

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DISCRIMINATION OF WOMEN IN LISA SEE'S *SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN*

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination means the practice of treating one group in society in an unfair way. Discrimination exists even nowadays. Gender discrimination often happens to women because they are born as women. Men keep discriminating women because they keep assuming that they are the ones who have the power over women. There is a taboo that women's positions are under men.

Lisa See is a Chinese American writer who emphasizes gender discrimination in her novels. Her *Snow Flower and The Secret Fan* is a good example of gender discrimination. See portrays the discriminations through the two female characters, Lily and Snow flower who are best friends. The two female characters are the representatives of women who get unfair treatment in the nineteenth century at China. At eighty, Lily explains her actions to her ancestors, her husband and Snow Flower. Her story reeks of misery from the hideous cruelty of her foot-binding at seven. It brings out how girls are paired with laotong old sames that has lasted throughout their lives. The novel brings the life expectancy of women, how women who have three brothers are not allowed to marry, how the widow is treated like a sinner and how women are not treated as equals, but as useless branches.

Lisa See has depicted not only life but an entire culture in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. This is a completely convincing portrayal of a woman who has been shaped by sufferings. The friendship helps her to survive the ways of struggle against the gender discrimination to reach her self-identity.

Discrimination means the practice of treating one group in society in an unfair way (LD384). The causes of the discrimination are various. Discrimination exist nowadays even in countries where freedom is believed strongly. In this democratic world, people still discriminate others. Gender discrimination often happens to women because they were born as women. Men keep discriminating women because they keep assuming that they are the ones who have the power over women. There is a taboo that women's positions are under men.

Maya Angelou, Khaled Hosseini, L.H. Anderson, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have used the theme of discrimination in their novels. Lisa See is a Chinese American writer who emphasizes gender discrimination in her novels. Her *Snow Flower and The Secret Fan* is a good example of gender discrimination. See portrays the discriminations through the two female characters namely Lily and Snow flower who are best friends.

The two female characters are the representatives of women who get unfair treatment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at China. The novel begins when Lily is eighty years old. It brings out the story of her life from birth, childhood, marriage and old age. At eighty, she explains her actions to her ancestors, her husband and Snow Flower. Her story reeks of misery from the hideous cruelty of her foot-binding at seven. "Lily's mother tells her over and over; only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you have peace" (SF38).

The women prepare sweets, enjoy with songs. They wash their feet and rub with alum. They cut the nails and wrap the bandages on their feet tightly. The feet ache as the pressure on their bones build. The tightness of the bindings block the blood's circulation. The tears run down her cheeks because of the pain. The women ask Lily and Snow Flower to walk till their bones break on fourth day. They ask them to soak their legs into the water and remove the bandages and dead cells on their skin. The women do not listen to their pain. To witness the cruelty of binding feet is heartrending. "For us, the pain didn't lessen. How could it? But we learned the most important lesson for all women: that we must obey for our own good." (SF29)

Lily is haunted by the memories of Snow Flower. They are friends closer than husband and wife. She recounts the tale of Snow Flower and asks the gods for forgiveness. In nineteenth-century China, when wives and daughters are foot-bound live in total seclusion. The women in remote Hunan Country develop their own secret code for communication, Nu Shu. Some girls are paired with laotong old sames that last throughout their lives. They paint letters on fans, embroidered messages on handkerchiefs and compose stories. Laotong relationship is meant to be an emotional connection. In Old China, the rules of society keep men and women in separate spheres. They are not able to get emotionally connected. They reach out of their isolation to share their hopes, dreams and accomplishments. "a laotong relationship is made by choice...when we first looked in each other's eyes in the palanquin I felt something special pass between us--like a spark to start a fire or a seed to grow rice. But a single spark is not enough to warm a room nor is a single seed enough to grow a fruitful crop. Deep love--true-heart love--must grow." (SF57).

Lily's aunt describes a laotong match this way: "A laotong relationship is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity. A marriage is not made by choice and has only one purpose - to have sons" (SF57).

Snow Flower has composed for Lily a poem of introduction in Nu Shu on the silk fan. Their friendship begins and they have become old sames at the tender age of seven. As the years pass, through feminine and rebellion, they reflect upon their arranged marriages, loneliness, the joys and tragedies of motherhood. The two found solace developing a bond that kept their spirits alive. But when a misunderstanding arises, their lifelong friendship suddenly threatens to tear apart. "And in our local dialect, the word for wife is the same as the word for guest. For the rest of my life I would be merely a guest in my husband's home not the kind you treat with special meals, gifts of affection, or soft beds, but the kind who is forever viewed as a foreigner, alien and suspect." (SF112)

Lily with a practical turn of mind is born for a relatively lower class parents. She can marry much higher than her social station into a rich family because her feet is small and beautiful. She bears three sons and one daughter considers auspicious for women in China at the time because after bearing only one son, the woman moves into the powerful role of matriarch.

Young Snow Flower is a dreamer. Born of wealthy parents who have misfortune, she marries a butcher. It is socially considered a very poor position. Her life is miserable. She is beaten by her husband. Lily recites, "He proceeded to beat her so badly that she miscarried in a violent gush of black blood that stained the icy slopes throughout our campsite." (SF 207) She has lost her children. The paranoid Lily is suspicious that Snow Flower has betrayed her trust. She reveals her sisterly secrets to a group of women. It destroys the woman's image in public. It is a horrifying thing in Chinese society. Lily tends to Snow Flower as she dies.

It is interesting to see how Aunt Wang, the matchmaker keeps her independence in a world of men. To see the rise of Lily into Lady Lu and the downfall of Snow Flower into the butcher's wife do not make sense from a western perspective. Lisa See explains the social structure so well. She makes us understand that how this happens. It is horrifying that women are in this repressive society and powerless to do. The varieties of

women's personalities are described by the Chinese zodiac. The monkey mother is conniving. The rat mother-in-law is selfish and the horse women need freedom and to guide their partners.

You married out," Mama said, in a way that seemed oddly detached. "You go to another village. Your mother-in-law is cruel. Your husband doesn't care for you. We wish you would never leave, but every daughter marries away. Everyone agrees. Everyone goes along with it. You can cry and beg to come home, we can grieve that you have gone, but you and we have no choice. The old saying makes this very clear: 'if a daughter doesn't marry out, she's not valuable; if fire doesn't raze the mountain, the land will not be fertile.(SF 79)

In China, women who have three brothers are not allowed to marry. But the brothers all have wives. They go to garden and hang because their brothers will not offer dowry. Lily's mother says "She's so miserable, she goes to the garden and hangs herself from a tree" (SF 49). Even the brothers do not want to care for her body though she has been virtuous and hard working. Her brothers will not serve her.

The eldest brother walks through the garden and pretends not to see her. The second brother walks through the garden and pretends not to see that she's dead. The third brother sees her, bursts into tears, and takes her body inside. A woman once had three brothers. When she died, no one wanted to care for her body. Though she had been virtuous and hardworking, her brothers would not serve her. How cruel this was! What would happen? (SF 49)

Chinese insistence on sons has saturated every page of this book and every day of these women's lives. They are confined to upstairs chambers in their fathers' homes and their husbands. Lily and Snow Flower must find a way to cultivate their bond.

The novel brings the life expectancy of women. Lily quotes, "I was thirty-three-year-old. I would be lucky to live another seven years, luckier still to get to seventeen" (SF 222). The life expectancy is so young. In America, the life expectancy is eighty-one. That's a huge difference as to forty. Then again on the age, Lily groans, "I am now too old to use my hands to cook, weave, or embroider...I have lived too long" (SF 247). To have lived long is a sad statement. Snow Flower feels that when they become older years become longer and body becomes weaker. It seems living too long in China is sitting quietly with no one left and nothing to live for.

This novel talks about the role of family life. Snow Flower argues, "As girls we are raised as useless branches. We may love our families, but we are not with them for long. We marry out into villages we do not know, into families, we do not know, to men we do not know." (SF 228-229).

In this novel, the widow is treated like a sinner. The widow who has children is forced to commit suicide. If a wife dies, the man can marry another woman and live happily. The widow is not allowed to marry again. She is treated as an untouchable person in the world. They cannot come out. If they come, they will suffer from harsh words.

Women are here to do the dirty work. They aren't supposed to be known to their families. They don't know the men or anything about their way of life. In our country, men, woman, children, adults all know each other. The role of men and woman are equal. But in this case, women are not treated as equals but as useless branches.

*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is an amazing book to read. Lisa See has depicted not only life but an entire culture. This is a completely convincing portrayal of a woman who has been shaped by sufferings. The friendship helps her to survive the ways of struggle against the gender discrimination to reach her self-identity.

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