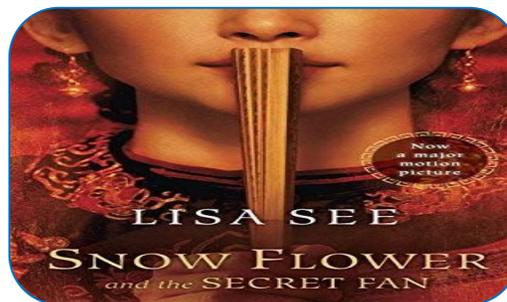




## PAINTING A WOMEN'S WORLD IN LISA SEE'S *SNOWFLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN*

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### ABSTRACT:

*The disadvantaged position of women in society has always been asserted by some philosophical interpretation. Women's inferior status has been construed based on the argument that both men and women are essentially different and this contrast determines the lower status of the female sex. Whether western or eastern, philosophers and their teachings have most often been antagonistic to 'the second sex'. Confucianism proved to be one such constraining religious doctrine for women. As inspired by the teachings of Confucius, Chinese men discussed gender in terms of yin and yang: women were yin i.e. soft and submissive whereas men were yang, who were tough and dominating. This conceptualization of differences between men and women naturalised the gender roles and the artificially created social relations. This paper attempts to examine how the Chinese-American writer Lisa See successfully draws the picture of imperial China and the oppressed state of women there. See not only endeavours a realistic portrayal of the sorrowful history of women but also tries to bring forth the mysterious realms of female friendships and their resistance to the imperious men around them.*

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese-American novel, laotong, nu shu, woman effect, women's world, philosophy.

### INTRODUCTION

If Men are from Mars and Women from Venus does Earth endorse the superiority of Mars over Venus? Before pondering over this 'planetological' perturbation let us consider a few transcendental 'visions' of the so-called scholars and prophets, which for a long time led to the overarching conclusion that women are inferior to men in all respects.

"Woman's greatest duty is to produce a son." (Damien, "Sexism in Confucianism")

"Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness." (Damien, "Sexism in Confucianism")

"A woman should look on her husband as if he were Heaven itself, and never weary of thinking how she may yield to him." (Damien, "Sexism in Confucianism")

Believed to be the true definitions of women, these Confucian and Neo-Confucian thoughts ruled the Chinese mainland for centuries. Philosophy became a platform for legitimizing male superiority in a socially acceptable way and thereby made life more difficult and empty for women. The Chinese-American writer Lisa See in her novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* fictionalize this hard endured, 'worthless' lives of nineteenth-century Chinese women and reconfigures the general presumption of women as rationally inferior beings. See establishes a women's world in her novel, pervaded by the sufferings and torments of the female populace of China, a few centuries back. This work purports to analyze how See creates a remarkable woman effect in the novel: by depicting both the hardships of

female survival and also the revolutionary female voices that faded away unheard and unknown but still leaving behind a mark.

### THE CONFINING WORLD OF A WOMAN IN *SNOWFLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN*

Creating the woman effect in a scenario where women were socially and culturally made invisible by intellectual imperatives becomes the central concern in the novel. This is achieved by narrating the story through the experiences and life of the protagonist Lily, and also by depicting the deep bonding between the *laotongs* (friends for life): Snow Flower and Lily, the narrator. In this sense, it is a female Bildungsroman that chronicles not only the development of Lily but also the growth of intimate friendship between two *laotong* sisters.

Lily's world is the constricted world of women, without much knowledge about the outer realm. The misery of this world looms over as identity crisis, the troubles, and misfortunes of the 'beauty myth' and also the extreme objectification of women that pushed the female world to a doomed state. 'Identity' confiscated all dreams and aspirations of a woman by imposing a set behavioral pattern: both in her natal and husband's family. The prescribed identity facilitated only one privilege: to bear heirs. To be the 'son-bearers' was the greatest achievement that accorded some power to a woman. Lily is only too aware of this when she reveals: "Sons are the foundation of a woman's self. They give a woman her identity, as well as dignity, protection and economic value." (151)

A son defined woman's identity to an extent that the misfortune of not mothering an heir turned out to be a real catastrophe for a woman. What complicated it more was that women themselves (as mothers and mothers-in-law) perpetuated this impairing practice of injustice. This imposed gender role was worsened by the theological understandings of the time. China, who was a devoted follower of Confucianism in the early centuries, strictly imprisoned women's world. With a limiting religion Confucianism is, the philosophies enchained the already restricted world of women that was diminished to the squeaking and quibbling of the upstairs parlor. *The Women's Classic*, which See confirms as the Confucian instructional guide, imposes certain rules over wives which resonate through Lily's words:

I also understood that two Confucian ideals ruled our lives. The first was the Three Obediences: "When a girl, obey your father; when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son." The second was the Four Virtues, which delineate women's behavior, speech, carriage, and occupation: "Be chaste and yielding, calm and upright in attitude; be quiet and agreeable in words; be restrained and exquisite in movement; be perfect in handiwork and embroidery." If girls do not stray from these principles, they will grow into virtuous women. (24)

Together, culture, religion, and politics controlled by men, restricted women in every possible way; either by directly constricting or by regulating through religious manifestos or scriptural codes of conducts (a divine intervention only for women!). The deprived life of the upper chamber—'nei' repressed even the little interest that women showed in the 'men's realm'. "A woman was always suppressed from entering the realm of outer world ('wai')". (174). In the novel See marks episodic representation of men's effort to quieten and annihilate any interest that women display in the outer realm of men. Once when Lily clarified her doubts about the Taipings with her husband, his immediate reaction was to condemn: "A wife should always worry about her children and making her family happy....And I did not say another word about the outer realm." (174) This vicious cultural circle enchained women to inescapable enslavement. See here is disapprovingly critical of dominating women's intellect whether it is the way described in the novel or the way it happens today—prejudiced mystique broadcast by agents of education and social sciences.

If social control over women meant domineering them intellectually and spiritually, familial authority involved physical domination and abuse. Snow Flower is a victim of this constant physical torture. Her husband beats her up to an extent where it results in a miscarriage. The worst part is that, as See illustrates, women were taught to accept it as a part of men's right or women's fate. See leaves it for the reader to examine, the harsh realities of a woman's life whether in the past or in the present.

Apart from the misread identity, another major issue that Lisa See extrapolates in the novel is unreasonable importance given to the beauty aspect of a woman and her objectification that leads to a life long suffering for women. The most prominent repercussion of this beauty obsession was the agonizing and fatal practice of foot binding. See dedicates the first few chapters in the section "Daughter Days" of the novel, to expound the traumatic and ill-fated experience of Foot binding. Most girls like Lily, succumbed to it only for the reason of being obedient—the ideal characteristic for their sex (11) and also to gain approval from the family (own and husband's). Lily's words clarify this: "...I tried to fulfill their expectations for me—to attain the smallest bound feet in the county—so let my bones be broken and molded into a better shape." (11)

As Ho explains Foot binding is an extremely problematic metaphor for ethnic feminism (Ho 53). It is no more than the violation of a woman's body or to a greater extent it is blatant child abuse. The extreme problematic process of Foot binding was blindly consumed for generations for reason that women accepted it as a standard for beauty and believed that the natural size of their feet evoked contempt. Lily's mother's justification was the misbelieved truth for most women: "A true lady gets no ugliness into her life. Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you find peace." (30)

Evils of Foot bonding extended to the commodification of women and reducing the value of a woman as to only a marriageable property and devaluing any worth of the life itself. In the chapter "Foot Binding", when Lily's mother helplessly tries to rescue the third daughter, the aunt warns: "Many of her bones have already broken. If you don't bind them, they will never heal properly. She'll be crippled. Unmarriageable." (32). The mother's resolution to save the girl: "I would rather keep her on earth unmarried than lose her forever" (32) is further disapproved by the aunt's reasoning: "Then she would have no purpose and no value, Your mother love tells you this is no future." (32)

See deeply despises this kind of 'thingification' of women and reducing their worth to that of child bearers. She crudely argues that women can be truly emancipated only with the realization that the societal notions of beauty poison our freedom and "it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control" (Wolf, 10). See is in line with Wolf's argument that Beauty is only a myth that is a violent backlash against women.

### CREATING THE WOMAN EFFECT

Lisa See's novel is not only a canvas for representing women's helpless submission to the patriarchal exploitation but also a space for immortalizing the revolutionary spirit that some women exhibited, even as two centuries back, to step out of the imposed 'nei'. All the efforts for free self expression found meaning in the *nu shu* writing of Chinese women, which was a secret woman's code. *Nu shu* was the expression of the unspoken female words. Lily herself believed the writing was her struggle against her suppression: "My only rebellion came in the form of *nu shu*, our women's secret writing." (3)

Writing, as See exclaims in the novel, is the best way to express a woman's true self and it's only through self-expression that women can free themselves. Therefore *nu shu* according to See is the symbol of the high spiritedness of women of the time and also the symbol of courage that these women passed down to the future generations to fight. To many critics, *nu shu* writing is also an extrapolator of ecofeminist concerns.

The creation and use of the women's language demonstrate Chinese women's wisdom and creativity and the way in which they actively contribute to their own empowerment and the enrichment of Chinese culture. The *nu shu* phenomenon, some Chinese scholars believe, confirms ecofeminism's rejection of androcentrism and anthropocentrism and values a harmonious relationship between human and nature in which the marginalized, from rural women to abused elements of nature, could be treated equally and kindly.(qtd. in Li 47)

However self-powering the script is, the writing itself was subject to criticism and disapproval by men with the accusation of imitation. See responds to this calmly yet strongly in the novel through Lily's voice: "Men just considered our writing beneath them...Men wrote about the outer realm of

literature, accounts, and copy yields; women wrote about the inner realm of children, daily chores and emotions." (153). The fact that women did not enjoy the freedom of knowing the happenings of the outer realm justifies this; after all who standardizes the subjects of literature? Or what is wrong with writing about the immediate experiences of a woman? Lily also confirms that *nu shu* was never an imitation of men's writing:

But Yuxiu( the woman who began the tradition of *nu shu* writing according to the novel)was not trying to copy men's writing. She was changing it, slanting it, feminizing it, and eventually creating entirely new characters that had little or nothing to do with men's writing.(70)

Women's voice was heard for the first time through the *nu shu* writing. See launches *nu shu* as the result of and a boosting force behind women's struggle for independence and claiming their space. Therefore it wouldn't be wrong to estimate the novel as a record of the beginning of Chinese women finding their space through their secret *nu shu* that gave them the fuel to fly high.

## CONCLUSION

The novel is not just an account of the restricted life of Chinese women of the past. It entails universal women's struggle, for See does not merely project the resistance of Chinese female population but the quietened struggle of women across the world during times of political disharmony or socio-cultural revolutions. The real positive woman effect that See creates is by not by lashing out on the culture, tradition or institutions but by subtly, at the same time powerfully and impressionistically creating an impact on the reader's; by conceptualizing the extreme torments and sufferings of Chinese women of the nineteenth century and making it universal. A woman still suffers the crisis of selfhood between what she aspires to become and the familial and cultural roles imposed on her. The beauty myth is always the most immediate reality. In the modern world, with an outburst of social media and many different forms of entertainment, women are endlessly commoditized and sold. The most effective and powerful weapon of women's struggle is her pen. Women's voices reach out the most through her writings, not without criticism of imitation and lack of depth of the theme. This accusation itself is a backlash to weaken women's struggle. Therefore the world that See creates in her novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is a reversed extension of women's condition today in culturally and historically different terms.

To logically conclude, Mars is Mars and Venus is Venus, and Earth beholds the struggle for this acceptance. For only with this recognition comes equality, and not with the blasphemy that Venus is mutilated Mars. After all, how can Venus ever be Mars or vice versa? The often forgotten truth is that the Universe will not be complete without both Mars and Venus! Lisa See in the novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* tries to emphasize this reality. She does so by questioning the inferior status of women in imperial China and by counteracting the established intellectual dormancy of womanhood by reciting instances of resistance through creative battle.

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