

Structures of Dominance and Oppression in Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls*

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Abstract

Lisa See is a Chinese American writer who gives a realistic picture of the state of Chinese women in her novels. Her novel *Shanghai Girls* (2009) has two sisters, Pearl and May as its protagonists, who go through great pain and suffering in patriarchal China, leave war-torn Shanghai, and try to change themselves to the difficult roles of wives in arranged marriages and as Chinese immigrants in the U.S. This paper bring out the patriarchal practices that were prevalent in China like of foot-binding, women being sold out in the name of marriage, gender-discrimination and women as victims of violence, as seen in the novel.

Key terms: patriarchy, foot-binding, gender-discrimination, doctrines

Patriarchy refers to the supremacy of male both in public and private spheres. In *Theorizing Patriarchy*, patriarchy is defined as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 20). Patriarchy is a system that is developed in society according to which men are considered superior to women, and men have a tendency to dominate, control and suppress women. China is the nation which has more than five thousand-year history is basically a patriarchal nation. Some traditions started since the very beginning in history still can be found in the twenty-first century Chinese society. Patriarchy is one among those traditions. Almost every dynasty in China is ruled by male and upholds a patriarchal society. This paper deals with the oppression of women under Chinese patriarchy that Lisa See brings out in her novel *Shanghai Girls*.

Lisa See is a Chinese American writer and novelist. She was born in Paris on February 18, 1955. Her mother Carolyn See is also a writer and novelist and her father Richard Edward is an anthropologist. Her Chinese American family brought a great impact on her life and work. Lisa See graduated with a B.A. degree from Loyola Marymount University in 1979. Her books include *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese –American Family* (1995), a detailed account of See’s family history and the novels *Flower Net* (1997), *The Interior* (1999), *Dragon Bones* (2003), *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), *Peony in Love* (2007), *Shanghai Girls* (2009). See completed a sequel for *Shanghai Girls* titled *Dreams of Joy* released in May 2011. Her novel *China Dolls* was published in 2014. Her latest novel *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* was published on 21 March 2017.

The subjugation of women has a deep-rooted history in China. In the patriarchal society of ancient China, the view that the men are superior to women was solid in the minds of the Chinese for thousands of years. Confucianism was like a system of social principles that ruled the lives of people in China. It had many doctrines. Women’s lives were ideally supposed to revolve around the *Three Obedience and Four Virtues* stated by the Chinese philosopher Confucius:

The Three Obedience enjoined a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband’s death. *The Four Virtues* decreed that she be chaste; her

conversation courteous and not gossipy; her department graceful but not extravagant; her leisure spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home. (Ling 133)

A traditional Chinese proverb states: “A woman without talent is a woman of virtue”. Women were deprived of education and they were restrained to the private-domestic sphere for a long time. They could only stay at home laboring at agriculture, weaving, cooking and washing, and they were not allowed to enter into society and employed in social activities. In old patriarchal China it was said that it was commercial to raise geese than daughters. Women were mostly treated as trading objects and reproduction tools and they should not only submit to her husband but also to their grown sons.

The male dominance was clearly associated with the practice of foot-binding. Women in China had to do foot-binding in order to get a better life. It was an obligation for Chinese women because it could bring them to the life’s perfection. As a critic notes, “In order to have women completely in its control and its disposal, the Confucian-dominated society also invented and forced upon women an odd and appalling concept of feminine physical beauty – the small bound feet” (Hong 22).

Foot-binding was a practice in which women’s feet were bound to fit in a three-inch long shoe called Lotus Shoes. It was originally a source of great pride and added prestige to a family. Instead of taking into consideration of one’s intelligence, face and body, size of the feet was the only standard to estimate a woman in Chinese society. The foot-binding began at the age of five and this course of action finished around the age of fifteen. Mothers in China bound their daughters’ feet when they were small, even though they exactly knew the pain of foot-binding as they had also experienced it. They did not have another alternative beside the same practice of foot binding to their daughters. The mothers were forcing their daughters to walk until the bones were broken. “Loving mothers suddenly turn into monsters that beat their sobbing girls with sticks and brooms, forcing them to hop around to speed up the rotting of flesh and make sure the bones are broken properly” (Ping 3).

By the continuation of the practice of foot-binding in Chinese society it was clear that the Confucian patriarchal society desired that the women should stay in the home

could be realized. Women were conscious of their gender inequality but they didn't have the courage to resist the patriarchal system. Simon de Beauvoir is quoted in Bressler's *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, as follows: "Women should have courage to break what all this time they believed that the position of women in the society was not born, but it was created by the society through the patriarchal system" (Bressler 182).

Marriage in China was a business deal or wife-selling, as a part of patriarchal culture. Arranged marriages reinforced the parental control over sons and especially, over daughters-in-law. The marriages were blind marriages arranged by the family heads in which neither the groom nor the bride had any voice. "Through marriage woman is now no longer lent from one clan to another. She is torn up by the roots from the group into which she was born, and annexed by her husband's group; he buys her as one buys a farm animal or a slave; he imposes his domestic divinities upon her; and the children born to her belong to the husband's family" (Beauvoir 82).

In See's *Shanghai Girls*, Pearl and May are the two beautiful girls whose images were on the posters which make the viewers buy the products. They condemned the superstitious and old world ways followed by their parents. Though the girls are beautiful, modern and have an untroubled life, everything was changed when their father informs them that he had gambled away all this wealth and to repay his debts, he must sell the girls as wives to suitors who had travelled from Los Angeles to find Chinese brides. Baba says: "I have arranged marriages for the two of you" (*Girls* 19). The girls obey their father's order and get married to the American sons of Old Man Louie, Sam and Vernon. However, they stay back in Shanghai. The Second Sino Japanese war commences and in a bomb blast May is wounded and her boy friend Tom loses his head and dies. The Green Gang gangsters often visit their home and persisted on them to go to America so that Louie can pay the debts of Baba. They threaten that they would take away his daughters so that they can indulge them in sexual practices.

Pearl's mama informs the soldiers that she would make all arrangements to send them to their husbands' house. Pearl says, "Mama is willing to ship us to America to cure my father's and her problems. But then isn't that the kind of thing Chinese parents have done with worthless daughters for thousands of years -- abandoned them, sold them, used

them?” (*Girls* 59). Pearl’s father leaves home and neglects his family. Mama takes all the necessary things, some money and joins with the refugees and they escape from Shanghai with their mother. Due to foot-binding, blisters are formed in the heels and toes of Pearl, May, and Mama and they have not brought any medicine or bandage. A wheelbarrow pusher takes them to a woman’s house and she offers them hot water, medicines and bandages.

The violence imposed on a woman’s body is portrayed by See in the novel. Japanese soldiers visit the house of the woman in which they stay. Mama tries to save her daughters by hiding the girls behind the wooden boards and orders Pearl not to come out of the room until she calls her. Pearl could hear her mother’s cries and anguish made by her mother in the next room. The screaming of her mother makes Pearl come out of the room and she sees her mother tortured by the Japanese soldiers. They beat her mother heavily and hit her with their boots in the bounded feet:

My mother’s beaten, but even her blood and her screams don’t stop the soldiers. They unwrap her feet, the binding swirling through the air like acrobats’ ribbons. Her feet look the color of a corpse gone cold -- bluish white with shades of green and purple beneath the crushed flesh. The soldiers pull and prod them. Then they stomp on her feet to try to bring them back into “normal” shape. Her cries are not those of foot-binding or childbirth. They’re the deep, anguished screams of an animal experiencing agony beyond comprehension. (*Girls* 74,75)

The Chinese women experience the cruel tradition of foot-binding when they are at the tender age, but when the soldiers torture Pearl’s mom she experiences a terrible pain. The surrounding is filled the smell of blood, mosquito incense and her mother’s exposed feet. Pearl’s mother’s life is sadly ended in that place while Pearl becomes unconscious. They repeatedly hear about women being abducted, raped and killed throughout China.

Yen-yen, Pearl’s mother-in-law, has also been a victim of patriarchal oppression. She was taken away from China at her age of five and she was sold as a servant in Canton. When she was thirteen years old, Yen-yen was bundled in a sack and was taken to America. She was a wife to many men and had sex too many times. She was

accompanied by many other Chinese women. Yen-yen was sold for cheap price and Old Man Louie bought her and brought her to San Francisco.

Gender discrimination is portrayed in the novel. Marriages in China were done to accomplish only one purpose which was to have sons. In a family, girls are children who are not expected to be born, because they are considered less valuable than boys and they marry to move away whereas boys would stay nearby and take care of their parents in old age. When Pearl and May reach San Francisco, they find that their in-laws are not happy with the baby because it is a girl: “You didn’t write that the child is a girl. You should have done that. We wouldn’t have prepared a banquet if we’d known” (*Girls* 129). It is the tradition in China to prepare banquet function for the neighbors if the baby is born as boy. Old Man continues to punish Pearl by ignoring her because she has a daughter. “A woman will be scolded by her mother-in-law until she produces a son, and she may even be divorced by her husband if she does not” (Kristof 228). Education is denied for women in China. When Joy is sent to school to have her education, her uncle Wilburt says, “Education is only trouble for a girl” (*Girls* 215).

Thus, this paper conveys the condition of women oppressed, dishonored and discriminated in a patriarchal society.

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