



“The Dilemma of The Working Woman: A Feminist Study of Tsukiyama’s *Women of The Silk*”

Submitted by

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Abstract

Most historians and literary critics tend to undermine and neglect the value of both women’s history and fictionalized history. Tsukiyama emphasizes the significant role that women characters play in a historical context in her contemporary historical novel *Women of The Silk* (1991). This study aims to explore women characters in this novel from a feminist perspective to highlight elements of objectification at two levels: the domestic and the workplace. The findings of this study demonstrate that, despite their subjugation, working women characters have more freedom, independence, and resistance than other women in China. This is the first study about this novel and serves to fill the gaps in existing research. This study is valuable for students and professors interested in the historical novel and Chinese literature and history.

Keywords: working woman, Chinese literature, historical novel, Tsukiyama

I. The Historical Novel and Women’s History

The historical novel, generally speaking, can be defined as: “A form of fictional narrative which reconstructs history and re-creates it imaginatively. Both historical and fictional characters may appear” (Cuddon, 383). A historical novel is required to be written at least fifty years after the events described; and its events completely lie outside the novelist’s lifetime, so that he or she is writing from research rather than personal experience (Brantly, 42). Hence, the goal of the historical novel is to transcend time to express themes that pertain to the present, as well as to reshape history and bring the past to life. In addition, most historians have neglected the lives and activities of women as historical subjects, because women are not regarded as active agents in the realm of politics (Rose,3). By writing a historical novel about women, Tsukiyama challenges male dominance over history and asserts the significant role that women play in historical contexts and, therefore, deserve a closer appraisal than they have so far received. Her novel *Women of The Silk* offers a critique of the present through its treatment of the past by re-imagining the lives of marginalized and subordinate women characters.

II. Gail Tsukiyama : Author Biography Gail Tsukiyama, a Chinese-American novelist, was born in San Francisco on September 13, 1957. Her father was a Japanese- American who was raised in Hawaii; and her mother was a Chinese who had immigrated to the United States from Hong Kong (Kort,327). She attended San Francisco State University, where she received both her Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Master of Arts Degree in English with an emphasis on creative writing (Seiwoong Oh, 291). She lives in El Cerrito, California; and works as a part-time lecturer for San Francisco State University and a freelance book-reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Ibid.) Tsukiyama wrote seven novels: *Women of The Silk* (1991), *The Samurai's Garden* (1994), *Night of Many Dreams* (1998), *The*



Language of Threads (1999), Dreaming Water (2002), The Street of a Thousand Blossoms (2007), and A Hundred Flowers (2012). She received many critical awards, such as the Academy of American Poets Award, the PEN Oakland/ Josephine Miles Literary Award, and the Asia Pacific Leadership Award (Ibid.). Tsukiyama's Asian heritage forms an integral part of and is embedded in her novels (Kort, 327). She has taken frequent trips to China with her mother to visit her grandmother, as she declares in an interview: "All the Chinese traditions from my mother's side of the family are within me, and have somehow found expression through my books" (quoted in Kort, 328). Thus, it was the influence of her mother and grandmother that provided her with the inspiration for many of the strong women characters in her novels.

III. Women of The Silk

Tsukiyama's first popular historical novel, Women of The Silk (1991) recounts the lives of a group of Chinese female workers in a silk factory from 1919 to 1939. The novel is based on Tsukiyama's Chinese heritage and pertains to the themes of solidarity and survival, as she explains in an interview in 1999: I began by researching China . . . So it felt like a natural desire to write about my heritage in some way. As I was reading one volume of an autobiography by Han Suyin, I was amazed to learn of these young women silk workers who were able to survive economically without family or husbands. There had been so little written about these early Chinese feminists that I knew instantly it was their story I wanted to tell (quoted in Kort,328)

The central character, Pei, is an ordinary Chinese girl of a typically patriarchal peasant family who cultivates mulberry leaves and breeds fish in ponds. When a fortune teller predicts that Pei will never marry, she is sent by her poverty-stricken parents to work in Yung Kee Silk Factory with her monthly wages being sent to her family. Pei resides at a boarding house called the girls' house, run by a retired silk worker, Auntie Yee (Women of The Silk, 15. Hereafter cited as WTS). Pei is unaware that her monthly payment has helped her family to survive during a bad harvest, as her guilt-ridden father ruminates :

He could only hope that Pei would someday grow to realize

how much the money she made meant for their survival.

The years after she went to work at the silk factory were

hard ones for them. It took three seasons for the fish to be

restored to the ponds and even longer for the mulberry

leaves to flourish again (WTS,133)

In Yung Kee Silk Factory, Pei is introduced to the process of spinning silk: the cocoons are sorted and boiled in water to loosen the threads, then the silk threads are wound into bobbins to create the raw silk. Like all new girls, Pei begins work at the silk factory in the sorting room (WTS, 36). She is dexterous enough to learn how to distinguish a good cocoon from a bad one by touch, texture, and firmness of its shell (Ibid.). Pei acclimates well and is promoted multiple times over the years, first to the spinning room to soak the cocoons, then she is promoted to be a reeler at the age of fourteen, after five years of work. This provides more money for her and her family (Ibid.,41).

IV.Theoretical Framework This study employs the feminist approach as a theoretical framework. According to Judith Lorber feminism is "a social movement whose basic goal is equality between women and men" (1). It began in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries following the Second World



War and has been divided into three waves of feminism. Feminists of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized that women were oppressed by a male-dominated society that marginalized them and considered them as “other” or “objects” (Tyson, 91). Hence, women are dehumanized because men consider them as objects. The objectification theory, which is part of the second wave of feminism, states that women’s bodies are viewed as objects to be evaluated. The theory of objectification proposed by Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi Ann Roberts in 1970 is divided into two main parts: self-objectification and sexual objectification. Further, Martha Nussbaum, an American philosopher, postulates in 1995 seven elements of treating someone as an object and thing: as instrumental, as fungible, as violable, as owned, as lacking autonomy, as inert, and denial of subjectivity (Fredrickson and Roberts, 174).

V. Feminist Perspective in Women of The Silk The researcher uses a close textual analysis to discuss five elements of objectification of women characters by a patriarchal society, which occurs at two levels: the domestic and the workplace. At the domestic level, the first element of objectification in *Women of The Silk* is ownership. This means the human body is treated as a thing or object that can be sold or bought (Nussbaum, 257). Thus, the patriarchal system treats women as objects to be sold. They are subjugated and forced by their parents to get married even as children. Pei observes that girls who are unable to cope with factory work are sent to their families in disgrace and forced into poor marriages, in which they are treated as servants rather than wives (WTS, 112).

Kung Ma is another example of ownership. At the age of fourteen, she is forced into an arranged marriage to a boy of six: “Out of nowhere returned the father she barely knew; he sold her again into another life” (Ibid., 87). Yet, Kung Ma never returns to her husband and she resumes her work at the silk factory to support her husband, his concubine, and his family (Ibid.).

According to Nussbaum, men treat women brutally because they are viewed as objects owned by men that have no value (258). Tyson asserts that “patriarchy . . . promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men” (85). In the novel, Auntie Yee and many women in the silk factory associate marriage with violence and unhappiness. Wives are beaten for submission, or ridiculed for not fulfilling their wifely duties (Ibid., 33). Violence against women is represented by Pei’s sister, Li, who is beaten by her husband. Pei’s mother is appalled to watch her “eldest daughter, her body beaten black and blue, wishing she had died like my other children, rather than have to return to that devil farmer” (Ibid., 144). The second element of objectification is denial of subjectivity, which means that a person’s feelings and experiences are ignored (Nussbaum, 257). Mei-li, for instance, furiously refuses her parents’ marriage plan because she wants to marry the person she loves, Hong: “They had absolutely no interest in what she felt. It was as if she had been born an empty box, only to be filled by their desires” (Ibid., 75). Her parents treat her as an object whose feelings need not be taken into account. However, she is also treated by her lover as an object for his desires, identified as only a body. She has been exploited and abandoned by her lover. Desperate, she commits suicide by drowning herself in the river. Auntie Yee blames herself for Mei-li’s death: “I’ve known of so many girls who have taken their own lives rather than face a marriage they didn’t want. How could I have been so blind!” (Ibid., 79).

Furthermore, three elements of objectification of women occur in the workplace, namely instrumentality, denial of subjectivity, and fungibility. Firstly, instrumentality means that a person is used and treated as a tool for another purpose (Nussbaum, 264). In *Women of The Silk*, working women are



treated as instruments for increasing production by their boss at the workplace with complete disregard for their health. Tsukiyama exposes authentic historical facts about the dire conditions of working women in China in the early twentieth century. In *Women of The Silk* Chinese women characters work for long hours at the silk factory under unsanitary conditions that risk their health: “ They left the factory wilted and drained from the wet heat. Most of the time they were given half an hour for lunch and ten minutes off for every three hours they worked”(WTS,36). Chung, the owner of the factory, has employed managers carrying sticks to threaten or beat the workers and ensure that they complete their work (Ibid.,27). In 1932, the conditions at the factory were aggravated by working longer hours due to the bad quality of the cocoons, which needed longer soaking time, in a dirty, noisy, and damp atmosphere for fourteen hours a day (Ibid.,108). Further, exhaustion, bad ventilation, and walking home damp in the chilly night greatly affect the women’s health (Ibid.,109). The second element of objectification at the workplace is denial of subjectivity, which means that the employer demands an employee to work in dangerous conditions(Nussbaum,263). In *Women of The Silk*, the younger girls are exposed to heat and the risk of being burned in the spinning room when they soak the cocoons in boiling water to loosen the silk threads. Hiemstra-Kuperus affirms that in 1929 Chinese silk factories hired girls as young as eight for “the painful task of beating the boiling cocoons to release the thread. This work caused their hands to come in frequent contact with boiling water and sometimes led to fatal or disfiguring accidents” (121). Pei sympathizes with a young girl whose hands are discolored with permanent burning scars : There were burns on the girl’s hands that would leave discolor scars throughout her life. Pei’s heart went out to these young girls, who simply couldn’t adapt to the silk work and had to suffer

through each day, adding to their injuries (Ibid.,112).

Moreover, working women are prone to burn accidents. Ming screams and moans when she gets burned with the vat of boiling water; and Lin calls Chan, the herbalist to treat her burns: “Ming lay on the floor in obvious pain, the skin of her face and arm pink as if she had been scoured with a brush” (Ibid.,42). Pei covers Ming’s shivering body with a discarded cocoon bag, and Chen Ling soothes her (Ibid.). Chung victimizes women workers because he dehumanizes them, believing that they lack the courage to speak and complain. As a result, many women complain among themselves for having little time for rest: “Let’s see how they feel standing all day in this heat! . . . Still, they bit their lips and kept working” (WTS, 36). Chen Ling and Lin, the factory’s supervisors, are powerless to change the long working hours: “He [Chung] knew that the girls would continue to work in silence, afraid to challenge the unfair hours for fear of losing their jobs” (WTS,109). The women kept working silently until one of the girls suddenly died: “The girl had been too scared not to work, even with a high fever and a bad cough. One morning, she collapsed in front of her basin and never regained consciousness” (Ibid.). The third element of objectification in the workplace is fungibility, which means treating a person as interchangeable (Nussbaum,262). Hence, workers are fungible either with other workers or with machines (Ibid., 263). During the women’s strike, Chung feels angry that a woman has dared to address him in this way. He threatens to dispense of them: “Do you think you’re indispensable to me? Well, you aren’t. You’re nothing but failures, female dogs who have just thrown away any luck you could have had in this life!” (Ibid.,115). Here, Chung compares women to dogs and threatens to replace them.

V. Freedom, Resistance, and Sisterhood in the Novel



Pei is presented as a strong woman who is capable of survival. She realizes that her parents have chosen her for silk work because she is stronger than her sister: “Li would have shrunk away; she had survived” (Ibid.,145). When Pei visits her parents many years later in 1936, her mother asks for forgiveness: “I didn’t believe your father when he said you were happy with your new life, . . .I prayed for the day when you would return and forgive us” (Ibid.,141).

Tsukiyama adds a historical dimension to her ordinary characters to render their experiences more authentic. Thus, Pei’s Hakka historical lineage contributes to shaping her strong and independent character. Pei’s father is from the Hakkas, the guest people, who migrated from the north and settled in southern China due to political unrest at the end of the Taiping rising (1851–1864) (WTS,10). Historians associate the Hakkas with their historical experience:

The character of the Hakkas is shown quite clearly in their name and history. They are a strong, hardy, energetic, fearless race . . .
The women folk are strong and energetic and have never adopted foot-binding as a custom (Constable, 10)

Notably, working women challenge traditional customs in China as well as gender roles. They have more freedom and independence than other Chinese women. They can travel and eat in restaurants: “The silk work provided them not only with money but with the independence of working and living on their own. For many girls, there could be no turning back” (WTS,54). Hence, Pei appreciates her new-found freedom as a working woman and enjoys some privileges that are denied to other women in China, such as going out to visit temples or seeing an opera with a group of girls (WTS, 37). Historically, Chinese women should stay inside their homes. In the silk area, by contrast, women can travel freely around the countryside (Wolf, 258). However, in the novel the village people resent the freedom and financial independence of women in the factory, unaware that they are working to support their families :

On several occasions, jealous villagers stopped and pointed at them.“ Who do you think you are ? ” they said vulgarly.
“ Living together with all your money!” The villagers had no idea that most of the girls’ earnings went to their families and for room and board. Usually, they were bothered by this thoughtless hostility(WTS, 39).

Moreover, the resistance of the working women against oppression is epitomized by their strike. The sudden death of one of the girls provokes the workers to summon their courage and challenge Chung’s authority. The togetherness of working women is the only solution for justice. The women organized a strike to demand shorter working hours, more rest periods, and better ventilation (Ibid.,110). Over a hundred women support the strike; and Chen Ling urges them to refuse to work as slaves for Chung’s greed (Ibid.,113). Chung orders his armed guards to scare the workers off with gunshots, but women yell their demand for shorter hours while he shoots to scatter them, and one of the workers, Sui Ying dies (Ibid.,115). Hundreds of women were encouraged to strike by Sui Ying’s death, shutting down other silk factories. In order not to lose more profits, the factory owners eventually agreed to shorten working hours to ten (Ibid.,119).



In 1936, like many factories, Chung was forced to close down the silk factory due to the decline of the business and depression (WTS,152). The workers rejoice in his defeat, which does not diminish Pei's bitterness and hatred towards him for killing Sui Ying: "Within their silence was all the hatred the years had stored up . . . [they] raise their arms and rejoice at their one last victory". (Ibid., 153).

The sisterhood of working women in the silk factory is another mode of resisting patriarchy. The historical figure of Kuan Yin offers a stimulus to fictional characters to reshape their lives and resist arranged marriages. According to Chinese history, Princess Kuan Yin was persecuted and executed by her father when she defied him and refused to marry to be a nun (Mann and Cheng,31). In *Women of The Silk*, Kuan Yin inspires the women working in the silk factory to be brave enough to challenge stereotypes of gender roles, reject arranged marriages, and join a sisterhood. After the evening meal, the women gather in the reading room to listen to their favorite ballad of Kuan Yin, which Chen Ling reads with great enthusiasm: "Kuan Yin alone fought against all the objections of her family to become a nun" (WTS,34). Chen Ling urges the girls to follow Kuan Yin's example :

Cheng Ling spoke to the girls after the evening meals, telling them of the advantages of remaining pure in the sisterhood "Why do we need a husband to mock us and a mother-in-law to beat us? This way we can dictate our own lives and remain free!" and the girls would clap and chant, "Kuan Yin! Kuan Yin!" (WTS, 34)

This sisterhood is a bond that assists working women to enhance their courage to face their oppressors, whether domestic or workplace. Many working women, like Chen Ling, Ming, Lin, and Pei choose to go through the hair-dressing ceremony to join the "silk sisterhood" in which they pledge to dedicate their lives to silk work instead of marrying (WTS,51). Thus, Tsukiyama's novel reveals important historical facts about the "silk sisterhood" in China :

[Women] cut their own hair, refusing to marry at all.
These [women] joined a Sisterhood of silk workers . . . ,
who dedicated themselves to silk, enjoying more pride
and independence than most could have found in a
rural China (Hiemstra-Kuperus, 127).

Auntie Yee does not regret her choice of sisterhood and acts as a surrogate mother to all the girls living in the boarding house (WTS,.54). She performs the rituals of the hair-dressing ceremony by braiding Chen Ling's hair and folding it into a chignon atop her head to signify her marriage to the sisterhood:

At the girls' house, Chen Ling found strength and courage from the stories of Kuan Yin in the precious volume. From them, she developed her own voice and found her rightful place. She adapted to the silk work immediately, as if it were second nature, and was now just moments away from the final step toward dedicating her life to the sisterhood (WTS, 62)

Ming's parents, who are poor farmers, travel for two days with her seven brothers and sisters to attend the ceremony (Ibid.,64). The sisterhood helps the women to make their own money, support their families, and have a much freer life than many of the young women forced into an arranged marriage. For Kung Ma, who



joins the silk work at the age of seven, the women at the sisters' house are her surrogate family: "They provided all the love and nourishment she had never received from a father and mother" (Ibid.,100).

In addition, when Lin's father is murdered by his political opponents, she decides to work at the silk factory to help her family financially. Pei admires Lin's self-sacrifice and feels very lucky to be her friend. One of the servants in Lin's house, Mui, tells Pei: "Did you know it's because of my Missy[Lin] that this family has survived?" (Ibid.,98). Lin's work at the silk factory for ten years has imbued her with independence to defy her mother, who urges her to leave factory work to get married. She chooses to vow celibacy and dedicate her life to the sisterhood, as she tells Pei: "I've known too many girls whose families have made them marry against their will. I won't be trapped in a loveless marriage with a total stranger. I can't allow that to be my fate"(WTS, 57).

With the invasion of the Imperial Japanese Army in 1937, the sisterhood was shattered. Chen Ling and Ming plan to join religious vegetarian halls; while Lin, Pei, and Ji Shen plan to travel to Hong Kong (Ibid. 82). On the eve of their departure to Hong Kong, however, Lin is trapped in a burning silk factory and dies (WTS,163). Yet, Lin's brother helps Pei and Ji Shen travel to Hong Kong to start a new life for themselves. Hence, the novel ends with a sense of hope and promise of a new life.

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