memory is not limited to the physical experience but also touches on the spiritual and metaphysical experiences by enabling memory to be linked with the belief of the Yin world by Kwan and her interactions with ghosts. In this context, the Memory Studies give a critical impression where these supernatural experiences can be interpreted as memories of culture and ancestral wisdom. Ghosts transform into apparitions of historical and emotional reality to keep the memory of those whose past has not been resolved. In this view, Tan seeks to use the supernatural to recapture pre-repressed or lost pasts so that characters can come to terms with unresolved loss and trauma.

The supernatural narration by Tan serves as a narration strategy to make peace with the past and the present, to enable characters like Olivia to start healing her emotional trauma. The ghosts in Kwan are not just artifacts of the past but dynamic agents of the memory who cause the existence of emotional landscapes to be felt by the living. Memory Studies presents a paradigm for the analysis of how these supernatural images can be observed as living testimonies of the intricate act of remembering, healing, and transformation. Combining memory and supernatural experience, Tan makes readers rethink the ways of remembering and retrieving memory and focus on its collective and continuing nature across generational lines and geographical space.

The main character of Kwan in *The Hundred Secret Senses* believes in the Yin world, where spirits and ghosts exist. In the case of Kwan, the Yin world relates to the world of the living closely, and the dead can communicate and pass on their memories to the living. This ideology is an indication of the need to conserve the past, especially the lives and narratives of her forebears. The ghosts that she sees are not simply supernatural processes but her emotional and cultural identity. Kwan's experience with spirits is portrayed as the natural continuation of life, where memory can be maintained, and voices of the ancestors are still heard. According to Kwan, as he explains to Olivia, it is similar to looking at the memory of something, a photograph that moves and talks when it appears as a ghost (Tan, 148). Tan depicts the Yin world through Kwan and shows it as a crucial location of cultural continuity where the dead provide a sense of guidance and enlightenment to the living.

In the novel, the communication with ghosts helps Kwan to heal and preserve culture. The ghosts she receives represent both past injustices and unresolved injustices and unrecognized losses. These help Kwan to acknowledge the trauma of her ancestors, especially the trauma of migration and dislocation, but also her personal sense of abandonment and exile. With Kwan reminiscing about her experiences with ghosts, there is no distinction between physical and spiritual worlds; instead, there is an awareness that memory persists in individuals and society in both personal and shared existence through supernatural beings. These spectral experiences confirm that memory may survive when material reality is over, and it may still determine identity, belonging, and the survival of emotions.

Tan, in her story, has explained the ghosts as strong representations of the memory that acts as a carrier of culture and the past. The ghosts are not supernatural beings but the stores of the knowledge of ancestors that keep the memories of several generations. As Kwan tells Olivia, "Ghosts don't always mean fear. Sometimes they teach you lessons, reminding you what you forget" (Tan 123). The communication of ghosts to Kwan underlines the possibility that the memory does not translate into the living world but exists in the spiritual world. It is through these spectral encounters that Kwan reaches a reservoir of memory that would not otherwise be accessible, and it offers continuity and attachment to her ancestral past. The ghosts in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, therefore, act as parables of cultural experience in that they contain both struggle and perseverance and success and continuity. They are used as representations of the power and sustainability of memory in its various manifestations, not confined to historical violence and group trauma.

Cultural identity and its continuity in the presence of assimilation and dispersal are also manifested in ghosts in the narrative of Tan. In America, being a long distance away, Kwan cannot afford to forget her ancestors without losing her identity. It is her attempt to recover a fragmented cultural identity that revolves around these spectral presences. They maintain traditions, values, and beliefs that have been transferred throughout the generations, which bring a feeling of belonging, and there is continuity in the otherwise hostile environment. In these figures, memory maintains a relation between the past and the present to address the loss of identity that is usually created by the displacement of cultures under the conditions of the diaspora.

The hauntings, which Kwan undergoes, dissolve the line between memory, fantasy, and reality to form an active work between the real and the imagined. Innocent and naive, Olivia finds the events Kwan was taking part in rather unreasonable and incongruent with her own real-world perception. But with a change in the perception of Olivia, she slowly fades the strict distinction between the real and the imagined. This indistinctness is mirrored in the fact that

memory itself is indistinct and is influenced by emotion, imagination, and subjective interpretation. As Kwan says, “you can’t see ghosts with your eyes, only with your heart” (Tan 165). In that regard, it can be said that the ghosts that Kwan meets are symbolic illustrations of a psychological and emotional condition that is closely associated with her memory-making activity. Accepting the Yin world, Kwan defies traditional ideas of reality and establishes that memory does not have to be material, and it can exist in the supernatural.

In this story, *Ghosts in Tan* also connects the intimate and collective memory between the individual experience of Kwan and the history of her family and culture. This communication shows that memory is always being built and reimagined over time. The realization that Kwan believes in the Yin world is a gradual process that Olivia goes through, which is similar to her coming to terms with family roots and cultural past. Olivia learns to accept the ghosts and their contribution towards maintaining cultural memory, and in the process, she acknowledges memory as a group phenomenon. The border between the individual memory and social history gets even more permeable, influenced by the family ties, subjective experience, and continuous identity negotiation. Supernaturally, Tan introduces the concept of memory as a kind of shared consciousness that cannot be expressed on an individual level and creates links between the present and the past.

The use of supernatural memory is very important in ensuring emotional reconciliation in the relationship between Olivia and Kwan. At the start of the novel, Olivia is so unconvinced about the fact that Kwan believes in ghosts and the Yin world and calls it superstition, which are vestiges of a past that she does not understand. The emotional distance and alienation of her culture in her own memories of their common past is what causes her to not be able to connect with her sister. Later in the story, it is memory and the supernatural that haunt Olivia herself. As she increasingly becomes absorbed in the haunts that Kwan undergoes, she learns to acknowledge the fact that memories, especially those that have been informed by trauma, cannot just be forgotten. As Olivia herself reflects, “Maybe Kwan’s ghosts are just memories, and memories are often truer than facts” (Tan 261), signalling her shift toward embracing memory as a powerful and valid form of emotional truth.

The supernatural memory enables Olivia to re-evaluate her relationship with Kwan and enables emotional reconciliation between them. Olivia starts to unravel the suppressed or misguided memories through the narration of ghostly experiences by Kwan. The supernatural is, therefore, a healing ground that allows Olivia to face the issue of emotional distance and misunderstanding. The ghosts not only serve as memory vehicles; they also serve as agents that express kinship and cultural affiliation. Tan observes through spectator narration that emotional connections can be rekindled with the help of memory, especially when it is free to act outside of its rational limitations.

*The Hundred Secret Senses* is filled with the emotional power of spectral memories by Kwan of Olivia. At first, Olivia is unemotional and cold towards Kwan and his faith in ghosts and the Yin world. The memories of Kwan are perceived as fictions and not valuable manifestations of lived experience. Gradually, though, there is a major shift in the emotional viewpoint of Olivia. The ghosts that feature in the stories that Kwan wrote are the result of grief, loss, and intergenerational trauma. Such stories make Olivia address her unresolved feelings in terms of familial background, cultural identity, and the relationship with Kwan. As Olivia reflects, “I used to think Kwan’s stories were just weird lies, but now I wonder if maybe she was trying to tell me important things in the only way she knew how” (Tan 321).

The emotional dimension of the memories of Kwan is more evident as the behaviour of Olivia towards the ghosts transforms. The symbolic expression of grief, guilt, and displacement is brought into light in what used to seem like a fantasy. These ghost memories bring Olivia further into the involvement in her own emotional traumas and allow her to acknowledge the presence of pain and hidden grief. In doing so, Olivia is emotionally reborn, which shows that the trauma of the past remains an influence in the relationships of the present. The novel, therefore, unveils the reverberating effect of memory, especially the traumatic memory, across time to change emotional territories.

Finally, memory is a form of healing and reconciliation for both of the sisters. Their relationship, which was broken due to cultural misunderstanding and emotional barriers, starts to be fixed when Olivia comes to know about the memories and feelings Kwan had. The ghosts that Kwan is meeting are not some tricks but the tools of healing that help her to face her internal trauma and to explain what has happened to her. When Kwan shares these memories with Olivia, she gives way to emotional understanding and mutual recognition. Olivia recalls how Kwan showed her how to see ghosts, a method by which she not only started seeing the past, the sadness, and the joy, but also everything that had made her and her sister one. As Olivia realizes, “Kwan taught me to see ghosts, and this way I began to see the past, the sadness, the joy, everything that made us sisters” (Tan 348). Tan uses the memory and the supernatural narration to confirm that reconciliation and healing can be found when one accepts the emotional truths of the past.

The process of reminiscence makes the emotional context between the sisters denser with the burden of their mutual past and, therefore, a healing process. Their memory is not easily given back, as remembering is a difficult process for both sisters, as it retrieves memories that have been long forgotten. The deeper emotional bond between Olivia and Kwan is made possible by the development of recognition of the latter and her gradual readiness to interact with the former. The sisters have to face issues of abandonment, grief, and resentment by going back to the trauma and loss in their family history. In the context of the present research, memory can be seen as a mechanism that breaks the emotional wall, step-by-step, allowing mutual understanding and further healing and reconciliation.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, remembering is also a way of fighting against the erasing of family and cultural history. Assimilation and displacement are major threats to the cultural memory, especially in the Chinese American experience, which is an issue that the novel addresses in great detail. Spectral memories of Kwan help retain a crucial link with the past and act as a cultural resistance against the rejection of history and its cultural eradication. The ghosts and the Yin world offer a platform where stories and values will survive even amidst the strains of marginalization by the mainstream society. In the case of Kwan, remembering is not limited to the individual but is also a political movement. She is attached to her past, and by doing this, she is defying the dominant forces of the culture, which attempt to deny her identity and history. This memory helps her to assert cultural independence and allows her to hold on to ancestral memory and hand it over to Olivia. You can forget, but I cannot, as Kwan says. I am the rememberer" (Tan, 145).

The term "memory" is also a way of confronting how marginal Chinese American experiences are to the whole picture of Americans. As time passes, Olivia learns to see the importance of Kwan and her memories and comprehends that recalling the past together that they share is not just personal therapy but also resistance to erasing the culture. The spectral memories evoked by Kwan reflect Tan's view on how memory can be used to maintain cultural identity so that the marginalized histories are not erased by history. By doing so, *The Hundred Secret Senses* places the idea of memory as a resistance to assimilation and normalization as an essential aspect of cultural continuity and resistance to historical amnesia.

Guilt, grief, and trauma are also the issues of memory that are addressed to provide the key emotional power within the novel. These spectral memories of Kwan are highly connected to loss and displacement. Her ghosts are a representation of unresolved trauma and are the manifestation of the sadness she has due to family separation and migration. These are supernatural characters who open up the possibilities of Kwan addressing her past and emotional wounds that define who she is. The act of remembering is a mechanism that causes her guilt and grief, especially in regard to abandonment and separation from her family. When Kwan thinks of how she might die, she is not sure when; she says, "Maybe I die at the wrong time, come back at the wrong time, still carrying the wrong sadness" (Tan, 78). Kwan uses these spectral memories to heal through his pain and attain some emotional release and reconciliation.

The same experience with Olivia is that of guilt and grief, especially when it comes to her strained relationship with Kwan. Her initial distrust of what Kwan believes about ghosts can be seen as a kind of emotional avoidance, protecting her against having to deal with the past. Slowly, but surely, as Olivia begins to be more open to the memories of Kwan and the emotional appeal that they hold over her, she can see how they contribute to her personal healing. Recalling allows Olivia to deal with her guilt about leaving Kwan behind and not comprehending her emotional needs. Through reliving the memories of Kwan, Olivia starts to grieve and feel guilty herself. In such a manner, the memory serves as the source of healing for the previously repressed emotional trauma and reflects on the emotional development of the two sisters, which enables them to face and cope with personal trauma and family trauma.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Tan employs the intersection of memory, reconciliation, and the supernatural to address the question of diasporic identity in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. The novel introduces ghosts as literal and metaphorical power in which the characters have to face and deal with the origins of trauma. Tan shows that memory is a very powerful healing and reconciliation tool that can be used to heal the feelings and emotions of people through the appearance of specters. This process is central to the growth of Kwan and Olivia, who come to terms with psychological traumas due to intergenerational trauma and cultural dislocation that their situation has exerted. In the story by Tan, memory is a practice at an individual level and a communal one, which connects the generations of the past with the present.

The supernatural world created by Tan in the novel is a point of entry into a different way of defining diasporic identities. Using the process of animation about ghosts in the story, Tan implies that cultural memory is not fixed but

instead shifting and moving continually, and, hence, determining and defining the identity of the people who absorb the cultural memory. These ghosts are not the shadows of the past but living beings that help characters, especially Kwan and Olivia, to find and accept their roots. This paranormal structure questions Western closed ideologies, which shows that diasporic identities are always renegotiated and influenced by the interplay of the past and the present.

Memories and the idea of ghosts in the story of Tan are not merely literary devices but working tools in creating emotional and cultural healing. The most important connection between Kwan and Olivia is through memory, although the two people have contrasting views about the past. Ghosts represent the emotional and cultural traumas in the family, as well as marking the way of reconciliation. Their experiences with the supernatural are what enable the sisters to recognize their common past, family ties, and ambivalent attitude towards cultural heritage. The supernatural act of remembering and reconciliation helps to underscore the need to face and accept the past to achieve emotional growth.

The topics of memory, trauma, and the supernatural also offer important opportunities in the future of literary research, specifically in the writings of diaspora and postcolonialism. The critical possibilities presented by the supernatural in the work of building cultural identity and emotional stability are abundant, particularly when migration, displacement, and legacies of colonial histories are the subject matter of the work. The potential of supernatural storytelling as a form of collective trauma processing in different cultures can be further developed, which can hopefully reveal more about how literature bears the manifestation, the maintenance, and the healing of historical and cultural trauma.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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