

Lisa See, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. 2005. London: Bloomsbury, 2011. 340 pp. ISBN 978-0-7475-8300-4.

Lisa See's novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, first published in 2005 and reprinted in 2011, the year of the novel's film adaptation under the same name by the director Wayne Wang, is set in nineteenth-century China. In it, the first-person narrator Lily recounts her life story of submissively and steadfastly fulfilling the myriad female roles expected of a respectable woman in China in the nineteenth century, including those of daughter, granddaughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, mother, grandmother and moral role model: "When a girl, obey your father; when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son" (See, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 29). Lily's life story is entwined with that of Snow Flower of the book's title, and the novel reveals the intense and at times homoerotic friendship between the two women. Lily and Snow Flower are *laotongs* – literally "old sames" – a Chinese expression suggesting that their numerous similarities have fated them to live life in parallel. Born in the same year (the year of the Horse), See's protagonists share the same birthday and astrological sign, are "of identical height, of equal beauty" (53), and come from similar social and cultural backgrounds. Their connection is underlined in a more figurative sense by the fact that they have had their feet bound on the same day. That they underwent this process at all indicates their families' relatively well-off status. Girls from lower social backgrounds would grow up to be "big-footed" and could thus only become servants or "little daughters-in-law," that is, concubines. While still girls, Lily and Snow Flower sign a *laotong* "contract" which binds them together for life and cements their relationship as stronger, more faithful and more devoted even than that between husband and wife.

First as girls and later as adults, the protagonists communicate using the historical practice of *nu shu* – literally translated as "women's writing" – a relatively rudimentary form of script that relied on phonetic codes. According to See, *nu shu* "appears to be the only written language in the world to have been created by women exclusively for their own use" ("Introduction"). Within the novel, the protagonists' use of *nu shu* not only speaks to their keen desire to communicate but also attests to their creative energy and that of Chinese women in general. At the same time, however, the fact they are restricted to *nu shu*, which is significantly less developed and sophisticated than the traditional Chinese characters taught to men, is a reminder of the alienation of women from the male-centred education system of the time and of their marginalised position in society; they are not encouraged to express themselves and if they must, they have to do so privately, furtively and with a restricted vocabulary. See's novel holds in tension a potentially (post-)feminist agenda of subverting

patriarchal restrictions (via well-established feminist tropes of sisterhood and illicit women's writing) and a suspect partial recycling of the contested repressive ideology, not least through the narrator Lily's passive acquiescence to her period's norms and her eventual betrayal of her more transgressive *laotong*. Throughout their lives, Lily and Snow Flower take turns to write in *nu shu* on the "secret fan" of the book's title, passing the implement between them. The fan, itself a Chinese symbol of chastity, modesty and inertia, thus becomes a covert record of the women's hardships, sorrows, triumphs and joys from girlhood to adulthood.

In her review of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Elizabeth Ho identifies thematic correspondences between See's novel and other British-focused neo-Victorian texts. She compares Lily and Snow Flower's use of *nu shu* and the "secret fan" to the "supposedly lost letters" of A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and the destroyed diary in Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999) (Ho 194). Ho also singles out the similarities between the Chinese women's eroticised relationship and the lesbian pairing of Sue and Maud in Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) (195) and compares the "women's chamber" in See's book to the English "repressive domestic regime" in Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008). Similarly, Lily and Snow Flower's embroidery is likened to the quilting metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) (Ho 195).

However, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* specifically does *not* incorporate any British or British colonial locations, figures, or cultural referents. Regardless of whether one can identify neo-Victorian themes in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, it is undeniable that this historical novel's primary focus is nineteenth-century China and the culturally specific taboos and customs that dictated and devastated the lives of Chinese women in those times. As such, See seeks to accurately capture the experiences of its female protagonists whose lives are confined to the "inner realm of children, daily chores, and emotions" (See 2011a: 201). Consequently, both Lily and Snow Flower remain generally unaware of the larger world and its political realities, including the British involvement in the Taiping Rebellion, an event that has a great impact on the characters' lives. The rebellion, which took place between 1851 and 1864, was a Christian-Confucian movement led by a self-appointed Celestial God Hong Xiuquan, who, together with his followers, intended to overthrow the corrupt Qing dynasty. See describes the chaotic effects of this rebellion, which results in Lily and Snow Flower, like millions of other Chinese at that time, fleeing into the countryside to hide from the rebel forces. The Qing dynasty eventually suppressed the Taiping uprising, but they could only do so with the support of a contingent of British army troops, whose presence in China dated from the beginning of the first Opium War in the late 1830s, a conflict that resulted in the ceding of Hong Kong to Britain.

See's novel, significantly, does not touch explicitly upon any of the details of British and Chinese diplomatic and military relations. Although *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* shows some understanding of the Taiping Rebellion, Lily, the main protagonist, dismisses it as something that happens in "the outer realm" (See, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 228), beyond the scope of her comprehension. When talking about its conclusion, she merely says, "the Taiping Rebellion ended somewhere in a distant province" (See, *Flower and the Secret Fan* 307). But this absence of the British Empire is not a weakness of See's novel. It would, in fact, have been awkward to mention Britain or the West at all, given the circumscribed worldview of the first-person narrative voice. The characters' lack of awareness of the "outer realm" is consummately authentic and perfectly aligned with the author's realistic depiction of her female characters, who, conforming to contemporary conventions, are mostly confined to the "upstairs chamber," both emotionally and physically. The novel's silence on Britain's involvement does not prevent historically informed readers from supplying the missing referents, thus activating a neo-Victorian framework. Still, this silence may also be read as a deliberate resistance on See's part to the activation of said frame as inappropriate, as it would be an act of cultural distortion or imposition.

Works Cited

- Ho, Elizabeth. "I think it's really about us': Review of Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and Wayne Wang's Film Adaptation." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 4.2 (2011): 191-202.
- See, Lisa. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. 2005. New York: Random House, 2011.
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