
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Foreshadowing of Women's Tragic Fate: An Analysis of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* from the Perspective of Space Theory

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ABSTRACT

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, written by a Chinese-American writer Lisa See, swept the United States as soon as it was published, becoming another masterpiece introducing Chinese elements into Chinese-American literature. In the book, Lisa See gives a detailed description of the fate of Lily and Snow Flower that spans decades. By applying Edward Soja's theory of "Thirdspace", different kinds of spaces in the novel and women's survival crisis and miserable situation are analyzed. We can see that Lisa See places deep sympathy on the fate of women in the male-centered society and tries to make a profound analysis of women's own weaknesses, thus arousing our concern and reflection on the tragic fate of women at that time.

KEYWORDS

Lisa See; *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*; space theory; tragic fate; feminism

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1. Introduction

Lisa See is an American writer and novelist with a great Chinese grandfather who has had a 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 to 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 says that "like Amy's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), or Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1981), *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* seems to aim at Asian-American readers who enjoy similar experience" (Ho, 192). The setting of the story 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.

In addition to describing an ancient period and special folk customs in China, Lisa See also narrates the female friendship in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. The story is set in Emperor Taoguang period — late Qing Dynasty that is featured by patriarchal society. One of the 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. These measures against patriarchy seem to be effective. However, if we analyze the women in the novel from the perspective of space, we will find that they have not stepped out of the barriers set by themselves and society. Therefore, they will inevitably lead to a tragic fate.

As a postmodern political geographer, Edward Soja updates Lefebvre's spatial triad and establishes new terms about space by integrating his geographical knowledge into the field of social space. The theory of Lefebvre on space can be considered as the starting point of Soja to establish his own "Thirdspace" idea. According to Soja, space can be divided into three kinds in general: the Firstspace, the Secondspace and the Thirdspace. The Firstspace is the most basic space type, which pays more attention to studying objective things. Because of its definite and clear shape, the Firstspace is the only kind that can be observed and touched through the eyes and hands, such as our home, apartment and office towers. All these concrete buildings can be classified into the Firstspace. Different from the Firstspace, the Secondspace, similar to Lefebvre's conceived space, is constructed through the consciousness of human beings as the result of reaction mechanisms. In other words, Secondspace is the conceptual space that allows us to imagine, dream and reconstruct the geographies of the Firstspace. In Thirdspace, Soja gives his own definition of the Secondspace which is "entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies" (Soja, 78-79). However, the two kinds of spaces cannot sum up all types of spaces with the continuous development of science and human society. Space is no longer a mere container that provides room for social activities or an imagined space for people's thinking and dreaming. Under these preconditions, Soja eventually puts forward a model of the "Thirdspace", which is not a totally new idea constructed on the existing spatial system yet surpasses Firstspace and Secondspace to some extent, "Thirdspace can be described as a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the 'real' material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through 'imagined' representations of spatiality" (Soja, 6). As a combination of the material space and the conceptual space, or the combination of the Firstspace and the Secondspace, Thirdspace is the "real and imagined" space, which is "a space of extraordinary openness" (Soja, 5), for example, people of different genders, races or identities. The core of the Thirdspace theory lies in its infinite augmentability. It breaks away from the traditional thinking pattern of binary opposition and creates "an effective invitation for entering a non-limits space, a realm for critics and communication, where geographical imagination expand and vision become multiplicity." (Soja, 68). The fact that all factors can be fused in the Thirdspace clearly shows its conspicuous feature of openness. All in all, Soja's Thirdspace theory pioneers a new type of thinking pattern and breaks the shackles of "black and white". Therefore, this paper will use Soja's space theory to analyze *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, explore the firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace of the two female protagonists Lily and Snow Flower, and analyze how these spaces reflect the survival crisis of women and predict their tragic fate.

2. Firstspace: The Limited Living Space of Women

It is living space that is of great importance to human beings at any time. Living space in which human activities unfold does not, of course, solely refer to the concept of physical environment but a concrete spatial structure with its unique meanings. It is generally true that living space is the regional space which is an indispensable place in daily life for all human beings because it offers an arena for human activities. According to Edward Soja's ideas, living space which is of necessity visible and tangible, is featured by "materiality" and "objectivity" and the major purpose of living space is to define different types of spatial forms in a general way.

In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Lisa See vividly depicts a series of living locations with rich meanings such as Puwei, Jintian, Tongkou and women's chambers. Though it is difficult for readers to make a conclusion about which living place should be regarded as the center for the whole novel because different characters and their activities center around different living locations spreads like a web revolving around those living domains, we can generally conclude the living space involved in the novel as the limited living space of women. It shows the pathetic situation of women under the control of the patriarchy.

In Edward Soja's view, living space, the so-called Firstspace, is "focused on the 'real material world'" (Soja, 6). This is the kind of place that the characters of the story are involved in. The whole story of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* centers on the deep friendship between two girls who come from totally different family backgrounds and the narration of the two major characters is closely related with their living spaces: the two completely different counties in which the state of the economy can't be more different. The story is narrated by one of the protagonists Lily who comes from a fairly humble peasant family in Puwei, which is a county not rich or desperately poor. Lily strictly conforms to feudal ethics all her life and eventually becomes the highest-ranked noble woman Lady Lu, in Tongkou whose residents are descendants of the Yao ethnic tribe. Lily lives in Puwei all the time before she gets married to Tongkou and she knows every weed and blade in this land. Snow Flower, another protagonist, is born and raised in one of the most distinguished families in Tongkou, which is the wealthiest village at that time. The two living spaces Puwei and Tongkou carry a foreshadowing of the storyline. Although Lily and Snow Flower are remarkably different from family surroundings and growth environments, the reality that they both have no power and liberty to live their own lives can be reflected in the fact that they are not supposed to show their faces in public and talk to strangers without parents' approval as girls. Apart from some special circumstances, their days in the outside world are numbered because they rarely have the opportunity to go for an outing and are always required to learn sewing from older family members, most of the time at women's chambers. After foot-binding at their ages of Seven, Lily and Snow Flower have to endure the pain and torture from their bound feet which further limit their free movements. In those days, many Chinese women had their feet broken and bound so tightly because the conception that only a woman has golden lilies can she have the chance to marry into a more affluent family than her own. Although this

practice violates humanistic principles and persecutes women's bodies, very few women can escape from it under the social environment at that time. The pain that women must have endured during this process is hard to conceive, and more seriously, some women even die from infection, like Lily's third sister. The custom of binding feet has a deep impact on female's life. Just as what Lily claims in the novel, "The binding altered not only my feet but my whole character, and in a strange way I feel as though that process continued throughout my life....." (See, 4). After binding feet, it is hard for women to walk freely and there are long-term side-effects even if the healing of feet wound. If they want to go out after binding feet, they have to sit in the sedan chair which is carried on the shoulders of two or four bearers (Pan, 137). However, a lot of people can not afford to go out by the sedan chair owing to its high cost and opportunities for women to go out are few.

The truth is that the fate of Chinese women in the nineteenth century was decided at the time of their birth and the two heroines Lily and Snow Flower in the novel are no exception. All through their lives, a great deal of their time is taken up with family chores at women's chambers. When male family members set out for the fields, women in the families are required to go to women's chambers and employ all their free time in the household chores. Their residences in tiny spaces limit their knowledge of the mysterious world and their idealized fantasies of the outside world mainly come from imaginations. Their desires deep in their hearts to step outside without restrictions are suppressed by the cruel reality that they have to be locked up in the cages until they die in their lives. Through the description of Chinese women's limited living spaces at that given age, the author accuses the male-dominated society of turning a deaf ear to the misfortunes of women who have to suffer a lot for a mere living. The tragedies of Lily and Snow Flower are not of themselves but of the whole society in the nineteenth century in China.

3. Secondspace: The Lost Spiritual Space of Women

The conception of spiritual space is put forward for the first time in *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre who thinks spiritual space contains abstractions. On this foundation, Edward Soja makes a summary of this sort of space and gives it the name "Secondspace" (Soja, 78) which is constructed from the notion of space and focuses on the study of spiritual activities of characters created by writers in the virtual world, including the formation, changing and other issues on the spiritual level. One thing to note here is that spiritual space is closely related with living space because characters that live in specific social spaces can make different reactions in their minds under the function of social ideologies which are the major sources of spiritual space. In turn, the characters' spiritual spaces always reflect living spaces, interpersonal relationships and social ideologies at the same time because spiritual spaces represent the inner worlds of the characters and bring about rich meanings in the spatial narration (Putra, 48).

As a female writer, Lisa See knows a lot about the feelings and psychological activities of women who lose their discourse power because of the low social position and the state of economic dependence. Under the circumstance of suffering suppression in real life for a long period, women have not enough power of overthrowing the existing patriarchy regime and an independent spiritual space is the only consolation for them to relax. However, the tragic experience of childhood and after marriage could not allow Lily to build a positive spiritual space, so she was lost in her own spiritual wasteland.

The traditional idea of preference for boys in ancient China had a great effect on people's basic value orientations, which lead to an extremely common occurrence that people are generally eager for a baby boy prior to a baby girl to join their families. Thus it is no wonder that the status of "women is inferior to men and women are always being ignored in their families where male family members have the absolute voice" (Long, 102). As a girl in her big family, Lily is often overlooked. At the beginning of the novel, Lily has already realized the truth that she is not important to her parents but she still chooses to do the household chores as much as possible to get her parent's attention and maintain her sense of place at home. She still tries her best to help her elder brother to gather woods for cooking and help out with the housework in spite of her thin body due to malnutrition in the long-term.

However, no matter what she does, her parents never fix their eyes on her and all the things she does for her family have been taken for granted. For Lily's parents, it is her duty to help with the housework at home to repay their fostering and they are not willing to take any extra time for Lily for the reason that she is just "a dispensable role in this family" (Islamiyah, 135). As a negligible person in the house, Lily is doomed to fail to get the attention of her family members and her life experience that she is too paltry to be given serious consideration has a lot of impact on the formation of her personalities and her emotional insecurity eventually. In her spiritual space which is surrounded by darkness, she becomes very sensitive and develops a great inferiority complex which results in her extremely low confidence in public all her life. She begins to get used to bending over backward to protect other people's feelings and the fundamental reason for her temperaments lies in lacking love from her parents. In order to avoid burdening her parents, she has taken a tolerant attitude and suppresses her own feelings since she was a little girl and she even spends all her time trying to please others. In her spiritual space, she always reminds herself again and again that she must follow the promise that she makes to her mother: "I will obey you...I will work for you" (See, 113) because she is firmly under the belief that only by strictly obeying this rule can she receive praises from other people to compensate her for the sense of safety. The root cause for Lily's lost in spiritual space is the way that she is treated in her childhood.

Besides the traumas in her childhood, Lily also suffers from the suppression of her husband's family. After she gets married, she never swerves from her principle of obedience and struggles to please her husband and mother-in-law even if she is not pleased to do those things. As a daughter-in-law of a distinguished family, Lily has to be careful with her gestures to meet the requirements of a good daughter-in-law and a perfect wife. In order to be a perfect wife, Lily strictly obeys the conventions of social ethics and is in full compliance with usual conventions as what her mother-in-law does. However, her behavior of speaking ill of her mother-in-law behind her back with Snow Flower clearly shows a fact that her spiritual world is not in harmony with her conduct and she does what other people thought was her duty without concern about her own free will. The most impressive scene that gives full expression to Lily's lost spiritual space occurs in times of pestilence (Fan, 17). When her mother-in-law has an infection of this acute viral disease, she takes a brave step to take care of her regardless of her own safety. It is not because she loves her mother-in-law. The main reason for her action is that she just wants to concentrate as a perfect daughter-in-law and avoid gossip behind her back.

To Lily, the highly stressful environments in her childhood and marriage lead to a vicious circle of her spiritual space of loneliness. Her pessimistic view of life further aggravate her desperation in real life. The self-consciousness buried in the deep recesses of her mind is ruthlessly destroyed. Therefore, she is dazed, stricken and uncertain of directions in her spiritual space.

4. Thirdspace: The Disillusioned Feminine Cultural Space

As the world structure becomes more and more complex, space does, of course, globalize. It is urgent to break free from the traditional idea because the old idea of binary structure is no longer applied to the new situation and the introduction of a new idea is sorely needed. Edward Soja, as a theory innovator who follows the trend of the times, puts forward the concept of "Thirdspace", which is similar to the idea of "other" but goes beyond its implications. According to Soja, this new idea is a continuation of the living space and the spiritual space and does not mean the superposition of new elements because "It's not a kind of conjugate or intermediate state among some continuum from soup to nuts"(Soja, 151). The main emphasis of Soja's "Thirdspace" is on the importance of otherization which is undoubtedly a marvelous and adventurous concept even now. In Soja's view, Firstspace, the so-called living space or physical space, which focuses on the objectivity, is materialization and Secondspace, or spiritual space, is conceptualization. Different from the two kind of spaces mentioned above, Thirdspace, which is not only the reconstruction but also the deconstruction of Firstspace and Secondspace, is between real and imaginative. Such a kind of cognition criticizes the out-dated thought pattern of dualistic theory and increases new possibilities of returning to vitality. Although it is hard to give an explicit definition of "Thirdspace", Soja still tries to give a definition according to his own understandings. He thinks of Thirdspace as "creative re-combination and re-expansion and its base focuses on combination horizon of the 'true' material world of the first space and the 'imagery' constructed conceptual world of the second world" (Soja, 79).

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan has a worldwide reputation for its unique Chinese cultural elements and feminine standpoints. However, in the novel, the establishment of Thirdspace for feminine culture under the influence of patriarchal cultures in China at that particular time is unsuccessful. One of the most important reasons is that there is an existential crisis commonly existed in feminist groups due to the orthodox prejudice of society. In order to go on living in a male-dominated society, women have to suppress their own desires and self-consciousness to a certain extent. Therefore, the idea of establishing an otherized Thirdspace for women is just "an ideal assumption at Qing dynasty in China" (Du, 93) because it is difficult for women to completely break the regulations and restrictions of the patriarchal society if they want to survive. Thus it can be seen that the failure of Snow Flower in constructing the feminine cultural space is predestined.

Unlike Lily, Snow Flower has a strong sense of resistance and fails to fit into the patriarchal society. In her whole miserable and messed-up life, she has hardly been happy in the process of growing up from a girl with a rebellious spirit against the old society to a woman who is forced to succumb to feudal ethics. As a woman at Qing Dynasty, she would be expected to become assimilated to feudal ethics rather than escape from the conventional rules. As her best friend Lily becomes complicit in the patriarchal society, she is so powerless to fight alone. Like most women in ancient China, the result of her revolt can only be a compromise finally (Fan, 18).

As a little girl, Snow Flower has to rely on her father who is addicted to opium and leads to the decline of her family. Powerless as a little girl she is, she can do nothing to change the situation but to accept that fate. Without any other means, Snow Flower gets married into this butcher's family in Jintian village because it is the best choice for her under such circumstances. After marriage, she fails to adapt herself to her husband's family's life for the reason that she firmly believes that the trade of a butcher is a brutal and odious business and therefore refuses to help her husband with his works. Besides, the priority of a wife at that time is to give birth to sons as many as possible for her husband's family. However, Snow Flower fails to give birth to a fine baby boy who is expected to carry on the family line which aggravates the dissatisfaction of her mother-in-law. When Snow Flower suffers a miscarriage, no one comforts her and cares about her sadness as a mother who loses her little darling but everyone in the

household blames her for her uselessness of giving birth to sons. Her mother-in-law even has a repugnance to her behavior and scolds her for her weakness and useless. In Snow Flower's whole life, she has been pregnant for seven times but only three babies enjoy their first breath of fresh air, and worse still, only a son and a daughter survive in the end. Her husband put all the blame on Snow Flower and even aims his bile at her when he finds it hard to release his frustration because of the situation which five children are lost. Under the ravages of a patriarchal society, Snow Flower's desire of seeking women's self-consciousness in her deep heart is drained by cruel reality. Snow Flower was once young, vivid and beautiful, but now "her pale skin-always so beautiful-had begun to thicken and darken. Her hands- always so smooth- felt rough on my skin. Lines were etched above her lip and at the corners of her eyes." (See, 189) The changes in Snow Flower's appearance clearly show that her body, mind and heart have languished in real life.

In the novel, Snow Flower is forced to give in to feudal ethics twice. The first one is in her childhood when she is a little girl who has to accept the fate of binding feet in order to comply with the aesthetic orientation of society. However, Snow Flower refuses to accept that due to her stubbornness and the persistence of her own self-consciousness. She even tears off her bindings completely one time in the early months of binding feet. However, powerless as a young girl she is, she tries her utmost to fight against it but finally yields to this convention at last. The second compromise appears after her marriage. She chooses to listen to the advice of Lily and does her best to give birth to more sons in order to consolidate her position at her husband's family. Although she behaves kindly to Lily, her husband and all the people around her at the expense of her self-consciousness and feelings, the situation does not have a significant improvement and her miserable life ends in tragedy (Rakhmyta, 136). Under the great wheel of history, her attempt to build a feminine cultural space becomes an disillusionment.

5. Conclusion

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, to some degree, is a women's work that majorly describes the miserable living conditions of women in a male-dominated society. Through the description of women's living crisis which mainly comes from three aspects, namely, the living space, the spiritual space and the feminine cultural space, Lisa See makes the troubles of Chinese women in the nineteenth century be exposed from inside to outside.

In conclusion, the failure of constructing the ideal living state of women in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* clearly illustrates the fact that Chinese women in the nineteenth century suffered the suppression from the patriarchal society in aspects of the living space, the spiritual space and the feminine cultural space. They are not free in a marginalized space created by men and are forced to suffer the tortures of the inhuman treatments such as binding feet, being required to give more sons and even have no rights to move around which severely restricts their natural growths both in body and mind. It is hard for women to realize the liberation both of body and spirit and the real freedom for Chinese women to get full equality with men in the nineteenth century is just an idealized fantasy. By applying Edward Soja's theory of "Thirdspace", different kinds of spaces in the novel and women's survival crisis and miserable situation are analyzed in detail. We can see that Lisa See places deep sympathy on the tragic fate of women, exposes the harm brought to women by the male-centered society, and she tries to make a profound analysis of women's own weaknesses, thus arousing our concern and reflection on the tragic fate of women at that time.

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