

The Writing of Historical Trauma in the Island of Sea Women

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Keywords: Lisa see, The island of sea women, Historical trauma

Abstract: In *The Island of Sea Women*, Lisa See writes the historical trauma of the people on Jeju Island in 20th century. By depicting the life and friendship of two haenyeos, she explores the decisive impact of the April 3 Incident on the individuals. She not only describes the historical event in a realistic manner, but tries to reveal the inner feelings of the individuals, which helps the traumatized return to the site of memory and reconcile with the past. Lisa See's transnational writing of the Korean people reconstructs history and spreads it around the world, thus integrating memory of the local people into the collective memory of all human beings.

1. Introduction

As a Chinese American writer, Lisa See has been committed to writing stories of Chinese. However, in her latest novel, *The Island of Sea Women*, she turns to focus on the life stories of Koreans on Jeju Island. As her previous works of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and *China Dolls*, *The Island of Sea Women* also writes about women. Actually the whole story centers on the friendship between two haenyeos, Young-sook and Mi-ja. However, *The Island of Sea Women* is different from the other two novels in the aspect that it does not intend to address the gender issue but explore the historical trauma suffered by the Koreans on Jeju Island.

In the novel, Lisa See depicts the turbulent history of Jeju Island starting from the 1930s. From 1910 to 1945, Jeju Island was colonized by Japan and the local Korean people led a miserable life. In 1945, Japan surrendered and the United States took it over and yet things did not turn any better. From 1948 and 1954 a series of uprisings and counterinsurgency occurred on the island, which resulted an estimated death of 30,000-60,000 people and destruction of over 100 villages. This is called the April 3 Incident.[1] With a focus on the April 3 Incident, Lisa See explores the historical trauma of the Korean people on the Island. It is fair to say that *The Island of Sea Women* is a historical novel based on real facts and events. In the Acknowledgments of the book, Lisa See records in detail how she uses official documents issued by the South Korean government, the U.S. National Archives, and a number of U.S. and South Korean military agencies to write her novel. She says those materials give her "first-hand descriptions of the events". [2]

In the novel, Lisa See depicts how the two heroines' intimate friendship is broken by the

Bukchon Massacre in the April 3 Incident. Faced with the possible massacre of everyone present, Young-sook asked Mi-ja, who had a chance to escape, to help her family, but she was rejected, and Young-sook's husband, their eldest son, and her husband's sister were killed, while Young-sook and Mi-ja survived. Afterwards, Mi-ja begged for Young-sook's forgiveness many times, but Young-sook could not forgive her until many years later. Is Mi-ja a perpetrator by not helping to save Young-sook's family? How does Lisa See use female friendship to explore the decisive impact of history on individuals? As a Chinese American writer, what is the significance of Lisa See's transnational writing about the history of Jeju Island? This paper will try to deal with those issues.

2. Betrayal and Massacre: Young-sook's Traumatic Experience

Like her other novels on sisterhood, Lisa See constructs an intimate friendship between the two heroines at the beginning of the story. Young-sook and Mi-ja met in 1923 at the age of seven. They were like real sisters, caring for each other and growing together from girlhood to womanhood. Young-sook was born in Hado Village on Jeju Island. Although her family was poor, it was full of love and warmth. Her mother was the leader of the haenyeos in the village and she was not only hardworking but patient with her children. Her father, like other men on Jeju Island, was responsible for the housework and taking care of the young children when his wife went fishing in the sea. Compared with Young-sook, Mi-ja lived a sad life. She was an orphan and had to live with her uncle's family and they treated her badly. The other villagers despised her because her parents worked for the Japanese when they were alive. Young-sook's mother took pity on Mi-ja and often fed her. Young-sook and Mi-ja's friendship grew over time. In a confrontation with the Japanese, Mi-ja desperately protected Young-sook's mother. This experience made the two girls closer like real sisters. When Young-sook was 15 years old, her mother died in an accident. Mi-ja not only assisted Young-sook with her mother's funeral, but also helped her with housework and cared for her younger siblings. Even after Young-sook and Mi-ja got married, they still maintained a close relationship.

However, even if the novel begins with the friendship of the two heroines, it cannot be classified as a work of "sisterhood". "Sisterhood" is a key term of contemporary feminist movement. It emphasizes unity among women under the common oppression of patriarchy. In *The Island of Sea Women*, Lisa See obviously focuses more on historical trauma instead of patriarchy. With the turmoil of Jeju Island, the friendship between Young-sook and Mi-ja faced a huge test. On August 15, 1945, Japan announced its surrender in World War II. The villagers were excited at first, believing that Jeju Island had finally gained independence. But soon after the Japanese left, the U.S. military came. The U.S. army chose to hire the same Koreans who once worked for the Japanese to run the local affairs and life was as miserable as before. This caused a lot of conflicts which triggered the April 3 Incident. In the story, Young-sook and Mi-ja were directly involved in the Bukchon Massacre in the Incident and it completely changed their friendship.

On the day of Bukchon Massacre, Mi-ja came to visit Young-sook who were living in Bukchon Village. It happened that two policemen died in the village and no one knew who killed them. The authorities sent a large number of police to the village to investigate and drove all the villagers to the village school, forcing them to name the murderer, or they would kill them all. Mi-ja's husband, who worked for the Jeju government, came to rescue Mi-ja. Young-sook begged Mi-ja to help her family, but Mi-ja dare not ask help from her husband. Soon Young-sook's relatives were killed.

For the next 60 years, Young-sook suffered from the trauma of the massacre and Mi-ja's betrayal. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena." [3] Traumatic experience itself is paradoxical. One sees the

violence directly and yet can never fully understand it; the violent event takes place in an instant, but the damage is delayed and comes back to mind repeatedly. Young-sook knew three of her beloved ones died and yet she could never make peace with it. She often wanted to commit suicide and suffered from nightmares. In 2015, Young-Eun Jung and Moon-Doo Kim of Jeju National University in South Korea conducted a survey on 110 survivors and 1,011 immediate family members of the victims of the April 3 Incident. The result shows that even 70 years after the Incident, 10.8% are still suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, 3.0% have PTSD only, and 24.3% have depression only.[4]

In addition to mourning the sudden death of her relatives, Young-Sook also could not understand Mi-ja's rejection and betrayal. The death of her relatives was so sudden and unexpected that Young-sook irrationally regarded Mi-ja as an accomplice of the murderer, even though Mi-ja explained that she was actually powerless at the time. Mi-ja apologized for her cowardice and asked for Young-sook's forgiveness, but Young-sook never wanted to listen. When Young-sook's daughter grew up and fell in love with Mi-ja's son, out of resentment towards Mi-ja, Young-sook broke off with her daughter, which brought great pain to both families. For Young-sook, the massacre and betrayal are clearly the source of her endless trauma.

3. Trauma of Mi-Ja

However, Young-sook did not realize that Mi-ja actually was also a victim of history. Compared with Young-Sook, Mi-ja's fate seems more miserable, and her misfortune is closely related to history. When she was born, her mother died of dystocia. When she was 7, her father died of illness. Her uncle's family mistreated her and most villagers hated her simply because her parents chose to work for the Japanese. At 18, she was raped by Sang-mun, a collaborator who worked for the Japanese. Mi-ja turned to Young-sook's grandmother for help, but Grandmother never liked Mi-ja because of her parents. She thought that since Mi-ja's virginity had been ruined and it seemed reasonable to marry the offspring of a collaborator to another collaborator. Grandmother persuaded Mi-ja's uncle to marry Mi-ja to Sang-mun. But Sang-mun was a wicked man. After marriage, he constantly beat Mi-ja. Even after Mi-ja gave birth to a son, Sang-mun never stopped abusing the mother and the son. Mi-ja's misfortunes in childhood and adulthood are directly related to the fact that she is the descendant of collaborators. The Korean people had a strong hatred towards the Japanese invaders and they hated the Koreans who worked for the Japanese as well. Mi-ja becomes a victim of the local Koreans' hatred for the Japanese and the collaborators.

Mi-ja cherished her friendship with Young-sook. She always loved Young-sook and her mother. But in the Bukchon Massacre, when Young-sook begged Mi-ja to use her husband's influence to save her family, Mi-ja was too scared to do anything. Mi-ja's cowardice became the source of her repeated self-blame and guilt, a stigma she couldn't get rid of. Steve Joseph finds that when individuals survive in a traumatic event, they will have "survivor guilt". The source of guilt may arise from two causes. One is that the survivor may think he or she survives at the cost of others' life; and the other is that the individual may blame oneself for actions not taken or actions regretted. [5] This kind of "survivor guilt" will cause psychological trauma. Mi-ja's mentality after the massacre is typical of "survivor's guilt", which triggers her negative evaluation of herself. She regretted for failing to take any actions, which might have saved Young-sook's family. She regarded herself as a bad person who lived a life of shame. To alleviate her guilt, Mi-ja left her husband and came to live in the same village with Young-sook. She tried her best to help Young-sook in different ways. However, Young-sook never accepted her apology and refused to forgive her. Finally, Mi-ja immigrated to America with her son and died there unhappily.

4. Recovery of Trauma

After the massacre, the traumatic experiences could not escape from the memories of Young-sook and Mi-ja. It constantly returned in the form of nightmares, causing them tremendous psychological pain. The trauma needs to be recovered, or it will continue to harm them. But how can trauma be recovered? Judith Herman believes that restoring a sense of security and connecting with others are the basis for recovering trauma, and at the same time the survivor needs to reconstruct his or her traumatic experience and regain a sense of continuity with the past. [6] In *The Island of Sea Women*, Young-sook's and Mi-ja's trauma are entangled with history, and thus the recovery is extremely difficult.

The massacre and betrayal deformed Young-sook's interpersonal relationships and broke her trust on others. Therefore, rebuilding a sense of security and trust is the first step in the recovery of trauma. After the massacre, Young-sook left Bukchon and returned to Hado Village. The warmth and care from her family and other villagers helped Young-sook regain strength. In spite of the pain of losing three family members, Young-sook's mother-in-law comforted and took good care of Young-sook. Young-sook's father and brother came to offer help in the first place. Love and care from families members gave Young-sook courage and strength, and her home became a shelter and healing place. To distract her from her loss, Young-sook's mother-in-law encouraged her to fish with other haenyos, hoping that she could soothe the pain among old friends. The haenyos in the village had known each other since childhood. Besides fishing to support their families, they could always talk about anything in life. They shared the pains of losing family members in the Incident and matters of raising children, and they also jointly raised money to rebuild village schools and repair the roads. Early since Sigmund Freud, "Talk Therapy" has been considered an effective way of curing psychological diseases. While communicating with other haenyos, Young-sook revealed her pains to other women who had similar experiences, and they could actually comfort each other. By involving in the village public affairs, the haenyos regained value of life, which helped them look into the future and get away from the dark past.

Love and care from her family and other haenyos could greatly help alleviate Young-sook's trauma, but she still lacked a public space for mourning. After the Incident, the Jeju government sealed up all the relevant documents, and deliberately concealed the history for decades. The "guilt-by-association" system adopted by the government further stopped people from disclosing the Incident. If anyone had been accused of getting involved or reporting family members dead in the Incident, he or his family members would be restricted in getting jobs, promotion and education.[7] It was not until in the 1990s that the Incident was widely known outside Jeju Island. As the one who experienced and witnessed the Incident, Young-sook initially lacked the social and political environment to mourn her relatives. She needed a frame in which these separated and suppressed memories could be reconstructed and found a proper place in social memory. Without such a social frame, Young-sook's traumatic memories could only be maintained on a personal level, and her psychological trauma could not be empathized and vented, and it would be difficult for her trauma to recover.

In the novel, Lisa See shows how the Incident came into public view step by step. In 1995, the Jeju government released a list of some of the victims. In 1998, the government held the 50th anniversary of the Incident. In 1999, President Kim Dae-jung promised to build a memorial park and at the same year, the Korean National Assembly passed a special law to launch a full investigation into the Incident. In 2008, the Peace Memorial Park was opened. Young-sook and other people who suffered from trauma in the Incident were invited to attend the opening and for the first time in their life they had the opportunity to mourn the deceased publicly. A memorial occasion like this gave Young-sook a chance to review the traumatic event systematically. She came to realize that the Incident was a collective matter as well as a personal one. This made her to reconsider her hatred for Mi-ja and opens the possibility of reconciliation.

As for Mi-ja, she desperately wanted to tell Young-sook how much she regretted for failing to offer any help in the massacre. Young-sook suffered from trauma and so did Mi-ja. She dare not beg for her husband for help in the massacre because she was too scared of him. She never told Young-sook that Sang-mun raped her before they got married and constantly beat her in their married life. She suffered great pain for her inability in the massacre. She wanted to tell Young-sook all these but whenever Mi-ja went to see Young-sook, Young-sook refused to meet her. Researchers find that survivors of an accident or massacre have the imperative to tell to “come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself”. [8] Before Mi-ja died, she made a tape to explain everything and her great-granddaughter took it to Young-sook. She had no way of healing herself if she could not tell Young-sook the truth.

With a safe social environment to openly mourn for her loss, a deeper understanding of the whole picture of the Incident, and a full explanation from Mi-ja, Young-sook’s trauma gradually lessened. “She feels excruciating pain as decades of sorrow, anger, and regret she’s carried within her begin to shatter and melt.” [9] Young-sook’s reflection shows that she is able to attribute the death of her relatives to history instead of blaming Mi-ja, who has always been her sister within so many years.

5. The Significance of Lisa See’s Transnational Writing of Historical Trauma

Lisa See always takes a special interest in writing history. She writes about the history of Chinese Americans in her family biography *On Gold Mountain* and two novels of *Shanghai Girls* and *China Dolls*. She explores the history of ancient China in *Snow Flower and Secret Fan*, *Peony in Love*, and contemporary China in *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*. The transnational writing of the Koreans in *The Island of Sea Women* is actually an expansion of Lisa See’s interest in history.

The Jeju April 3 Incident seems to have been little known around the world. It has been deliberately concealed by South Korean government for nearly half a century. In the Acknowledgments of *The Island of Sea Women*, Lisa See mentions that when she was studying the culture of the haenyeos on Jeju Island, she visited the April 3 Peace Park there and learned about the turbulent history of the Island in the 20th century. She was so deeply shocked that she incorporated history into the story of the haenyeos in the novel.

This traumatic history of Jeju Island should not be forgotten. Aleida Assmann summarizes four modes of dealing with traumatic history: “dialogic forgetting”, “remembering for the sake of never forgetting”, “remembering for the sake of forgetting”, and “dialogic remembering”. [10] When a civil war is over or when there are no absolute victims or perpetrators on both sides of the violence, “dialogic forgetting” can be an effective means to end social divisions and promote integration. However, if the perpetrator and the victim are completely unequal, it is necessary to remember the past in order never to forget the collective destruction. In this case, remembering is not only a healing for survivors, but a spiritual and ethical obligation to the victims. “Remembering for the sake of forgetting” refers to the internal reconstruction of a country or society and remembering is considered a way of reconciling with the past. When two or more countries are involved in the same traumatic violence, they can employ the strategy of “dialogic remembering” to overcome the past and open up a new future.

For Lisa See, to write the historical trauma of the April 3 Incident is to keep the memory for the sake of never forgetting. As Herbert Marcuse says, if we simply forget the suffering of the past, we are forgiving the forces which cause it instead of defeating them, which may continue to produce injustice. “The wounds that heal in time are also the wounds that contain the poison. Against this surrender to time, the restoration of remembrance to its rights, as a vehicle of liberation, is one of the noblest tasks of thought.” [11] Lisa See’s transnational writing of historical trauma of the Korean

people helps to spread the history around the world, and integrates the memory of the local people into the collective memory of all humans. Her writing reminds us to cherish peace, and avoid repeating the mistakes in history. Even if people from different regions and ethnic groups may not experience the same traumatic past, we can actually share the trauma and learn lessons from it.

Acknowledgement

This paper is sponsored by the research project of Guangdong AIB Polytechnic College. (Project No.XYZD1810)

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