

**FOOTBINDING AND THE PAINFUL MEMORIES:
A STUDY OF LISA SEE'S *SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN***

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Abstract

Much has been written about the Chinese Confucian rhetoric underlining gender difference and hierarchy, inclusive of female subjugation and seclusion. From the earliest of times, women had been taught the Confucian Classics that cosmologically enshrined the most basic of equations- of yin and yang, of earth and heaven, of moon and sun and of day and night- with female and male. The articulation of Chinese women's experience is a challenge. Victims of the ideology of Confucianism and patriarchy, the marginalized Chinese women have resisted and battled against the manifold powers of dominance. It has been a journey where they have battered the confines of knowledge but also dismantled and deconstructed the fundamental image of womanhood and have relentlessly engaged in the reconstruction of the same.

Aspiring to recuperate women from the periphery to the centre, make the invisible experiences visible, give voice to the voiceless and change the degrading view of women, Lisa See has sought to recognize woman's voice in her narrative as a powerful mode of subversion against the rigid patriarchal society. This paper will explore traditional and modern ideas of the notion of gender, the juxtaposition of gender mobility and power which serves as a strategy to enhance the context of the gender power dynamics that the writer endeavors to bring forth through her narrative.

Keywords: Footbinding, Sisterhood, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Power.

Keep her barefoot and pregnant – an Old Chinese saying

The articulation of Chinese women's experience is a challenge. Irrespective of geographical borders, religion and cultural setting for many centuries, Chinese women have struggled and failed; been misunderstood, violated and marginalized. It has been a lasting journey where they have been victims of patriarchy, Confucianism and have resisted and battled the manifold powers of male dominance. Since Chinese society remains fundamentally rooted in highly gendered social and family roles, discrimination against women is therefore a part of the system of norms and values in a society that traditionally favours males.

Chinese women have been deformed, mutilated and bonded, not only to survive but also to satisfy the men erotically and sexually. One of the most painful ways in which women became bound to patriarchy was *footbinding*; a Chinese tradition that has been practiced for more than one thousand years, binding the feet of women. In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), Lisa See relives the painful and traumatic memories of *footbinding* and presents the condition of Chinese women inflicted by Confucianism, patriarchy and particularly the horrifying custom of *footbinding*. The narrative presents human suffering in myriad ways: the physical and psychological pain; the suffering and plight of Chinese women of the time, who were treated as an entity. The gruesome practice is nonetheless the code and ideology of the feudal system, a symbol of the patriarchal oppression of the Chinese women. Chinese women have been mystified by strongly propagating the oppressive patriarchal and Confucian ideologies endowed with strict religious, traditional customs and severe moral codes, and above all the unfortunate practice of footbinding. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) analyses the condition of American housewives suffering from "a problem that has no name." She provides a neoteric insight into the long-standing problem of domestic enslavement and censured that because of mystification, women are unable to resist the role of being a subjected domestic entity and gradually becomes satisfied within the walls of their homes. Women were regarded essentially different from men and were believed to occupy a lower position than men in a hierarchical order. (Friedan, 46) See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* exposes the marginalized subaltern women being subservient to the men in their families right from their childhood and confined to these repressions without a choice.

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. (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 29)

See exposes the concept of filial piety in a Chinese society where a father had total control over his children and a husband had complete domination over his wife. She reveals how these ideals have been deeply ingrained in the mindset of the women through her characters. Lily and her sisters had no choice but to be submissive, they could not escape nor hide from the clutches of the oppressive patriarchal society. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* provides a memorable gallery of Chinese women's experience who accepted their 'men-ordained' roles in spite of enduring physical violence and maintained a reclusive life spending most their time in the women's chamber knitting, sewing, embroidering and making shoes:

I knew I would spend almost my entire life in a room like that. I also knew the difference between nei-the inner realm of the home and wai-the outer realm of men-lay at the very heart of Confucian society. Whether you are rich or poor, emperor or slave, the domestic sphere is for women and the outside sphere is for men. Women should not pass beyond the inner chambers in their thoughts or in their actions. (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 28-29)

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 however belongs to a wealthy family unlike Lily, yet she ended marrying a butcher. Lily's perfectly bound three inches foot or 'Golden Lotus' earned her a prosperous marriage while Snow Flower larger bound feet directed her towards poverty and adverse life. This exhibits how *footbinding* decides the fate of a Chinese woman. Chinese men had no custom as such and they even had the liberty to take new wife or concubine if his wife fails to give a son. The dominance of the male member in the household was so strong that the woman had no right to retaliate. A Chinese woman had no liberty to choose a life partner as this power was absolutely vested on the father.

For many generations, the Chinese women have been victimized to cater men's aesthetic demands upon women. Besides training them to be silent and obedient, the poor families in the society had their daughter's feet bound with the prospect of marriage in mind. A bound "foot size would determine how marriageable" and was in fact considered a prerequisite to marriage and passed down from one generation to another. (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 44) Lily belonged to a poor family and her mother binds her feet with the hope of marrying her to a prosperous family.

My small feet would be offered as proof to my prospective in-laws of my personal discipline and my ability to endure the pain of my childbirth, as well as whatever misfortunes might lie ahead. My small feet would show the world my obedience to my natal family, particularly to my mother, which would also make a good impression on my future mother-in-law. The shoes I embroidered would symbolize to my future-in-laws my abilities at embroidery and thus other house learning. And, though I knew nothing of this at the time, my feet would be something that would hold my husband's fascination during the most private and intimate moments between a man and a woman. His desire to see them and hold them in his hands never diminished during our lives together, not even after I had five children, not even after the rest of my body was no longer an enticement to do bed business. (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 44)

Involving physical transformation for men's sensual pleasure and indoctrinating the minds of young girls with patriarchal and Confucian ideals of filial piety and obedience, a bound foot was actually believed to be a sacred entity and bare feet must never be displayed to anybody. Wang Ping asserts how "beauty is created through sheer violence" and addresses the interdependence and link between beauty and pain. (Ping, 9) She points that even though *footbinding* was considered an epitome of exceptional beauty, achieving this 'beauty' involves tears, blood and extreme torture:

Such a beauty is created, however, through sheer violence. Lily and Snow Flower had to undergo immeasurable pain to achieve this 'beauty' at a very tender age. Lily's words highlight how excruciating the pain of footbinding was. But no young girls could escape from this so called 'rite of passage' as footbinding became mandatory criterion for Chinese girls to marry. (Ping, 9)

Lily repeatedly recalls the painful memories of her *footbinding*:

Mama washed my feet and rubbed them with alum, to contract the tissue and limit the inevitable secretions of blood and pus. She cut my toenails as short as possible. During this time, my bandages were soaked, so that when they dried on my skin, they would tighten even more. Next, Mama took one end of a bandage, placed it on my instep, then pulled it over my four smallest toes to begin the process of rolling them underneath my foot. From here she wrapped the bandage back around my heel. Another loop around the ankle helped to secure and stabilize the first two loops. The idea was to get my toes and heel to meet, creating the cleft, but leaving my big toe to walk on. (See,38)

The practice is “endowed with deeper meaning, representing women’s acceptance to obey and compliance of oppressive ideals”. (Ping, 9) She had to walk repeatedly in spite of much pain to break the toe bones with her mother’s 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. (See, 38) See captures the episode of *footbinding* and the plight of marginalized women. Lily continued enduring the pain with her aunt and grandmother looking over her the entire time, “making sure no wrinkles saw their way into those loops”. (See, 32) The gruesome practice “not only limit their mobility but also their independence”. (Ping, 9)

A women’s bound foot was associated with sexuality in Chinese society. It 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. Zhang explains that “footbinding was able to perpetuate and sustain for such a long span to time is its erotic fascination of the Chinese men”. (Zhang, 14) Lisa See subtly presents how the three inches ‘Golden Lotus’ as it was called, was considered as the most powerful focal point of sex-appeal whereby constructing a carnal idol to satisfy men’s sensual interest. Lily carried out this practice not only to marry but also to sexually please her husband and win his heart. It was her priority to let her husband see her bounded feet on her wedding night :

I shook my head and the little balls on my headdress shook and the silver pieces chimed prettily. My tassels parted and I saw that his eyes were cast down. He was looking at my feet. I blushed. I held my breath, hoping to still the tassels so he wouldn’t glimpse the emotions on my cheeks. I didn’t move and neither did he. I was sure he was still examining me. All I could do was wait. (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 146)

See resonates how bound feet was considered as an object of carnal desire and how men were intrigued and moonstricken by it. It became an intimate body part where men derived sensual pleasure and an enduring passion that would continue to provide excitement even in old age. Such was the fixation of men over tightly bonded or bound silk wrapped feet. At the same time, it was also an entity to ensure the husband’s commitment and love. Van Gulik observes:

Women’s feet being the center of her sex-appeal, a man’s touching those became the traditional preliminary to sexual intercourse... he will touch the lady’s feet. This is the final test. If she does not get angry, the suit has been gained, and he can immediately proceed without restraint to all physical contact. (Gulik, 218)

Chinese men’s fixation over bounded feet posed damaging repercussion for women. Radical feminist considers the objectification of women to be chiefly responsible for reducing women to oppressed class/sex. With severe codes and moral rules to observe, Chinese women maintained

their position as voiceless subaltern. Lisa See cleverly engages in presenting how *footbinding* has infiltrated into every Chinese household and how women were victimized. The narrative epitomizes how sexuality performs as an apparatus to control and marginalize women. She exposes how women's sexuality is mostly recognized as frigid and is regarded as an agency of power that men exert over women under institutionalized heterosexuality.

In the male dominated Chinese society, women have been misrepresented and indoctrinated by the ideology of patriarchy. Men frame and construct stereotypical role for women dictating how they should live their lives. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) states 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, 9) She justifies that patriarchy maneuvers in taking advantage of sexual difference to condition women to remain silent and submissive. Women adhere to the norms set by men and submit to stereotypical roles. Chinese women with their bound feet remained within the four walls of the house doing household chores and had no liberty to move out freely like the men. The practice of *footbinding* crippled them physically and they could not move fast or run nor could they participate in works outside their homes. Ethics of feminine conduct are directly or indirectly imprinted into the psyche of women right from childhood, limiting them to predetermined gender specific roles. The painful custom of *footbinding* controlled women's lifestyles and roles in the Chinese society, the rigors of adult life that includes childbearing, rejection of one's self, and pleasing the husband. They were bound to patriarchy in the state society- destined to be mother, wife, lover and friend. The pain of *footbinding* forces women to "relearn language, a language more preverbal", transmitted from mother to daughter and shared among women. (Ping, 9) *Footbinding* and the desirable female body were publicized, visible, and fetishized. Chinese women's experience in See's narratives has shaken the very faculty of understanding and critiquing womanhood and observes the barrier of patriarchy and other forms of power which have been inflicted upon women in realizing their strength and appreciating their individuality. *Footbinding* heightened the negation and destructiveness that increases from the continuous patriarchal subjugation and marginalization of women. Chinese women therefore, became a marginalized subaltern with no power to voice their feelings and desires.

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