

Ramifications of Love-sickness in Lisa See's *Peony in Love*

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Abstract

In Lisa See's *Peony in Love*, the love-sick lady Peony undergoes anorexia which ultimately ends in her death. Anorexia and foot binding are the deformities of the female body and these abnormalities use numerous symbols to communicate. The reluctance to eat or consuming the same meals over and over again is shown in the novel as manifestations of a psychological breakdown. This article aims to identify these anorexia concepts in this novel. Anorexia arises to Peony because of her love towards Wu Ren. After their three-day meeting, Peony fell completely in love with Wu Ren. Peony's constant remembrance of him throughout her calligraphy practise, zither playing, and embroidery lessons served as evidence of her love for him. The outcome also demonstrated that Peony's life changed as a result of her meeting Wu Ren, which led her to violate social conventions, go through emotional trauma, and develop lovesickness, all of which contributed to her death.

Keywords: social conventions, love-sickness, anorexia, death

Every woman on earth and men as well, long for the kind of love that changes us, lifts us above the ordinary, and gives us the strength to endure our small deaths: the

agony of unfulfilled expectations, the disappointment of personal and professional goals, and the end of relationships. Lisa See's *Peony in Love* depicts the historical truth that generations of young Chinese women, known as the lovesick ladies, became pathologically obsessed with *The Peony Pavilion*. Many among them starved themselves to death. A sixteen-year-old girl named Peony fell in love with Wu Ren, whom she unintentionally encountered at the opera. Romantic love comes when a person and their partner feel emotionally charged, exuberant, and passionate. Peony has a romantic love towards Wu Ren. She stops eating out of grief at her father's plan to marry her off to someone else, and she passes away without realising Wu Ren is both her future husband and her obsessive love. According to Chinese mythology, she comes back to earth as "a hungry ghost" in an effort to find her old boyfriend as well as out of a desire to make her voice heard through her written reflections on the opera.

One of Hangzhou's most prominent families, Master and Lady Chen's only child is Peony. Peony is an intelligent girl who begins writing poetry at the age of seven. As an artist, Peony fearlessly adopts her own way of life by representing *The Peony Pavilion's* original literary masterwork. She sees herself in the tragic heroine Liniang and her dream lover, the scholar who is Liniang's genuine love and who brings her back to life. Peony attends the opera performance of *The Peony Pavilion* that is presented in her garden and also admires while reading it as,

My mother had trained me never to show m feelings, but when I read *The Peony Pavilion*, I felt certain things: love, sadness, happiness. Now, watching the story played out before me, imagining what happened in our rockery between the

scholar and Liniang ... I had to get away for a few moments; Liniang's restlessness was my own. (14)

Peony meets Wu Ren in the opera and this was the first time Peony had seen a handsome man who was not a member of her family. As an unmarried woman, it is inappropriate to look at or interact with a male except with family members or within her household. Peony is terrified and happy because she could finally speak with the stranger. A little talk pleased her because the stranger obviously knew a lot about *The Peony Pavilion* opera and asked her what she thought about it. Peony is once again astonished by the stranger, and a tickling filled her belly as butterflies flew inside. According to Burns, "an ideology of femininity that disempowers women in love by claiming to empower them" (28).

Too many connections happened at once to separate reality from imagination and cause Peony to become immersed in the love story as if her entire existence had been planned to include every moment of the opera. She lets the tale penetrate her mind, which gradually solidifies as a result of a coincidence that actually occurred between her and the stranger. Peony is aware of all the problems that would follow if they are discovered together and she is already engaged. Peony is unstable to conceal her emotions as she admits that, "I had been carried away by the story of Liniang, but she was not a living girl who would suffer any consequences"(39). Peony confines herself in art and loses her ability to enjoy her earthly pleasures.

After meeting Wu Ren, she disobeys the filial rules and she is unhappy with her family members. Guillemot and Laxenaire state "the characters suffering from eating

disorders are unhappy in their families. It seems appropriate that a culturally oriented eating disorder, such as anorexia, should be linked to family problems, since it originates with the other's gaze on the anorexia self"(6). Peony's mother is extremely traditional in all aspects; she supervises the family's internal affairs and is in charge of instilling punishment for improper behaviour that disobeys the four virtues. She is also a model of Confucian chastity. Peony is expected by her mother to behave delicately in the women's chambers. Mothers' love is made up of both affection and suffering. She teaches the ultimate mother love to Peony by teaching her how to bind feet for her future daughter. Peony is sick to her stomach and scared by the bloody image and screaming, but she persisted in staying and trying to help as her mother instructed, even though she felt unworthy of one day connecting her daughter's feet to exhibit her mother's love. In the view of Wack, the symptoms love-sickness is of "[s]ighing, sleeplessness, and wasting from refusal to eat" (5). Peony developed anorexia as a means of escaping her mother's relentless pursuit of perfection, which eventually resulted in her death.

Ciavolella defines, "Lovesickness has been described as an actual medical entity with a specific etiology, pathogenesis, and treatment. Amazingly, many of the described symptoms of lovesickness are... fever, agitation, loss of appetite, head ache, rapid breathing, and palpitations" (20). Peony had to make preparations for her own marriage, she is becoming increasingly overcome with thoughts about her love for her stranger. Her hunger is muted, and she feels empty within from the secret love that filled her heart. A few weeks later, her psychological anorexia transforms into physical anorexia, her stomach turns into a pit of agony, and she either refuses to eat or does so adamantly.

Peony utilises her anorexic body as a means of expressing her love because she is unable to explain her feelings to her partner in words or to anyone else. Because of her unusual thought, she is unable to eat. She madly believes that someone in love cannot eat since the intense emotions have completely consumed her body. Peony is startled, and the thrill caused her body to tremble severely. In reality, she is mistaken to be terrified of everything. If Peony loved someone, she would get married to them. In actuality, Wu Ren, her future husband, is the stranger she had been meeting for three days while visiting the *Riding-Wind Pavilion* and the *Moon-Viewing Pavilion*. Even though Peony's heart is filled with joy because she would marry the person she loves most, she is too weak and tired out to do anything.

Peony died suddenly just five days before her wedding. She prefers to live in her sweet memories rather than face the challenging future, allowing her body to deteriorate, and as a result, her existence is frozen. Food enables the creation of patterns and gives daily life a sense of repetition and regularity. Meals are essential to family life and unity. By purposefully eliminating these links to her family, Peony seeks to express her true self through anorexia, which is in pursuit of strong personality and real love.

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