

# Metaphors of Anorexia—Analysis of Peony’s Starved-for-love Self in Lisa See’s *Peony in Love*

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In Asian American writer Lisa See’s novel *Peony in Love* (2007), the love-sick maiden Peony commits anorexia which finally leads to her annihilation. Anorexia, as well as foot bonding, both of which are distortions of female body, convey various metaphors. The novel repeatedly presents the inability to eat or eating monotonous meals as symptoms of the nervous breakdown. Through a series of feminist psychological analysis, this paper is designed to figure out these metaphors of anorexia within the text in the following three dimensions: anorexia as imitation of art, anorexia as failure in mother-daughter relationship and the anorexic female body as a language. After explanations of the metaphorical meaning of anorexia, this paper aims to analyze Peony’s starved-for-love self, and draw a conclusion about lovesickness during the whole process of Peony’s maturation.

**Keywords:** anorexia, foot bonding, female body, feminist psychology, lovesick

Anorexia is a contemporary American problem, but not exclusively: In 17th-century China, young women starved themselves to death because of their obsession with the famous opera *The Peony Pavilion*, which celebrates the transcendence of love over mortality.

All women on earth and men too, hope for the kind of love that transforms us, raises us up out of everyday, and gives us the courage to survive our little deaths: the heartache of unfulfilled dreams, of career and personal disappointments, of broken love affairs. Asian American writer Lisa See portrays the historical fact that generations of young Chinese women, known as the lovesick maidens, became too obsessed with *The Peony Pavilion* in a morbid passion, many starved themselves to death into her fifth novel *Peony in Love*, which offers an exquisite rendering of life and love in this world and the next. The heroine, Peony’s vibrant voice, perfectly pitched between the novel’s historical and passionate depths, carries the whole story evocatively in life and afterlife.

Peony, betrothed since infancy to a man she has never met, accidentally encounters a handsome stranger on the night of the play and falls in love with him. Grieving over her father’s arrangement of her marriage to someone else, she stops eating and dies, never having realized that her husband-to-be and the object of her obsessive love are one and the same man, Wu Ren. In accordance with Chinese legend, she returns to earth as “a hungry ghost” in an effort to be reunited with her former fiancé, as well as from a desire to have her voice, in the form of her written meditations on the opera, be heard.

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### Anorexia as Imitation of Art

Judging from Peony's physical and emotional status, anorexia which is exactly the reason leads to her final annihilation seems not painful at all; instead, she tastes the ecstasy brought by pious hopes to be resurrected by true love after death. Anorexia to Peony is a way of existence rather than a fatal illness. As a subject, rather than an object gazed by the male dominated society, Peony bravely embraces her own way of living as an artist who imitates the original literary masterpiece of *The Peony Pavilion*. By leaving their inner chambers they've become artists of worth. It is a setting of role-playing directed by her, she identifies herself with the tragic heroin Liniang as well as her dream lover her stranger as the scholar whose true love brings Liniang back to life.

According to Lisa See's survey, *The Peony Pavilion* was the first piece of fiction in the history of China in which the heroine—a girl of sixteen—chose her own destiny, and that was both shocking and thrilling. It entranced and fascinated women who were allowed to read the opera. The passion this work aroused has been compared to the fanaticism for Goethe's *Werther* in eighteenth-century Europe or more recently, in the United States, for *Gone with the Wind*. Young educated women from wealthy families with their marriage already arranged—were particularly susceptible to the story. Believing that life imitates art, they copied Liniang: they gave up food, wasted away, and died, all in hopes that somehow in death they might be able to choose their own destiny, just as the ghost of Liniang did.

"A girl on the edge of sixteen knows how pretty she is, and as I looked in the mirror I burned with the knowledge" (Lisa See, 2008, p. 4). Peony is well known of her beauty, her eyes were shaped like bamboo leaves, her brows were like gentle brushstrokes limned by a calligrapher, her cheeks glowed the pale pink of a peony petal, her lips were full and soft, her waist was small and her breasts were ready for a husband's touch. "I was secure in my beauty but had enough wisdom to know it was only fleeting" (Lisa See, 2008, p. 4). She shares the same kind of feeling with Liniang: "Liniang was so delicate and touching in her movements that it was like watching a silkworm's death—tender and subtle" (Lisa See, 2008, p. 17). Through the delicate body features as well as transient beauty, Peony identifies herself with Liniang. She felt that she is another version of Liniang: in full bloom but neglected. The fleeting nature of beauty resonates in these two lovesick maidens thus create a close tie of sympathy. Peony's heart had always been with Liniang, both of them were trapped in a cloistered indoors life, Peony wants to dream romantic thoughts and imagine that her life too might have a happy love-filled ending like Liniang's. She cannot discern the opera world clearly from the real world. The delineation between the dream world and reality becomes blurred and ambiguous.

Peony deliberately shadows the encounter with her betrothed husband Wu Ren, with a mist from the plot in the opera *The Peony Pavilion*. The stereotype of an ideal romantic love has already formulated from the opera as well as the legend of weaving maiden and cohered.

Today was my sixteenth birthday. Tonight, in the heavens, the Weaving Maid and the Cowherd would be reunited. In out garden, Liniang would be resurrected by Mengmai's love. And in the Moon-viewing Pavilion, I would meet my stranger. (Lisa See, 2008, p. 67)

On the seventh day of the seventh month, the day of the lovers' festival, and Peony's birthday, her favorite opera *The Peony Pavilion* was mounted in the garden of her family, moreover, for the first time, as a cloistered girl who had never walked out of her inner chamber, Peony met a male stranger not of her family, which brought

out too many emotions in her. All these three events happened at the same time, and developed separately in their spaces simultaneously and cooperate with one another to construct a blurred world mixed with fevered imagination, legend story and literary fantasy. Characters of these three paralleling worlds perform their love stories in a simultaneous pace and the plot are coincidentally the same in essence. In the legend world, the Weaving Maid and the Cowherd after long departure by the milky way came to meet each other once a year on the magpie bridge at the Double Seven night; in the literary fantasy of scholar and Liniang, the opera mounted in the family's garden will carry on the scene of Liniang's resurrection by Mengmei's love; while in reality, Peony would meet her stranger. Too many coincidences occurred at the same time that draw the reality world into the fantasy world, and make Peony carried away by the romantic story as if her life is designed to experience every second of the opera. She allows the story seep into her consciousness, which gradually becomes consolidated through coincidence happened in reality between her stranger and her.

Artistic creativity goes against social demands, against cooperation, and as such it is an expression of an extravagant spirit, but also of freedom from constraint. Artistic creation goes against seriousness of purpose, equals irresponsible behavior, and implies abandoning common sense. Only through art can educated lovesick maidens escape the bamboo-and-lacquer cage which confines their body as well as their desire to a stifling degree. Peony has lost her ability to enjoy life worldly. Thus she follows the process of decay to indulge herself in illusion of mirage-like circumstances in Tang Xianzu's opera *The Peony Pavilion*; her abandonment of body could be seen as recreation of art following Liniang's suit. Compared to the entrancing fantasy of Liniang's resurrection from true love in afterworld, the secular repetitious confined life in inner chambers is not worth to live at all. Peony, such a subtle and sentimental soul, who is imbued with deep emotions and sentimental love, holds pious belief to lead a life full of *qing*.

### **Anorexia as Failure in Mother-Daughter Relationship**

Although there are indeed numerous coincidences which facilitate Peony to consciously build up a liaison between her and Liniang, imitation of art alone is not forceful enough to bring Peony into a firmly persistence against eating. According to Guillemot and Laxenaire, 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. Peony's thought her strictly supervised by other family members who are all trained to spot weakness and vulnerability. Indeed, numerous popular books and articles on anorexia notice that family background is frequently at the origin of such eating disorders as anorexia and bulimia, in particular if a conflict with the mother is involved (Guillemot & Laxenaire, 1997, p. 6).

Women's vulnerary-ability to these disorders derives at least in part from the nature of early female psychosexual development. The early process of separation-individuation from the all-powerful pre-Oedipal mother is enormously more difficult for girls than for boys, since girls must simultaneously individuate from and identify with a primary caretaker of the same sex. Hostile-dependent conflicts and ambivalent struggles for autonomy from the mother may persist life-long in women and are all too easily acted out via abnormal control of food intake and body shape.

Peony's mother is excessively traditional in every ways, she manages the inner realm of the family, who is responsible to carry out punishment towards improper behavior that violates the four virtues, and she is such an exemplary example of Confucian chastity. Mother expects Peony to be a delicate young lady in women's quarters. Mother's love is constituted by love and pain. She teaches Peony how to bond feet for her future daughter as if deliver the highest mother love. The bloody scene and screams made Peony sick and terrified, however, she still tries to stay and follow her mum's instructions to help, while thinks she is also incompetent in showing her mother love to her daughter in the future though bonding her feet.

Everything—as it was every day in our women's quarters—seemed a test of some sort. And every test reminded me of my inferiority. I didn't excel at anything—not footbinding, or embroidery, painting, zither playing, or reciting poetry either. (Lisa See, 2008, p. 66)

Mother is a model for Peony, she is respectful and noble. Under such a great mother's shadow, Peony, who is industrious and perfectionist tries her every effort to follow mum's instructions and hopes one day she can become a successful wife. Though Peony carries out every word and deed imprudently and cautiously to follow the feudal rules, she can not reach her mum's high expectations. What she is fond of is not embroidery, painting, or reciting poetry. Her hidden interest lies in writing. As a girl, she is not encouraged to develop to become a woman writer, who is despised in the feudal society and accused for chasing fame. As a female, her voice must be confined in the inner chamber and can't be heard by the public. To become a woman writer is an extravagant dream which is as vulnerable as a bubble. Under the obedient appearance, there lies a rebellious heart crazy for freedom outside the confinement.

Peony's mum appears as a flawless woman who excels in everyway, but when Peony asks about the past of what happened to Grandmother as well as the whole family during the Cataclysm, mum always hides the truth and pretends to be peaceful. Until Peony died, she happened to meet her Grandmother had she known that the truth about the family's past is not as glory as it pretends to be. Grandmother actually is not at all what she has been told. She wasn't tolerant of her husband's concubines, she hates them. She uses her body as a shield to protect grandfather and father during the Cataclysm, and later she became honored as a martyr, which is out of her will. Mum was as passionate as Peony in her youth, and was also eager to write poems. What made Peony more surprised was that mum was raped many times by the Manchu's soldiers during the Cataclysm. All of these ugly truths are well protected from this sixteen-years-old girl, only the amazing glories are allowed to be revealed. She felt she was weak and tiny, difficult to turn to a beautiful swan as her mum, which brings her traumas and isolated herself from her mum. As Grice notes, the parental desire to forget the past is ultimately shown to contribute to the daughter's on-going psychological problems (Grice, 2002, p. 83). Only after mum revealed the truth about the past, can daughter and mum be closely tied again.

The clash originates with the family's expectations towards the anorexia's academic and social achievement. More often than not, the parents in such families are high achievers and perfectionists, and tend to judge severely the offspring's failure to conform to these expectations (Guillemot & Laxenaire, 1997, p. 7). Mum's gaze towards Peony is fierce and nowhere to escape, which breaks the mirror; Peony disconnects herself from her mum and identifies herself with a more ideal idol—Linlang, whose spirit is as subtle and free as hers. Such families are said to breed children who are industrious and perfectionist while at the same time obedient and

respectful to their elders. At one point though, the children choose a self-destructing manner of rebellion against parental authority, and the refusal to eat may mean the refusal to become like one's mother (Guillemot & Laxenaire, 1997, p. 75). Compared with Liniang, Peony finds her mum no longer perfect and ideal for her to identify with and becomes to refuse her mum inwardly, though she is still an obedient daughter in appearance. This refusal becomes more acute if the mother-daughter relationship is bad, imperfect, for "it is impossible to mourn successfully the loss of an imperfect object" (Guillemot & Laxenaire, 1997, p. 91).

As a sixteen-years-old girl, Peony still needs models for her to rely on in order to derivate her own independent identity. After unconsciously cut off from her mum, Peony felt extremely lonely, as she has no friend, the only way to release her sadness is through reading the opera. Anorexia behaves as if there were no acceptable choice between embracing one's past, represented by one's mother, and relinquishing the past to thrive in the future; as if there was no way to find one's identity. Peony's lost of identity bring her to a puzzlement which confuses her and force her to make a choice to get out. The rejection of her mother, expressed through anorexia, may ultimately lead to annihilation, if it is not stopped in time. Peony take anorexia unconsciously as a way to escape from her mum's all perfected image, trapped so deep that finally lead to her death.

### **The Anorexic Feminine Body as a Language**

In the 17th century, Chinese women had difficulties in achieving freedom and identity in a society that was both male dominated and rigid in its gender expectations. In a society that kept them cloistered, with their feet bound, many girls like Peony on the brink of adulthood and marriage let themselves waste away to death. Women have had a need for some small measure of autonomy; they want to experience more of life than what is available inside their gardens. As scholar Rudolph Bell has explained, by starving themselves young women are able to shift the contest from the outer world—in which they have no control over their fates and face seemingly sure defeat—to an inner struggle to achieve mastery over themselves and their bodily urges. Self-imposed starvation may be understood as a form of human action, a product of individual choice, with specific motivation and identifiable objectives. Anorexia is fundamentally the same as a political hunger strike, and stands as a symbol of and a protest against, the oppression of women in the society (Moorey, 1991, p. 14).

Women began to use their body as the only thing she can control to defend her position and speak out her voice to the world. Susan Sontag, in her book *Illness as Metaphor*, discusses tuberculosis in nineteenth century Europe and notes that it of course remains a terminal illness, became a symbol, or a metaphor, for a romantic, sensitive, enlightened, refined, but tragic, higher nature. In a sense it became fashionable to have tuberculosis, and the condition came to stand for, or represent, certain values. So does footbinding which develops into a way of existence, which symbolizes certain cultural significance as well as self belief. Mothers do footbonding to their daughters to help them to be softer, more languid, and smaller, so they can walk elegantly, sway gracefully, and act as delicate as flowers; in another sense, mothers wrap their daughters' feet as an act of rebellion against other culture as a way to cherish their own culture. Women can not take arms to fight against foreign intruders; however, they use their female body as a language to defend their culture and position. The same case with anorexia, which is also a means to let women's voice heard, though morbid and fatal it is.

The anorexic maiden Peony "speaks with her body". She cannot confine to anybody about her fever love towards the stranger she happened to meet in the Moon-viewing Pavilion, the three nights of secret meetings

remains dwelling in her recess. She has to control her emotion not let it out in any form, because she has been betrothed to her husband and will be a bride soon. After she met her stranger, Peony has been tortured by the fear of being caught or interrupted. In the outward, she composes her face as best as she could to always wear a placid smile. Inwardly, the stranger had invaded her thoughts deeply and completely enough to fill her with secret happiness. The hidden feelings of love that filled her chest dampened her appetite and emptied her head. Several weeks later, her psychological anorexia turns to physical anorexia, her stomach becomes an abyss of anguish and she ignores the food or stubbornly pushes it away.

Living within prescribed boundaries, her body becomes the vehicle for a whole range of expressions that have no other medium. The body becomes her mouthpiece. She speaks with her body (MacSween, 1993, p. 48). Anorexia, then, is a language and a protest: it expresses unconsciously a 'solution' to problems which cannot be consciously articulated (MacSween, 1993, p. 17). Peony uses anorexia body as an expression of love, since she cannot confine love to her beloved, nor can she communicate in language with any other one about her deep emotions. She could not eat for thoughts of her stranger. She frantically thinks that one who is in love can not eat because the overwhelming feelings have totally filled her body.

Except being used as a tool to speak out her secret love, anorexia is taken as a female body language to assert her reluctance to become a traditional femininity in that society. "Anorexia is really an attempt to hold together an identity, and to avoid the loss of one part of the self which growing up brings with it" (MacSween, 1993, p. 206). In pre-puberty a girl can be both "pretty"—that is, an acceptable female—and "clever"—a successful individual. At puberty, however, she has to choose: she hits "the friction-point of womanhood". It is acted as a strategy of control, arising from a conflict between independence and femininity, pursued through the creation of a psychic "shell". The anorexic body is a "fortress"; it is a "shell" (MacSween, 1993, p. 249). Femininity in feudal society equals confinement, self-sacrifice, and totally obedient to husband, even if he get concubines, the wife should tolerate it. In sight of the dark future being totally dominated by the mother-in-law as well as various kinds of powerful women, Peony prefer to stifle herself from entering adulthood. She chooses to indulge herself in the three nights of happiness and considers it more than married couples have in a life time. Her life is thus stagnate, she prefers to dwell in her sweet memory and give up the tough future, letting her body depleting away. Food permits establishing a certain pattern and endows everyday life with the sense of repetition and regularity. Meals are rituals of family life and family cohesion. Peony deliberately destroys these ties with her family to assert her voice of self through anorexia body, which is in pursuing of free spirit and true love.

### Conclusion

Peony has been bewitched by the allure of dying young, beautiful, and talented. She was seduced by the pain and pleasure of contemplating the other lovesick maidens. She read *The Peony Pavilion*, she wrote poems about it, and she died, hoping her writing would live beyond the ravages of time and the decay of bodies.

Anorexia is treated as an extended example of how women both resist and are constrained by the cultural concept of the female body. Peony uses her feminine body as a language to speak out her love towards Wu Ren as well as her resistance to be assimilated into the traditional feudal womanhood. Anorexia is examined as a strategy of resistance, which ultimately becomes its own prison.

However, before death, Peony was only a lovesick maiden who is immature and even naive. Most of Peony's maturation takes place after Peony's death. In the process, she encounters a number of women writers who lament the difficulty of getting their voices heard in a male-dominated world. From her dead grandmother, she learns many painful details about her family's past as the Qing Dynasty violently replaced the Ming Dynasty, details later amplified by Peony's mother. Peony comes to learn about the courage and extreme suffering both older women experienced during the fighting and that the sternness her mother treated her with as a girl was only her attempt to protect her daughter from the evils of the outside world. Through her influence on Ren's second and third wives, Peony shows her enduring love for him. In their daily life, she learns how to love.

Before death, she considers that marriage is like experiencing death and rebirth without having to travel to the afterworld. These morbid thoughts for a lovesick maiden sent her mind into darker and darker places. Only through communication with her family members as well as being a wife in the afterworld can she heal her trauma and grow up healthily without loneliness and sense of detachment. As time went by, Peony's girlish ideas about romantic love have gone, and her later ideas about sexual love have also faded away, what remains is her appreciation of deep-heart love. Until now, Peony obtains a rational appraisal of Wu Ren: he was not the great poet she had imagined him to be as a girl, nor was he the mediocre man whom Ren's second wife Ze had humiliated. He was just a man, with good and bad qualities. Through Ren's third wife Yi, Peony saw that deep-heart love meant loving someone in spite of and because of his limitations.

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