

Mother-Daughter Enmeshment: An Analysis of Lisa See's Novel *Shanghai Girls*

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Abstract

Lisa See is a Chinese-American writer, who has focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, female friendship, and sisterhood in her writings. Lisa See spins the story with history and cultures of China. Mother-Daughter relationship is unique and it describes the thing that goes between the mother and the daughters. The novel *Shanghai Girls* represent twentieth century Chinese traditional mother and the modern daughters. The paper is analysed based on the feminist theorist Sara Ruddick three concepts of maternal thinking. This paper brings out the care and love of a mother towards her daughter through various incidents that highlighted in the novel.

Key Words: Love, Care, Separation and Sacrifice.

The common features that shares by mother and daughters are love, warmth, care, affection, and respect. For every daughter, the relationship between mother and daughter begins at birth. This relationship between mother and a daughter continues till the end of their life. Everyone knows the old saying that, "A daughter is a daughter all of your life, but a son is a son until he takes a wife" (Chapman 35). Mother trained her daughter to become obedient, responsible and dutiful women. A daughter always resembles mother's behaviour and attitude. Moreover she inherits all the moral and physical attributes from mother.

Daughter's behaviour is the replica of her mother. Daughter's begins to imitate her mother from the childhood days. In the Chinese society, all the daughters are moulded by her mothers inside the four walls. The protagonist Pearl is the elder daughter and May is the younger daughter lives in the developed Shanghai city in China. For the first time the women receive education in the country and these girls started to adapt the western attributes and breaks the traditional dresses and practices.

Mother's bond between the daughter's are not peaceful but moves with conflict. However mother doesn't stop to care her daughters. In her work "Maternal Thinking", Sara Ruddick's claims three important concepts that the mother does in her life. "The three interests is Preservation, growth, and acceptability of the child govern maternal practices in general". Preservation is the first thing that a mother does to her children. It is natural for all living creature to preserve their young ones. Sara Ruddick states, "A mother, acting in the interest of preserving and maintaining life, is in a peculiar relation to "nature". Pearl's mother though lives under the patriarchy norms protects and preserves her daughters.

Mother builds a strong bond between their daughters. Hendrika C. Freud, an author states in her book, *Electra Vs Oedipus: The Drama of the Mother-Daughter Relationship*, that “the mother is the most influential person and is therefore held responsible for everything that might go wrong in the rearing of the child”. They care for their daughters physical beauty. Pearl, “When I turned five, my mother began rubbing my face and arms with pearl creams, mixing ground pearls into my morning jook-rice porridge—hoping the white essence would permeate my skin” (SG 3). Mother’s are conscious about their daughters beauty. Based on the second concept of Sara Ruddick, a mother always shows interest in fostering the child’s growth. They provide nutritious food and beautify their daughters.

Moreover mother gently teaches the moral and life principles. According to the third concept of Sara Ruddick, Mother shows interest in shaping the child. They shape their daughters to be an unique person, and “She train her children for strength and virtue”. The Chinese mother’s gently confront their daughters. “A girl doesn’t need a new dress every week, Mama says gently” (SG 6). A woman should not waste the money for buying unnecessarily on dress but instead she should preserves the money that they gets from their father and husband.

Pearl and May were sold to overseas business man Old Man Louie. They both get married to Sam and Vern. They both failed to board the flight to America that Louie had bought for them. Unfortunately the Japanese war drastically changes Pearl’s family. In order to save the daughter’s Mama takes a bold decision. Both the daughters were looking for their fathers but Mama, “If he doesn’t come home, then we’ll still go ahead with my plan. Your father’s family will take us in” (SG 64). Mother shows hope and courage that they can escape to the village .H. M. Kung in the book, *The Family and Social Change in Chinese Societies*, states that “Although the daughter was raised to be married outside of the family, the bonds of affection between a mother and her daughter remained strong after the daughter was married” (134). Hence mother’s caring and training towards the daughter does not harm the bond rather it strengthen the relationship. Moreover even after the marriage, mother risk her life to protect her daughters from the difficult situation.

Moreover Mama hides some cash from her husband. Her secret money helps her as well during the difficult situation. “This is all that remains of my bride price” (SG 65). Out of surprise her daughters, “How could you have kept these things hidden?” “Why didn’t you offer to pay off the Green Gang?”. . . “My Mother always said, “Keep something for yourself” “I knew I might have to use these things one day. Now that day is here” (SG 65). Mama’s behaviour and advice startled Pearl and May. Daughters understood the value of their mother for the first time.

In the patriarchal Chinese society, mothers had no role in the outside world. Her relationship is powerful even though she stays in the inner sphere. Harriet Evans, an author of the book *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China*, states that, “the relationship between daughters and mothers reveal powerful ties linking the present and future with ‘Previous Premise’ (17). Their bond is strong enough to protect their life. It is the first time Mama takes her decision to safeguard her daughters. Before leaving, Mama says, “I want to give you girl these. She loops a tiny cloth pouch hanging from a string around mine. “I bought them from a diviner. They hold three coppers, three sesame seeds, and three green beans. He said they will keep you safe from evil spirits, illness, and the dwarf bandits flying machines”” (SG 66). Mama was a traditional woman believing all the rituals and bought the

string to protect the daughters. Out of love Mama bought this but the daughter's failed to understand her love.

During their journey by the wheelbarrow, mother conveys moral stories to the daughters. Unfortunately they were caught by the Japanese soldiers. Mama hides both the daughters, but the disobedient daughter Pearl shows herself, and become victims to the Japanese soldiers, and thus they raped both Mama and Pearl until Mama dies. May controls herself witnessing the horrible incident. She was protected from the Japanese soldiers. Mama sacrifice herself for the daughters and Pearl witnessed the values and mothers love and care in the eyes of her dead mother.

Moreover in the patriarchal society, daughters are a temporary member, however their relationship between mother and daughter is emotional and eternal. In the Chinese society there were no great conflict that goes between these relationship. Sara Ruddick states, "Maternal thought. . . exist for all women in a radically different way than for men. It is because we are daughters, nurtured and trained by women, that we early receive maternal love with special attention to its implications for our bodies, our passions, and our ambitions". Mother-daughter relationship is beyond the level of understanding to men and it is meant only for female. Though in the novel, daughters miss their mother, their memories and experience of separation strongly reflects the mother-daughter relationship in the lives of Pearl and May. Separation helps them to explore the bond between mother-daughter. The paper has highlighted the importance and unique attributes of Chinese mother-daughter relationship.

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