

Destruction of Patriarchal Society by *Nu Shu* in *Snow Flower and Secret Fan*

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Abstract—Lisa See’s *Snow Flower and Secret Fan* is set in Emperor Taoguang period-late Qing Dynasty that is featured by patriarchal society. One of typical features of the patriarchal society is that the male is the center of everything, while the female is in a disadvantaged position, which is clearly shown in the novel. However, Laotong—a kind of woman’s friendship in the novel can be regarded as a sort of female rebellion to the patriarchal society. They communicate with each other in a special way that men have no access to, which in a way wins more space for women in feudal society in which men always are in dominated position in terms of social status in family or society. The paper is going to discuss how this *nu shu* narrative destructs the patriarchal society and strives for more space for women, breaking the yoke of man’s gaze and power.

Index Terms—*Nu Shu*, patriarchal society, destruction

I. INTRODUCTION

Lisa See is an American writer and novelist with a Chinese great-grandfather who has wielded great influence on her life and writing career. Some of her works mention cultural events emphasizing the importance of Los Angeles and Chinatown. As a foreigner who has a special connection with Chinese culture and history, she can write from outside and inner side. On the one hand, she is familiar with the story in China and as a result, the stories she has created are almost based on true stories. On the other hand, she can write from a critical perspective. In the past few years, she has published several works which are related with Chinese culture. Her representative novels such as *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), *Peony in Love* (2007) and *Shanghai Girls* (2009) enable her to enter the 2010 New York Times bestseller list. Elizabeth Ho (2011) says that “like Amy’s *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), or Hong Kingston’s *China Men* (1981), *Snow Flower* seems to aim at Asian–American readers who enjoy similar experience” (Elizabeth Ho, 2011, p.192). *The Chicago Tribune* locates *Snow Flower*’s “ideal audience in those who enjoy the movie version of *Julie and Julia* (2009), but really only like the modern day stuff about the blogger with the less-than-riveting domestic crises” (Phillip, 2011), while *L.A. Times* thinks the past a “rich, ancient world both exotic and erotic” (Sharkey, 2011). The setting directly draws the readers to an ancient period in old China, which provokes rich imagination for the readers, especially for those who have a crush on Chinese culture. The story is “well-researched” (Ho, 2011, p.192) with detailed descriptions of phenomenon such as foot-binding in feudal China albeit with some simplistic narration about some traditional customs. I assert that *nu shu*, one of traditional customs in ancient China, in some senses, plays a fundamental role in the destruction of patriarchal hierarchy. Therefore, I attempt to analyze how *nu shu*, a writing system, accomplishes this stated purpose.

II. THE SUFFERINGS OF WOMEN IN FEUDAL PERIOD

The first type of suffering of women in feudal society is the random arrangement of Laotong pair. The novel depicts woman’s sufferings in many ways: women experience the painful foot-binding both physically and psychologically; they are treated as man’s property without any subjectivity; they are cornered to the domestic sphere deprived of the right to the public issues. The detailed treatment of the suffering which Lily and Snow Flower experience in their Laotong relationship is one major aspect of the novel. Firstly, the Laotong pair is arranged by parents and relatives so the victims themselves are kept in the darkness. The protagonists Lily and her friend Snow Flower are ordinary girls in small village in a remote and provincial county. One of the traditions of this place is to form a Laotong pair, exclusively for girls, whose sisterly relationship is far stronger and closer than that of husband and wife. Once in contract, their fate will connect with each other in their lifetime. Secondly, Laotong relationship is the product of limited space for women in feudal society. They have no access to regular writing system, thus communicating with each other in secretive way. The narrator says that except “for three terrible months in the fifth year of Emperor Xianfeng’s reign”, she has “spent her life in upstairs woman’s rooms”. She says that “she has gone to the temple, traveled back to her natal home, even visited with Snow Flower, but she knows little about the outer realm. She has heard men speak of taxes, drought, and uprisings, but these subjects are far removed from her life”. What she knows is “embroidery, weaving, cooking, her husband’s family, her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren, and *nu shu*”. Her life course has been a normal one—“daughter days, hair-pinning days, rice-and-salt days”, and so on (See, 2005, p. 40). In this way it is reasonable to think that women themselves have to invent their own ways to communicate with each other. The girls

write letters to each other on a fan with *nu shu*, a secretive phonetic form of woman's writing. In addition to the language itself, the young women learn *nu shu* songs and stories. Thirdly, the requirement for the relationship is strict and rigid. The first condition for the contract is that both girls must be born under the same sign. They have to deal huge difference between both sides to strengthen the binding. There are big differences between Lily and Snow Flower, born under the same zodiac of horse though. The former is practical and conservative, while the latter attempts to fly over the restraints of woman's life in the 19th century. Although Lily comes from a family of relatively low status, her feet are considered beautiful, playing a significant role in her marriage into the most powerful family (Master Lu) in the region. She is later known as Lady Lu, the region's most influential woman with four healthy children (three sons and one daughter). Despite the fact that Snow Flower comes from a formerly prosperous family, she is unfortunate because she marries a butcher who is culturally considered as the lowest status of all professions in that time, living a miserable life filled with children dying and beating at the hand of her husband. With huge difference, they have to form a lifetime binding, and thus the breaking of contract in the end seems to make sense.

The second sort of suffering for women in ancient China is that there are so many requirements for women from the perspective of men. In the first place, women are limited to domestic sphere without caring about anything about public issues such as politics, economy and workforce. The rule works from the time when they come to this world. The position of each one in the feudal family is clear and each one has their own undertakings. One of typical points is that 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. The narrator puts it clearly that "Uncle was kindhearted, but as the second son he had no authority in our home. Aunt knew the benefits that might arise out of this situation, but as a sonless woman married to a second son, she had the lowest rank in the family". She adds that "Mama also had no position, but having seen the look on her face when the matchmaker was talking, I knew what her thoughts would be. Father and Grandmother made all decisions in the household, though both could be influenced"(See, 2005, p. 23). Evidence above shows that women have their clear obligations and they should strictly obey all these rules. They are limited to a narrow space, fulfilling their own duty. In the second place, except the limited space, their behaviors are restricted in order to meet demands of the male as well. The concept of "Three obediences and Four virtues" is one of typical traditional Confucian requirements for women. "Three Obediences" refer to the fact that "when a girl, obey your father; when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son," and "Four Virtues" delineate woman'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" (See, 2005, p. 24). Women have to obey all those rules otherwise the society will judge them as unqualified women and should be punished. Women are usually required by the society to perform according to man's authority. The concept of "Three obediences and Four virtues" mentioned above is typical requirement for the women in patriarchal society. As far as I am concerned, the most miserable thing is that women are not aware of the injustice done to them and they just act according to man's will.

The third kind of suffering for women is foot-binding that is a kind of feudal custom in ancient China, which causes unbelievable suffering for the female. First of all, the requirement of perfect foot-binding is extremely strict including the perfect shape and size. Foot-binding is the tradition of binding a young girl's feet by wrapping cloth around their feet tightly, forcing them to walk until their bones are broken, easier to mold and change, then tightening the bindings as time progresses. The ideal foot (called Golden Lotus) is about 7 cm (approximately 3 inches) in length. To comprehend this, the narrator draws a parallel that "men in China feel about woman's feet as men in the West do about a woman's legs"(See, 2005, p. 50). Matters of feet or legs are all for the sake of men's gaze, feminist readers can easily realize this point. It is the product of men as they consider the woman with small size of feet to be beautiful. The direct result is that numerous girls have to suffer the unbearable pain at a young age. The misleading concept is that the small size of feet—so-called "Golden Lilies" is beautiful, which can help women get married with a rich family. Holding this belief, the girls at a very young age have to suffer the pain of foot-binding.

Second of all, the consequence of foot-binding is extremely detrimental to the development of young girls both physically and psychologically. Lily says that the binding "altered not only my feet but my whole character", and "as though that process continued throughout my life, changing me from a yielding child to a determined girl", then "from a young woman who would follow without question whatever her in-laws demanded of her to the highest-ranked woman in the county who enforced strict village rules and customs"(See, 2005, p. 4). The girl who has experienced this process must have unbelievable courage and endurance as the foot-binding can break the bone and prevent the natural growth. The only reward of foot-binding is the marriage, which, more often than not, becomes those parents' pretext to encourage their daughters. Whenever Lily can not bear the pain, desiring to give up the foot-binding, her mother encourages her with comforting words that if she had a small foot, her later life would be much easier and the most important thing is that the pain is just temporary but the well-being is everlasting. The narrator says that "when I knew I couldn't suffer another moment of pain, and tears fell on my bloody bindings, my mother spoke softly into my ear, encouraging me to go one more hour, one more day, one more week, reminding me of the rewards I would have if I carried on a little longer".(See, 2005, p. 3). The so-called *tengai* (maternal love) is based on the pain and suffering of the girl. As a young girl, what Lily should do is to endure the pain and obey the order. If she does not do as her mother orders, she will be criticized as useless, bringing shame to her ancestors.

Third of all, despite the pain and suffering of foot-binding, not everyone has the chance to be bound and the girl in poor family has no chance of being bound so that when these girls grow up, they will not have the opportunity to get married with rich family. In this way the girl's destiny is decided by whether she has the chance to be bound or not. Foot-binding is a long-term work. On the one hand, not every family can afford to buy all those necessary materials for foot-binding. On the other hand, the likelihood of success is low and the process is highly risky. As a result, the poorest girls don't have their feet bound at all. Besides, the preparation of foot-binding takes much longer than expected and the proper age for foot-binding has to be carefully considered. Lily says that "the preparation for my foot-binding took much longer than anyone expected". In cities, "girls who come from the gentry class have their feet bound as early as age of three, while "In some provinces far from ours, girls bind their feet only temporarily, so they will look more attractive to their future husbands". For those whose bones are not broken, "their bindings are always loose, and, once married, their feet are set free again so they can work in the fields alongside their husbands. The poorest girls don't have their feet bound at all"(See, 2005, p. 17). The preparation work is complicated and not every case is successful. Without enough patience and care, tragedy can happen at any time. The death of third sister and Moon flower is one typical example. Third sister is the girl whose feet are firstly bound and because of unhealthy treatment on the feet, her feet are infectious, which finally leads her to death. For the sake of man's appreciation, the little girl has to endure the great suffering. The smaller their feet are, the more likely they will get married with a rich family. Their goal is to achieve a pair of perfectly bound feet with seven distinct attributes. They should be small, narrow, straight, pointed, and arched, yet still fragrant and soft in texture. Of these requirements, the length is the most important. Third sister is only six years old and when she is forced to accept the foot-binding, she could do nothing but scream. Her mother criticizes her to be useless, bringing an embarrassment to her ancestors. Just as Lily narrates in the novel that "Third Sister was pushed into the room, but as soon as she fell to the floor she clambered to her feet, ran to a corner, and cowered there" (See, 2005, p. 27). It is very hard to imagine the scene and over the whole process, third sister just screams, being incapable to stop the foot-binding. Suppose that men appreciate big size of feet, the girl would have to suffer other kinds of pain. It is easy to find out that foot-binding is a long and painful experience and the chance of being bound is closely connected with the well-being of female's marriage. The system of patriarchal society forces female to perform so as to cater to man's taste, which is really miserable at that time.

III. DESTRUCTION OF PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY—*NU SHU* WRITING

It has been mentioned above that *nu shu* is a product of the patriarchal society. However, this writing system, for me, is also a kind of rebellion to the patriarchal society. Firstly, those girls in contract can communicate with each other in their own way, which can provide more private space for women themselves. In male-dominated society, it is not common to see this kind of phenomenon. The narrator introduces the *nu shu* at the beginning of the novel as the secret-code writing used by women in a remote area of southern Hunan Province—developed a thousand years ago. It appears to be the only written language in the world that has been created by "women exclusively" in their own use(See, 2005, p. 22). It can be used to write "letters, songs, autobiographies, lessons on womanly duties, prayers to the goddess, and, of course, popular stories", written with "brush and ink on paper or on a fan", "embroidered onto a handkerchief or woven into cloth"(See, 2005, p. 25). It is something that can be sung before an audience of other women and girls, but it can also be something that is read or treasured alone. However, the most important rule is that "men must never know that it exists, and men must not touch it in any form"(See, 2005, p. 25). Men have their own writing system and women do not interfere as well. This kind of custom is the product of reality but at the same time it rebels the patriarchal society unconsciously.

Secondly, the secretive writing system can provide comfort and happiness to each other. From the novel we know that the contract of Lily and Snow Flower is arranged by Madame Wang for the sake of individual interest and family interest not for the sake of girls' well-being. The two girls who have been arranged by their parents and matchmaker do not know anything. And they just do as their parents demand. Despite all these realistic aspects, the two girls can have their happy moment when they form the Laotong relationship. Lily writes to Snow Flower saying "I write to you. Please listen to me. Though I am poor and improper, though I am not worthy of your family's high gate, I write today to say it was fated that we join. Your words fill my heart. We are a pair of mandarin ducks. We are a bridge over the river. People everywhere will envy our good match."(See, 2005, p. 45). This is the first message passed by secret fan by Lily and in later life they just use this way to share their respective life. "*Nu shu*" as a special way for girls to communicate with each other, to share joys and sorrows can be regarded as a kind of rebellion to the feudal society. As the men can not understand what those women talk about and they do not have the right to interfere with, which in a way means that women have their private space that men can not disturb. The unique writing system provides not only private space, but also some other benefits for each other. The narrator says that "my only rebellion came in the form of *Nu Shu*, our women's secret writing. My first break with tradition came when Snow Flower—my Laotong, my "old same," my secret-writing partner—sent me the fan that sits here on my table, and then again after I met her". But "apart from who I was with Snow Flower, I was resolved to be an honorable wife, a praiseworthy daughter-in-law, and a scrupulous mother. In bad times my heart was as strong as jade. I had the hidden might to withstand tragedies and sorrows"(See, 2005, p. 4). The establishment of Laotong relationship between Lily and Snow Flower is forced by their matchmaker and the two girls are kept in the darkness. However, we cannot deny the benefits that relationship has brought up.

“Intimate female friendship enhance woman’s self-esteem, connectedness, and enjoyment” (Lillian, 2013, p.5). Both of them get comfort from this contract and face the reality with courage. In one article Lillian (2013) mentions that Lisa See’s portrayal of two women’s intimate friendship can function as healing and provide support for each other by communicating with each other in a special way. She says that “*Nu Shu*” likes “sister friends, comadres, sworn sisters, sister of the soul” and also she refers it to “sister of my heart” (Lilian, 2013, p.4). In this article, she asserts that special bond between intimate women friends has the healing and transformative power. By means of sharing sorrows and pains with each other, two intimate friends can support each other psychologically so that they endure those miseries in daily life. Lily finally knows the truth that she is taken in by Madame Wang whose only purpose is to arrange everything for the sake of her own interest and her family. She is aware of that she is treated unfairly. She reflects on her life that “we are seen as completely useless. Even if our natal families love us, we are a burden to them”. When they marry into new families, they “go to their husbands sight unseen, do bed business with them as total strangers, and submit to the demands of our mothers-in-law”(See, 2005, p.127). Sons can secure their positions in their husbands’ homes, while daughters will just come with “the scorn of our mothers-in-law, the ridicule of our husbands’ concubines, and the disappointed faces of our daughters” (See, 2005, p.127). Telling those miseries in secretive writing can reduce the pain they are experiencing. We have to know that a Laotong relationship is different from sworn sisterhood. It involves “two girls from different villages and lasts their entire lives”, while “a sworn sisterhood is made up of several girls and dissolves at marriage”(Lilian, 2013, p.22). The long-standing intimate relationship can provide spiritual comfort for each other not just for the time being but for the rest of their lives.

In a nutshell, the *nu shu* writing not only expands more private space for women in male-dominated society, but also provides psychological support for women to survive the oppressed situation. In my view, the privacy is the most crucial factor contributing to the destruction of male-dominated society. The narrator also mentions the most fundamental principle of *nu shu* is that “men can not know it exists and man can not touch it in any form” (See, 2005, p.25). It is the space that men cannot and should not invade, which is itself contradictory in a way. The binary opposition between male and female is prevailing but this secretive writing system gives an outlet of destructing patriarchal hierarchy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Laotong relationship is a product of reality and at the same time we find from the story of Lily that Laotong relationship helps her grow and change her course of life. It is a kind of old traditional customs in feudal society but we have to admit that it in a way provides an outlet for women to express themselves, especially, using a secretive writing system to communicate with each other, which wins more space for women in male-dominated society. According to Elizabeth Ho(2013), Lily’s *nu shu* narrative, like “lost letters of A.S Byatt’s *Possession*(1990) or Margaret Prior’s destroyed diary at the end of *Sara Water’s Affinity*”, only adds to the ephemeral nature of the record of woman’s experience (Ho, 2013, p.195). Besides, she also mentions that through the use of *nu shu*, *Snow Flower and Secret Fan* aims to recover “an alternate history of the Chinese nineteenth century for consumption in the West and by the West, including overseas Chinese readers”, that tends to “re-inscribe, rather than trouble, conventional roles and literary stereotypes of Chinese femininity and feminism” (Ho, 2013, p.195). Readers can easily notice that Chinese woman’s space in ancient time is limited and cornered. The story begins with Lily’s reminiscence of her birth “on the fifth day of the six month of the third year of Emperor Daoguang’s reign”(See, 2005, p.9), placing the novel in 1823, drawing the Western readers to Victorian period. In fact, it is the same with western women in Victorian period because they are also required to cater to man’s taste, especially in terms of dressing and manners, and they are also limited to the space of household. During that time, it is tough for women writers to publish any novel. One typical example is George Eliot whose original name is Marian Evans, publishing her work under the name of George Eliot, a man’s name. Virginal Woolf even calls for a room for women. She thinks that Shakespeare has a sister but she has no space to grow and a slim chance of becoming a writer. French scholar Henri Lefebvre says in *The Production of Space* (1991) that social space is produced and reproduced by the reality. It is same with woman’s space. The writing system of *nu shu* is also a product of social reality. See’s stated goal of the novel is to illuminate the struggle of women during times of “political upheaval” whether “during the Taiping Rebellion so many years ago or today in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Sudan or even right here in this country in the post-9/11 era” (See, 2005, p.265). With the development of feminist movement, the woman’s space has been expanded a lot but in reality there are still unfair issues happening every single day. I assert that Lisa See has noticed this phenomenon, thus setting a story in ancient China, describing woman’s suffering and sorrows, with taking reality into account. From this perspective, we can arrive at a conclusion that *nu shu* destructs the patriarchal system to a certain degree.

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