

snow flower and the secret fan

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is a poignant novel by Lisa See that explores the complex relationships between women in 19th-century China. Set against the backdrop of a society steeped in tradition, the story delves into the themes of friendship, love, and the constraints imposed by cultural expectations. Through the lens of Lily and Snow Flower, the protagonists, See presents a rich tapestry of life in a time when women's lives were often dictated by the whims of men and the rigid structures of society.

Plot Summary

The novel is divided into two parts, each focusing on different stages of the lives of the main characters.

Childhood and the Bond of Laotong

1. Introducing Lily: The story begins with Lily, a young girl from a poor family in a rural village in China. She is subjected to the painful practice of foot binding, a symbol of beauty and social status.
2. Snow Flower Enters: At the age of seven, Lily is paired with Snow Flower, a girl from a wealthier family, in a ritual known as Laotong, which signifies a lifelong bond of friendship.
3. Shared Secrets: The two girls communicate through a secret written language called nu shu, which was developed by women in China to express their thoughts and feelings away from the prying eyes of men.

As their bond deepens, they navigate the trials of growing up, including foot binding, marriage, and the expectations of their families. The connection between the two girls is profound, as they serve as each other's confidantes and emotional support.

Adulthood and the Challenges of Life

1. Marriage and Betrayal: The narrative shifts to adulthood where both women marry into different families. The pressures of their respective marriages reveal the harsh realities of their lives.
2. Struggles and Heartaches: Lily faces significant challenges, including her husband's infidelities and her own struggles with motherhood. Snow Flower, while initially appearing to have a more favorable situation, also experiences the pain of loss and societal expectations.
3. Conflict and Distance: As their lives take different paths, misunderstandings and distance begin to strain their relationship. The once unbreakable bond of Laotong is tested as both women confront their individual realities.

Key Themes

The novel is rich in themes that resonate with readers, providing a deep understanding of women's lives during this period.

Friendship and Loyalty

- The bond between Lily and Snow Flower represents the ideal of female friendship.
- Their Laotong relationship showcases how women supported each other in a patriarchal society.
- Despite the challenges they face, their loyalty to one another remains a central theme throughout the novel.

Gender Roles and Societal Expectations

1. Patriarchy: The novel highlights the oppressive nature of a society where men hold power over women.
2. Foot Binding: This painful practice symbolizes the extreme lengths to which women went to conform to societal standards of beauty and femininity.
3. Motherhood: The expectations placed on women to bear sons and fulfill domestic roles are emphasized, showing the limited agency women had in their lives.

The Power of Language

- The use of nu shu serves as a powerful symbol of female communication and resistance.
- Through their secret writing, Lily and Snow Flower express their innermost thoughts and feelings, creating a space for their voices to be heard.
- The fragility of their language mirrors the fragility of their relationship as they navigate personal and societal challenges.

Character Development

The characters in "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" are intricately developed, each representing different facets of womanhood in their time.

Lily

- Resilience: Lily's journey is marked by her resilience in the face of adversity.
- Growth: As she matures, she grapples with her choices and the weight of societal expectations, ultimately leading to a deep self-reflection.
- Complexity: Her character embodies the struggle between loyalty to her friend and loyalty to her family, adding layers to her personality.

Snow Flower

- Idealism: Snow Flower initially appears as the more idealistic of the two, but her life experiences reveal her vulnerabilities.
- Tragedy: The tragedies she faces highlight the harsh realities of being a woman in her society, and her character evolves through pain and loss.
- Symbol of Friendship: As the story progresses, Snow Flower becomes a symbol of the sacrifices women make for friendship, love, and family.

Historical Context

Understanding the historical context of the novel enriches the reading experience and provides insight into the lives of the characters.

19th Century China

- Confucian Values: The societal norms of Confucianism heavily influenced gender roles, dictating that women be submissive and obedient to their male counterparts.
- Foot Binding: This practice became a status symbol, with upper-class women often having their feet bound to enhance their beauty and desirability.
- Nu Shu Language: The existence of nu shu is a reflection of the need for women to find their voice in a male-dominated society.

The Author's Perspective

Lisa See draws upon her own heritage as a Chinese-American author to provide authenticity to the narrative. Through her meticulous research and personal insights, she brings to life the struggles and triumphs of women in historical China.

Conclusion

In "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan," Lisa See masterfully weaves a tale of friendship, love, and the indomitable spirit of women against the backdrop of a restrictive society. The novel serves as a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the power of female bonds. Through Lily and Snow Flower's story, readers are invited to reflect on the complexities of relationships and the societal norms that shape them. The exploration of these themes not only offers a window into the past but also resonates with contemporary discussions about gender and friendship, making the novel both timeless and relevant.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in 'Snow Flower and the Secret Fan'?

The main themes include female friendship, the struggles of women in 19th century China, the practice of foot-binding, and the complexities of cultural identity.

How does the concept of laotong impact the relationship between Lily and Snow Flower?

Laotong represents a lifelong bond between two women, allowing Lily and Snow Flower to share their innermost thoughts and emotions, which deepens their connection despite societal pressures.

In what ways does the secret fan serve as a symbol in the novel?

The secret fan symbolizes communication and intimacy between women, allowing them to express feelings and thoughts that are otherwise suppressed in a patriarchal society.

What role does the historical context play in the development of the characters in 'Snow Flower and the Secret Fan'?

The historical context, particularly the practice of foot-binding and societal expectations for women in 19th century China, shapes the characters' lives, choices, and their struggles for autonomy.

How does the author, Lisa See, portray the intersection of friendship and betrayal in the novel?

Lisa See explores friendship and betrayal through the evolving relationship between Lily and Snow Flower, highlighting moments of loyalty and misunderstanding that reflect the complexities of female relationships in their cultural context.

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