

Excruciating Experiences in Lisa See's *Dreams of Joy*

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Abstract

Trauma is defined as an extremely painful or unpleasant experience or experience that causes an emotional or psychological reaction. Trauma frequently shows up in the most typical ways, which are usually expressed in the form of emotions. Anger, grief, denial, and emotional instability are signs of emotional trauma. The main idea of this paper is to highlight the horrible events that a young girl, Joy experiences in Communist China. Pearl and Joy are inseparable mother and daughter who show deepest love for one another despite their numerous hardships and difficulties. This paper also discusses the discrimination and hardship that Chinese endured in Mao's The Great Leap Forward.

Keywords: Trauma, discrimination, hardships, humiliations

Kirby Farrell, a trauma scholar, observes trauma "As a trope, trauma helps account for a world in which power and authority may seem overwhelmingly unjust. The trope may be a cry of protest as well as distress and a tool grasped in hopes of some redress"(14). Lisa See's *Dreams of Joy* is the sequel to *Shanghai Girl*. It depicts the mother and daughter relationship during communist rule. In their home town China, Pearl and May go through lot of pain and suffering. Mao tse Tung spreads communism throughout China, and it appears to create a new society. Polygamy, which is common in China, is banned by communism. In its Marriage Law of the 1950s, it officially legalised free love and marriage and created gender equality. Within the first few years after the law's enactment, the divorce rate in rural marriages reached 50 percent. Mao has improved more things for women. The first few years of communist government in China witnesses considerable changes in Chinese women's lives. The goal of the struggle is to win freedom from not just the landowners' oppression but also from their husbands' abuse and domestic isolation.

Joy a young girl of nineteen, fled from America to Communist China in search of her biological father, an artist by the name of Z.G. Li. After meeting her father, Joy develops curiosity about communism in China because she had studied Chinese politics in school. Joy is eager to come with her father to the commune that Mao established for the peasants. Joy and her father arrive in the Green Dragon village Joy hoped that the peasant life is everything, where everyone worked so everyone could eat and all are equal. Joy believes, "We'd help clean the neighborhood and share meals. We wouldn't be poor and we wouldn't be rich. We'd all be equal" (10). Political, social, religious, and male authorities are the four authorities which serve as the four heavy chains that bound the Chinese people, especially the women in patriarchal society.

Herman states traumatic people "are able to make use of any opportunity for purposeful action in concrete with others, while ordinary people are more easily paralyzed or isolated by terror. The capacity to preserve social connections and active coping strategies, even in the face of extremity, seems to protect people to some degree against the later development of post traumatic syndrome"(58). Because as their resistance is built on identification, Herman's assertion applies to all of the wounded characters, like Joy in

Dreams of Joy. Mao encourages the peasants to put in extra effort because the production is poor and inefficient. Additionally, he declares that he would take over China's economic dominance so that nation could exceed the United Kingdom in the production of steel in fifteen years. In fifteen years, China may also exceed the United States in terms of steel production and agricultural output. He urged the peasants once more to strive themselves and work hard for a few years in order to achieve happiness for a thousand years. The peasants are inspired by Mao's speech, and they are all delighted.

Mao's The Great Leap Forward is a huge failure that causes a severe famine in the village. Another failure is the close planting in which most of the seedlings died and only produced poor yields. The women are required to work in the fields all day long without food or water. Kristof quotes Mao's words as, "Power should be shared equally he said and women should hold up half the sky" (213). The daily supply of rice in the commune has been decreased to half a *jin*, and it is enough for one bowl of rice porridge. The majority of people die of deadly diseases that produce swelling in the arms, legs, neck, and faces is called edema, which is brought on by a protein shortage. They consume incorrect foods and experienced complete dehydration. The first victims are newborn girls, then young girls, then grandmothers. Since all food must initially go to males, sons, fathers, and grandfathers who did not starve. No one is interested in buying females when some of the neighbours attempted to sell their daughter. The traumatic experiences of peasants are as follows:

We've slit open our padded jackets and sewn little packets of gleaned rice and wheat in the cotton bunting. We buried some millet in a jar under the sleeping platform. We wrapped foraged peanut shells in an old rice sack and tucked it between a rafter and the roof. We'll grind the shell to mix into porridge...The village, the fields, and canteen begin to look like movie sets—just facades. (260)

Arthur G. Neal, in his *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experiences* explains trauma has a direct impact on personal life and always produces numerous psychological reactions such as fear, rage, paranoia, anxiety, and delusion. He asserts, "Many of the most severe personal traumas grow out of abrupt changes in the quality of social relationships, perceptions of danger, chaos, and a crisis of meaning replace previous feelings of safety and security. ... The magnitude of such traumas frequently makes people feel that they have become 'damaged' or permanently changed" (3). Li, the commune's leader in *Dreams of Joy*, deceives the farmers by making them believe that there is plenty of grain available, but the actual reason is that he gave the government an excessive amount of their poor harvest. Strange foods including cornstalks, corn roots, dried sweet potato leaves, and wild grasses boiled into soup are provided at the canteen. Everyone in the village start to get sick from disease caused on by protein shortage. No one is allowed to leave the commune, but the leader issues certificates to men, including Joy's father-in-law, so they could beg or find work.

All the residents' animals, including roosters, chickens, oxen, birds, water buffaloes, rats, and mice, are consumed. Because the peasants continue to believe in Mao and the Communist Party, the peasants are too weak, tired and afraid to revolt or protest against the authorities. The villagers experienced hunger and terror. As the villagers started eating the deceased bodies' flesh, they turned into cannibals. The fathers' words, "We're still young. We can have other children" (281) persuade their wives to consume their children. The leader declares that no meals will be provided in the canteen because he didn't wish anyone to pass away from hunger on the floor in the commune's canteen. The father-in-law of Joy passed away from a fever after working in the freezing temperatures on an irrigation project. The peasants had no access to nutritious food. To obtain ration grain, the members of the commune hid dead bodies, and many of the women engage in prostitution with the leader in exchange for a single bun. The peasants are ordered to work without rest, with just a bowl of mirror soup in which they could see their own image. The starvation had spread throughout the country, leaving millions dead or dying. Everyone in the village lost weight except the leader, Li. Thus, all the peasants like Joy are traumatised in the horrible situations.

Lisa See's heroines not only concentrate on the horrors they endure, but they also reveal glimpses of the constant humiliation, hurt, and dread they had to undergo, in an effort to diminish the pain of their own recollections. The survivor of trauma Joy participates in a variety of actions in order to fight and oppose her long-term traumas. She refuses to surrender and employs visible and unseen resistance

strategies. Finally, the survivor Joy's experiences demonstrate tenacity and survival strategies, which allowed them to recover.

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