
Emancipation of Chinese women in Meira Chand's *A Different Sky*

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Meira Chand (1942-) occupies an important place in the list of multicultural writers. Born to Indian - Swiss parents, she depicts the diasporic issues particularly of the nations she has lived in. Presently, she lives in Singapore. Her historical novel *A Different Sky* (2010) is about Singapore during the tumultuous years 1937-1955 including the Second World War that took place in between. Her purpose of writing this novel was to explain Singapore's history to the new generation. The novel deals with many issues like cultural clash, identity crisis, alienation etc. The novel develops further the theme of emancipation of Chinese women who suffered from the

orthodox Chinese traditions. This paper focuses on the emancipation of Chinese women and for this Meira Chand has chosen one of her prominent characters to bring out their emancipation.

Key Words: Emancipation, Orthodox, Women, Prominent, Chinese.

Meira Chand has portrayed a traditional picture of the Chinese society. Mei Lan, a Chinese girl, yearns to emancipate herself and other Chinese women from the stifling traditions of China. She has been given a nice portrayal by the author to represent the Chinese women. Women were confined to live within their traditions. It was a tale of miseries on the part of women.

Through the novel, we come across the sufferings of slave girls who lived as ignored beings. Ah Siew, who lived as a slave girl in Mei Lan's home had narrated tragic tales of her home in China. In her village, they faced devastating floods and famines. Her father sold her two sisters to be prostitutes and received three pieces of silver. It was one of the traditions in China. Those girls became victim of such tradition. They suffered from starvation and what else could be done. He sold again another two daughters and for them he got some quantity of rice. Her sisters who were sold to the brothel did not want to go there and wished to stay with her. As Ah Siew, was the eldest among them but she was unable to help them and finally they were taken to the brothel. They were frequently slapped by the women staff. They still

wanted to return home but their mother advised them that if they wanted to survive then they must stay there. So there was no alternative for them other than to agree. They agreed because of their tradition and survived themselves and their family by obeying such laws. This kind of tradition had victimised many other women of China and Ah Siew who her self was living as the slave girl had narrated several stories to Mei Lan about her other sisters who were living in Kongsí Fong. It made Mei Lan melancholic and she herself was scared not to become a victim of tradition. She came to know through Ah Siew that like her second grandmother most of the Chinese girls were sold to rich men like puppets:

Gold and Silver and Little Sparrow must all have been sold by their parents

for a bag of rice or a few coins when they were seven or eight years old, just like Ah Siew's sisters. Now, Little Sparrow was already fifteen and Gold and Silver thirteen years old. Sorrow for the girls and horror at their plight blew hot and cold inside Mei Lan. What would she feel, what would she do if her parents decided to sell her? Worse than this was the realisation that it was her own grandfather who had bought the girls as a present for Second Grandmother? That one person could be bought as a gift for another filled

her anew with distress.

(Pp.50-51)

Mei Lan's second grandmother was sold to a brothel at the age of five and Mei Lan's grandfather paid more money and bought her. People could be sold like onions or fish or a length of cloth. Her own grandfather had paid money for children and then filled Little Sparrow's body with a baby. And Second Grandmother too had been sold at five and sold again at thirteen to Grandfather (p.57).

When Mei Lan heard from Ah Siew that Little Sparrow who was also a slave girl and was going to deliver a baby of Lim Hock An Mei Lan was perturbed as Ah Siew explained it to her:

Because it is Ancient Master's baby. If the baby is a boy Little Sparrow will



become Ancient
 Master's
 concubine or may
 be even his wife.
 Then Little
 Sparrow would be
 your third
 grandmother and
 her baby would be
 your uncle. If this
 happens then
 Little Sparrow too
 will wear jade
 earrings and an
 embroidered sam
 and eat bird's nest
 soup like Ancient
 Mistress.
 Sometimes
 Ancient Master
 looks at me now
 in the way he used

to look at Little
 Sparrow. One day,
 if I have a baby
 boy by Ancient
 Master, then may
 be I will become
 your fourth
 grandmother.
 (p.26)

Mei Lan feels dejected for Little Sparrow who according to their tradition would be now Mei Lan's third grandmother. Mei Lan thought that what ever little Sparrow had achieved in her life she was destined to lose it. It was tragic, how Little Sparrow returned from nunnery with a baby boy and when second grandmother saw it she became aggressive and reacted furiously. After Little Sparrow's first child she was pregnant again, it was unbearable for

second grandmother and she refused to allow her in the home.

Through the novel, it is apparent that women were suppressed. It was very difficult especially for women to live in such traditions. When a girl child was born, at its initial breaths she was drowned in the river by her mother in order to save her from slavery. Taking example of Ah Siew's sisters, she still did not know about their whereabouts and some times she thought that they would not return. She was sure regarding their victimisation and ensured herself that she would not see them again. For her they were dead. She still felt the wailing of her sisters in her dreams. She missed them a lot and could not stop herself from tears that rolled down from her cheeks. Mei Lan equally became melancholic and herself began worrying. Those traditions were totally opposite to

the modern girl Mei Lan and she thought to get rid of this orthodox tradition as soon as possible.

There was another tradition in the Chinese society that when a man was supposed to tie a knot and if the man was not himself present, he was replaced by his friend as it happened with one of the slave girls whose husband was not present as he was working that time in a tin mine and she was forced to tie her knot with one of his friends a cockerel. It was one of the customs in China. The slave girl could not see her husband as he died during his work in the coal mine. In this way that slave girl was married against her choice and all other slave girls who were alive and lived in Kongsui Fong did not want to happen the same thing with them. They were totally embarrassed when they came through

such type of tragic stories which depicted nothing other than sufferings. .

Slave girls had their own ambitions which were very different from girls of other races. Mei Lan had been busy almost in half part of the novel by asking plenty of questions to her house maid Ah Siew, other slave girls and her second grandmother. Mei Lan basically wanted to know in detail the customs, traditions and culture of the Chinese people and her earnest desire was to emancipate herself from the male oriented society. She wanted to be a modern woman in order to save herself and other Chinese women from slavery.

Against this background Mei Lan grows in awareness and develops her personality through her own life experiences. As with the passage of time she matured and it became apparent to Meira Chand that consciousness of

Mei Lan must be raised to exert especially for the rights and equality of women that were less privileged than herself. She had been provided special tools which were not given to other women in her family as it includes education and privileges, vast experience of different worlds and access to herself in an age of new freedoms. Like a modern woman, Mei Lan stood intrepid before propriety, and took independent decisions. To say it in a more clear way Mei Lan had been a transitional female link between traditional past of Singapore and its more enlightened future. After the war, like Elizabeth Choy, Mei Lan went to London for some years in order to recover herself. In London she got a degree in law and returned to Singapore to be called to the bar. It was really brave for a woman of that time to enter the all-male bastion of

the law, but reading of amazing women such as Teo Soon Kim who was the first woman lawyer in Singapore and many others who followed her later, made Meira Chand realise that Mei Lan was suitable for the work to be done.

Mei Lan started working in a law firm of Singapore. There she visited a women's prison and was called upon to represent female miscreants, a class of women she had not known before when their fathers solicited husbands for them. It was decided by Teo Soon Kim to become a lawyer simply because no woman in Singapore and few in Asia had done so earlier. Such an uncommon verve was quite remarkable and finally Meira Chand added this element to Mei Lan especially when she met Teo Soon Kim. It was unbearable for Mei Lan. She noticed the extent to which illiterate women were defenceless against

religious and secular laws that permitted men to practise polygamy; men divorcing women on the smallest pretext; yet prevented a woman from doing the same. The dismissal and abuse helplessly suffered by so many women shocked Mei Lan deeply. Mei Lan pleaded nicely the case of battered wife namely Ei Ling which was a namesake of her mother. Ei Ling had a tale full of sufferings. She was a woman who was quite often beaten by her polygamist husband. As polygamy was one of the customs in the Chinese society to which Mei Lan had vast experience of her own grandfather, Lim Hock An. Ei Ling was at times so harshly beaten by her husband that two of her babies came out dead. Not only this, he used to drag her when ever he wanted. He beat her children as well. After leaving Ei Ling, he went through another marriage and



married a girl of fifteen years and he did all this without informing his wife Ei Ling. All this was narrated by Ei Ling to Mei Lan and finally she was emancipated by Mei Lan by winning her case. After this Mei Lan started a sort of shelter for the women who were abused.

Works Cited:

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