

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Chinese culture is one of the oldest cultures in the world. It is also a culture which practices the patriarchal system. “Patriarchal is a system that the oldest male in a family is the legal head and responsible for all aspects of the family, including finances and behavior of the other members” (Regulations in Chinese Family). The father’s role becomes a symbol of Chinese traditions as men take control of the whole family. Women are considered less important than men. The daughter is perceived as a burden to a family. Their fathers regard them solely as property; that is why a father can decide his daughter’s fate. Moreover, daughters are expected to show their obedience towards their fathers.

In my thesis, I will discuss two famous authors who deal with Chinese women’s life in Chinese culture. They are Lisa See and Gail Tsukiyama. Both of them are well-known Asian-American contemporary authors. Lisa See is a Chinese-American author. Her novel, Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, is her fifth work. It was regarded as the New York Times bestseller. “Only the best novelists can do what Lisa See has done, to bring to life not only a character but an entire culture, and a sensibility so strikingly different from our own. This is an

engrossing and completely convincing portrayal of a woman shaped by suffering forced upon her from her earliest years, and of the friendship that helps her to survive” (Golden). Moreover, “The Organization of Chinese American Women achieved Lisa See the 2001 National Woman of the Year” (“About the Author”). Snow Flower and the Secret Fan tells a story about a Chinese poor peasant’s daughter’s life, which is strongly influenced by the Chinese traditions and culture, and represented by her family and society.

Gail Tsukiyama is a Chinese-Japanese-American author. She is a bestselling author of six novels, and was awarded a prestigious Academy of American Poets award (“Women of the Silk”). Her first novel, Women of the Silk, was published in 1991. “Tsukiyama spent most of her writing time looking into the silk society which survived in China for one hundred years, between 1830 and 1930” (Siciliano); consequently, in her first novel, she “described a community of unmarried women who earned their own livings . . .” in the silk factory (Siciliano). Furthermore, this book tells about a poor farmer’s daughter’s life, named Pei. She is sold to the silk factory because her father deems that she is an unmarriageable daughter. Tsukiyama’s novel shows similar problems as in See’s novel, about Chinese women’s lives and characteristics being influenced and dictated by society and family.

Through the story of the protagonists lives and sisterhood, I can see one of the most important aspects in the literary works, namely, the portrayal of the female protagonist. Through the characters, the readers can understand the story and the purpose of the novel. “The requirement of good fiction is that each character be characterized fully enough to justify his/her role in the story and make it convincing” (Perrine 70). “Fictional life begins when an author breathes life into his/ her characters and convinces us of their reality. Though fullness of characterization need not be his aim, soundness of characterization is a test by which he/she stands or falls” (Perrine 71).

In these novels, I will analyze the changes of both female protagonists’ characteristics. I find it important to analyze the portrayal of the two female protagonists to see how women’s characteristics in both of the novels are influenced by the pressure of society and family. Lily is the protagonist of Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, who lived in the 17th century, while Pei is the protagonist of Women of the Silk, who lived in the 20th century. Although the two women live in different periods at time, they have a similar experience that is, of being brought up in a patriarchal society. Both Lily and Pei live under the pressure of family and culture in China. Lily is obedient because she wants to win her parents’s affection and Pei is obedient because she is forced to. The two writers, Lisa See and Gail Tsukiyama, describe the Chinese women’s role in the family and society as merely being treated like property. “Female children were considered a bad economic and emotional investment, particularly in poor families” (“Regulations in family relationships”).

Statement of the Problem

The problems of this study are:

1. How do the authors portray the female protagonists?
2. What are the authors' purposes of presenting such characters?

Purpose of the Study

According to the statement of the problem, the purposes of the study are:

1. To show how the authors portray the female protagonists.
2. To show the purpose of the authors in presenting the characters.

Method of Research

I use the library research for my thesis. First, I read the primary texts, Lisa See's Snow Flower and the Secret Fan and Gail Tsukiyama's Women of the Silk. Later on, I analyze the data that I have obtained from both novels. Then, I draw some conclusions.

Organization of the Thesis

As the writer of this thesis, I will provide five chapters, preceded by the Preface and the Abstract. In Chapter One, the Introduction consists of the Background of the Study, the Statement of the Problem, the Purpose of the Study, the Method of Research, and the Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two consists of the discussion of the portrayal of Lily and how Lily's characteristics change in Lisa See's Snow Flower and the Secret Fan. The next chapter consists of the discussion of the portrayal of Pei and how Pei's characteristics change in Gail

Tsukiyama's Women of the Silk. In Chapter Four, I will draw a conclusion of the discussion from the previous chapters. The thesis will end with the Bibliography, containing the reference books and sources which I have used. The synopsis of both novels and the authors'

