



Unravelling the Silken Threads: Depicting the Tapestry of Resistance of the Women in *Lady Tan's Circle of Women* by Lisa See

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Abstract

Lady Tan's Circle of Women was written by the famous writer Lisa See which is a historical fiction that exposes the lives of the women in 19th century in China, some are exploited while some dominate. The plot revolves around Lady Tan an influential lady who forms a secret circle of women to help, support and empower each other in times of need. The novel analyses the themes of friendship, resilience in times of adversity, loyalty, the struggles and victories of women in a patriarchal society. The author has beautifully delves into the life of the Chinese women and their close knit life and allows the reader to see the intricacies of their life, their strength and their ability to survive against all odds

Keywords: friendship, healthcare, infection, unjust, culture

Introduction

Lisa See is a well-known novelist and writer from America. She spent many years at China Town in the U.S, which had a great impact on her life. So, she wrote about the cultural events and had a fascination for China Town as her paternal great grandfather Fong See was Chinese. She has written several works with China as the background like *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year of Odyssey of My Chinese American family* 1995, *Dragon Bones* 2003, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 2005, *Shanghai Girls* 2009, *China Dolls* 2014, *Lady Tan's Circle of Women* 2023.

The novel *Lady Tan's Circle of Women* which was published in June 2023 was nominated for Best Historical Fiction by GoodReads. The whole novel is set in 15th century China which was ruled by the Ming Dynasty. The protagonist is a physician who struggles to break free from traditions imposed by her arranged marriage in order to help Women with their illness. Lisa See was inspired by a true story of a Woman physician. She has received several awards for her works including the New York Times Best seller, Asian/Pacific American Awards for Literature

"Achingly beautiful, a marvel of imagination" is the manner in which Lisa See, an American author's



works has been described. She has brilliantly illuminated the strong bonds between women in her series of bestselling novels. Her vision as reflected in the books, shows an authentic, deeply researched lyrical stories about Chinese characters and cultures. Some of the novels were best sellers according to New York Times 'Snowflower and the Secret Fan,' 'The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane,' 'Island of Sea Women,' 'Shanghai Girls, China Dolls' and 'Lady Tan's Circle of Women.' The novel 'Lady Tan's Circle of Women' was based on a true story of Tan Yunxian who was a Chinese doctor of women and girls, that lived in the 15th Century.

The novel is a captivating story of a women helping other women, a positive portrayal of a woman who was remarkable during the reign of the Ming dynasty in China. This novel has social relevance even today. Lisa See had been fascinated and intrigued by stories that have been forgotten and even covered upon purpose whether in the past or in the present world. Lisa even visited a remote village in China to do some research on a script used for a thousand years by the Chinese women. That secret script was undiscovered for a very long time. The outcome of this visit was a New York Times bestseller called Snow Flower. Most of her novels were the result of her spending a lot of time at her father's family in China town.

The novel Lady Tan's Circle of Women (2023) is based on a work of historical fiction. The novel though fiction deals with the life of Tan Yunxian who happens to be a physician. The novel is set during the reign of the Ming dynasty in China. Tan Yunxian's list of cases is the earliest surviving Chinese medical text. The narrative proceeds with Tan Yunxian who is looked after by her grandparents who are medical practitioners as she lost her mother at an early age. As time goes by, she grows into a beautiful young adult and settles for a life of marriage into a well to do household. Her life is divided into various roles like a wife, a daughter in law and a mother. All her aspirations and desires are buried as she takes up various roles expected of her.

Tan's friendship with Meiling a young midwife helps Tan to grow independent and pursue her ambition to provide healthcare to women of all walks of life. This stand of Tan is in total contrast

to the existing cultural beliefs that a woman's role is only for child bearing and for glamour purposes. Tan wants to provide healthcare to all women. Tan's friendship with Meiling and providing health care to all women helps in forming a circle of supportive and nurturing women. This also makes a firm foundation for a meaningful life.

The plot unravels with the eight-year-old Tan Yunxian losing her mother due to lack of medical care. So, she is sent to live with her grandparents who practice medicine. Tan learns that her grandfather learnt medicine from books while her grandmother has collected age old remedies that have been handed over from her ancestors. Yunxian shows interest in learning about medicines and becomes a prospective student. Yunxian's grandmother works with a mid-wife, as in ancient China doctors were prohibited from touching blood. Meiling is the mid-wife's daughter and grows into a wonderful companion to Yunxian as they are of the same age. Yunxian has no idea about the outside world as she hails from an orthodox family. It is Meiling who transforms Yunxian by educating her on the outside world as she hails from an orthodox family. Yunxian teaches Meiling about how to behave like an upper-class lady and about how to read.

Soon Yunxian is engaged to the son of a wealthy merchant. Her grandmother gives her instructions on how to treat specific ailments, even those that involve pregnancy and childbirth. Yunxian's perception about the state of women like her maid Poppy and Miss Zhao are examples of women whose livelihood depends on pleasing men and producing sons to carry on the family name. Miss Zhao is the mother of Yunxian's half-brother. Yet another incident which provides Yunxian with a clearer understanding of the status of women is when Yunxian sees her grandfather's concubine who suffered a leg injury after a fall. Though Yunxian is confident that she can set the broken bone, she is not allowed to as it is the job of the setter. A shocking reality is when Yunxian sees her half-brothers' mother Miss Zhao sold. Her father has a new wife just like the others in her community. It is then that Yunxian realises the place of women in her world. She sees a 'circle of good' in all the women who help, protect, educate and encourage her like Poppy, Miss Zhao and Meiling.



Yunxian is married to Yang Maoren at the age of 15. Her husband hails from the family of a wealthy silk merchant. They live at the Garden of Fragrant Delights. Yunxian is accepted by her husband and he treats her well but her mother-in-law Lady Kuo does not approve of Yunxian practicing medicine. She is under the impression that a women's duty is to bear sons. The medical care should be left to Dr. Wong. Life after marriage is lonely and tedious. Yunxian tries to keep herself busy by treating a girl with digestive disorders but her mother-in-law is against such activities as she believes that it is beneath her family's dignity and social status. Yunxian gives birth to a girl when Miss Chen who is a concubine of Yang delivers a boy, making Yunxian a little insecure as the boy will be the next in line to inherit the name and property. She becomes quite upset when she learns that her husband is not responding to her properly and she also discovers the drowned body of her spinster aunt who was supposed to know a secret about Miss Chen. Yunxian is in for further shock when she attends the inquest, where the magistrate closes the cases with false acquisitions about the spinster aunt's death. At one-point Yunxian falls very sick and is nursed back to health by her grandmother Ru and Meiling with the permission of Lady Kuo.

Over a period of thirteen years Yunxian's role as a mother and wife has not changed much. She continues to be a busy lady raising 3 girls, teaching them to be proper ladies, graceful, obedient and respectful. She even oversees the painful process of binding her youngest daughter Ailan's feet. Lady Kuo continues to be a dominating character and Yunxian is wary of her. Her service of medical care continues as Yunxian visits Meiling frequently. Once a visiting official brings his wife and mother-in-law to Yunxian, they observe how Meiling is assisting in childbirth. Meiling is later called to Beijing to be a midwife to the women of the imperial court. Yunxian is also summoned to treat an eye infection of the empress. Much against her will she is forced to travel to Beijing in a pregnant state because her husband believes that the family status would be elevated through service to the emperor. On reaching Beijing, Yunxian charms the empress so much so that she is asked to stay until the delivery

of the empress. At one point both the empress and Meiling are pregnant and while the empress delivers a healthy boy, Meiling delivers a stillborn child much to the emperor's horror as he felt that the empress' chambers had been polluted. The punishment from a death sentence was changed to flogging. Meiling suffers a lot after being severely beaten, so Yunxian provides nursing care to her in spite of the taboo of touching blood. Yunxian delivers a baby boy, she and Meiling return to Wuxi. It is shocking for Yunxian to learn that Meiling had consumed a drink full of herbs to induce a miscarriage given by Dr. Wong. On her return home Yunxian finds her household infected with smallpox and nurtures them back to health. As she looks after the various people of her household, she finds out the truth about Maoren's infant son who does not look like his father. So, it will mean a case against Dr. Wong.

Yunxian is determined to bring justice even though it would bring a scandal to the family. The spinster aunt's body is exhumed, it is found that she died of a head injury, Manzi's father was Dr. Wong. Miss Chen and the spinster aunt had known that Dr. Wong was Manzi's father and that Dr. Wong had prescribed medicines to Yunxian to cause an abortion. Finally, Dr. Wong confesses that he wanted Manzi to be the legal heir and he wanted to prevent Yunxian from bearing a son.

Life changes for Yunxian as she is allowed to practice medicine openly. When Grandma Ru was on her deathbed, she handed over all her medical records to Yunxian, who in turn confronted Lady Kuo and got her consent to practice. It is ironic that Lady Kuo asks Yunxian to treat her chronic cough and at last both ladies are reconciled. During the last phase of her life Yunxian runs an extensive household, supervising the food stores, the women, children and most importantly her medical practice. She allows the women and children to attend the annual Dragon Boat festival which was forbidden earlier. Meiling remains a constant companion encouraging Yunxian to publish the medical records to motivate more women to get proper medical care. Both friends grow old gracefully.

The author Lisa See has shown the deep influence that China and its culture have had on her life and writings. The historical fiction set in the 15th century



China, when the protagonist Yunxian had to fight against all odds to practice medicine, to treat women and women's ailments. That world seemed so unjust with women being given very little regard in society. Yunxian struggled every bit of her life's journey with women like her mother-in-law Lady Kuo making her life hell. The novel also exposes the deep friendship between Yunxian and Meiling who stuck together through thick and thin.

This fictional piece evokes mixed emotions especially when the reader learns about how women in China were treated in 1400s, and how the foot binding was carried out during that time.

Among Lisa See's various accomplishments due to her interest in China and its culture was the Chinese Garden at the Huntington Library. She was a guest curator for the Chinese-American experience. Later she designed a walking tour of Los Angeles Chinatown, and was most overjoyed as they opened the China Town metro station, and she also curated the inaugural exhibition of the artist Tyrus Wong for the grand opening of the Chinese- American

Museum in Los Angeles. She even travelled to China and that gives the novel an authentic flavour of China and its culture. Lisa See's genius lives on through her various writings.

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