



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3., 2017 (July-Sept.)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE GOLDEN LOTUS: FOOT BINDING IN LISA SEE'S
SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN

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ABSTRACT

Beauvoir's famous words, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman," (293) justifies that patriarchy maneuvers in taking advantage of sexual difference to condition women to remain silent and submissive. In a rigid patriarchal society women adheres to the norms set by men and women gradually ingrained the stereotypical roles. Foot binding in China was practiced for centuries till it was finally banned in 1949 when the communists came to power. Bound feet were regarded as an embodiment of extreme beauty and epitomized wealth and prosperity in a Chinese society. "Golden-Lotus" which is 3 inch long (7 centimeters) is the ideal length of bound feet. The Chinese women had to undergo immeasurable pain during the process of foot binding. This paper is an attempt to present a vivid episode of marginalized subaltern Chinese women encountering physical violence and trauma in Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*.

Key words: foot binding, marginalization, subaltern, violence and trauma.

During the powerful Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) Confucianism was adopted as the regime's state doctrine and China thereby maintained a male dominated patriarchal society. Confucian principles were strictly adopted and the Chinese lives were considerably impacted by Confucius teachings. According to the Confucian order of society, women irrespective of age had to occupy a position lower than men. In a rigidly formed and tradition bound society, the Chinese women had to comply with stringent rules which were made just to meet the male demands. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279), Confucian scholars further perpetuated the patriarchal traditions and enforced more restrictions and rules for Chinese women, including foot binding for young girls. Pamela Tan observes:

"New ideas of the Song period did not improve women's lot. It was during this period that the cruel practice of foot-binding began. The rules of marriage were rigid. They stated that the duties of a wife were only to have children, care for parents-in-law, and do household chores." (24)

Confucian teachings framed the ideologies of Chinese society and women were taught to be submissive and oppressed. The Chinese women were instructed to remain obedient to her father before marriage and comply with her husband after marriage and later listen to her son.

Foot binding also known as 'Lotus Feet' was a cultural practice that was not only physically violent but crippled the Chinese women to the core. Bound feet were regarded as an embodiment of extreme beauty and

epitomized wealth and prosperity in a Chinese society. Chinese women had to undergo immeasurable pain during the process of foot binding. Foot binding involved mutilation of the feet, toes were broken and tightly crushed against the sole of the foot. The process of foot binding is agonizing and traumatic. In Chinese society, bound foot was reckoned to be exquisite and had sexual connotation as it was arousing for men. Walking on bound feet necessitated bending the knees slightly and swaying to maintain proper movement and posture, this dainty walk appeared erotic to men. Susan M. Greenhalgh considers this practice as, 'The most brutal symbol of the subjugation of Chinese women.' (1) Chinese women become the 'subjected underclass,' a marginalized subaltern as the dominant Chinese men exert their hegemonic power. In a male dominated society men fabricate societal norms which are advantageous to men and disadvantageous to women. In *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir maintained that men are capable to mystify women. This mystification and stereotyping made women acquiesced their predetermined role in a society. According to her there is no 'essence' of woman as such but is constructed and fabricated by men and society. Beauvoir famous words, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman," (293) justifies that patriarchy maneuvers in taking advantage of sexual difference to condition women to remain silent and submissive. In a rigid patriarchal society the women adheres to the norms set by men and women gradually ingrained the stereotypical roles. Chinese women with their bound feet remained within the four walls of the house doing household chores and they had no liberty to move out freely like the Chinese men. The gruesome practice of the foot binding crippled the Chinese women physically and they could not move fast or run nor could they participate in works outside their homes. Lisa See brilliantly captures the episodes of foot binding and the plight of marginalized Chinese women in China.

Chinese women as a gendered subaltern have remained in the margins through ages. In China women were regarded essentially different from men and were believed to occupy a lower position than men in a hierarchical order. The marginalized subaltern women spent their lives being subservient to the men in their families. Through the character of Snow Flower and Lily See provides a memorable gallery of Chinese women's experience in a conservative Chinese society. When Lily turned six she realized it was time that she prepares herself for marriage and it started with foot binding. Poor families in the Chinese society had their daughter's feet bound with the prospect of marrying their daughter to a wealthy family. A bound foot was in fact considered prerequisite to marriage and it was passed down from one generation to another. Lily belonged to a poor family and the only way to good fortune was marrying her into a prosperous family. At the tender age of six Lily was preparing physically and mentally for foot binding. Through the words of Lily we can comprehend the agony and trauma of foot binding:

"Tears coursed down my face as Mama led me back and forth across the women's chamber. I heard myself whimpering...We three girls were nearly paralyzed from our physical torment, yet our trial had barely begun. Even with empty stomachs, we vomited out our agony...But as the hours passed a new kind of suffering overtook us. Our feet burned as though they lay among coals of brazier. Strange mewling sounds escaped from our mouths."(See 35)

The Chinese women not only endured physical violence but the episode of foot binding was also a traumatic one. In the novel we come to know that Lily's third sister loses her life as she could not endure the pain. Many young girls in China lost their lives to foot binding as the process was extremely agonizing.

From many generations the notion of women's inferiority and that of men's superiority has gradually become so deeply ingrained in Chinese society and culture. Pertaining to this belief the Chinese women easily accepted their 'men-ordained' roles. The Chinese women with their bound feet maintained a reclusive life and spend most their time in women's chamber knitting, sewing, embroidering and making shoes. This is well illustrated in the novel; Lily receives training from her mother and grandmother in the women's chamber where she learns shoe making for her future mother-in-law. Snow Flower belonged to a wealthy family unlike Lily, yet she ended marrying a butcher. Lily's perfectly bound 3 inch foot or 'Golden Lotus' managed her to get a rich suitor while Snow Flower unsightly larger bound feet directed her towards poverty and adverse life. This exhibits how foot binding decides the fate of a Chinese woman. While Chinese men had no custom as such, they even had the liberty to take new wife or concubine if his wife fails to give a son.

In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* both Lily and Snow Flower encounters various degrees of violence and psychological transformation. The experience of foot binding which is extreme physical violence is also traumatic. In Lily and Snow Flower's life we unearth various traumatic events that engulf their psyche which leaves them devastated for the rest of their lives. Pain and trauma becomes inseparable part of their memory. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) elaborates the term 'trauma theory' through the discussion on Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where he unfolds the pattern of pain and suffering which are, "...inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals. Perplexed by the terrifying nightmares of battlefield survivors, the repetitive re-enactments..." (Caruth-1) Lily repeatedly recalls the painful memories of her foot binding, how she had to walk repeatedly in spite of much pain to break the toe bones. Her mother words kept echoing, "Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you find peace. I wrap, I bind, but you will have the reward," (38) and Lily continued enduring the pain.

Foot binding is nonetheless the code and ideology of the feudal system, a symbol of the patriarchal oppression of the Chinese women. This article is an attempt to delve into the practice of foot binding and the experience of marginalized Chinese women. The concept of beauty rested on the idea of tolerating pain and Chinese women in order to achieve a perfect bound '*Golden Lotus*' endured immeasurable pain. To attain the three-inch beauty Chinese women had to mutilate their feet. In a domain of strict patriarchal and patrilineal Chinese society women had to abide by the rules set by the head of the family. The dominance of the male member in the household was so strong that the woman had no right whatsoever to retaliate. A Chinese woman had no liberty to choose a life partner this power was absolutely vested on the father. Therefore, Chinese women became a marginalized subaltern with no power to voice their feelings and desires.

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