

Existentialism as a Motivating Force in Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls*

Esther Kiruba.S,

Research Scholar,

S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil,

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Trinelveli.

Dr. C. Bibin Sam,

Assistant professor,

Department of English,

Sivanthi Aditanar College,

Pillayarapuram, Nagercoil.

Abstract

Lisa See is a Chinese American writer and novelist. Existentialism is one of the remarkable post-modern theories. This theory emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent. Existentialism is one of the best theories which can be applied to Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls* to explore the depth and hidden themes. This was depicted in this paper and everyone wants to live a life of free and satisfied life. But such life may be affected due to war, hostile attitude of nature, colonialism, hunger, poverty and other factors.

Key Words: Existentialism, colonialism, poverty

Everyone wants to live a life of the best in this materialistic world. The choice of life of an individual is in their own hand but in reality, due to war, hostile attitude of nature, colonialism, hunger, poverty and other factors, the normal existence of a person gets affected. The Japanese invaders forced the native Chinese to leave their native land like defeated animals.

The New Edition of Advanced Deluxe Dictionary defines Existentialism as, the doctrine that states the human life is conditioned by anxiety and suffering, and that a man's decisions

determine his or destiny. If existentialism could be summarized in three words there might be freedom, responsibility and authenticity. Existentialist philosophy can be described in the following lines: "Human beings have no predetermined purpose or essence laid by God or nature. They are responsible for creating their lives according to their own values and not by following the herd" (Urusula Tidd 14).

Existentialism is a philosophical theory or approach that emphasizes of an individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that occurred in Europe during the 1800's and 1900's. Everything is centered on the individual's experiences on earth and the limit one must endure for human. Soren Kierkegaard is generally considered to have been first existentialist philosopher through he did not use the term existentialism. He proposed that each individual not society or religion is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely. Existentialism became popular in the year following Second World War and influenced theology, drama, art, literature and psychology.

The longing for existence is felt in this novel *Shanghai Girls*. The protagonist Pearl and her sister started their journey with their mother when the war commences between Japan and China. They wish to go to Hong Kong which is a British Colony where they never want to worry about the Japanese attack. But they gained the ticket to San Francisco. Pearl say, "I slip down next to May. I can't believe Mama is a willing to ship us to America to cure my father's and her problems. But then isn't that the kind of thing Chinese parents have done with worthless daughters for thousands of years - abandoned them, sold them, used them?" (*Girls* 59).

They took a painful journey towards San Francisco with the hope of finding free land for their survival. With heavy hearts the girls and their mother left their native land, China. They hurriedly packed the necessary materials. The food they ate on their way was so terrible .They never slept that night. The next day they were taken by a wheelbarrow pusher took them around the village and they could able to find the condition of the men who were unsuccessful on their journey to escape. Pearl says :

On the road we see those who tried unsuccessfully to escape: men bayoneted and shot, babies abandoned, and women, wearing only tunics, with the bottom halves of their bodies exposed and their bloody legs splayed at odd angles. Just afternoon, we pass dead Chinese soldiers moldering in the hot sun. One is curled

into a ball .The back of his hand rests in his mouth as if in his last moments he was biting back pain. (72)

Pearl and her family prayed that they should never find any Japanese soldiers before they reach San Francisco. But all their prayers and expectations were shattered when the Japanese soldiers came there that night. Pearl and May managed to escape from the Japanese soldiers. But they lost their kind and affectionate mother. They got second class on the President Coolidge for twenty days voyage to San Francisco. They did not know what will happen to them and their only satisfaction was that Pearl says, “We’re just trying to stay out of the Green Gang’s net and stay ahead of the Japanese” (84).

Pearl and May reached Angel Island, which was a part of America. It was a Immigration station for the immigrants to enter into America. Pearl and May was also sending to the immigration station. They felt that they were free and safe but it was a temporary happiness for May and Pearl. They were sent to the dormitory where there was a number womens’ who were separated from their husbands. None of the soldiers show any sympathy to them and were treated more poorly than the cargos’ that travelled with them. They were interrogated by the white men Mr. Plumb, and Mr. White. The questioning continued for eight hours without any break for lunch or toilet.

The suffering they had during their journey brings out their longing or thirst for their existence. Women who were alone with them in the dormitory committed suicide by hanging in the showers or by driving the sharp chop stick through their ears and into their brains. When they were in the dormitory Pearl comes to know that her sister May was pregnant. They stayed and suffered in the dormitory until the baby was born. They named the child as Joy and May gave her baby to Pearl to grow Joy as her own child. The baby Joy got the birth certificate of United States and finally they got permission and set out their journey towards San Francisco.

With great expectation and satisfaction they reached San Francisco and met their husbands. According to them their father-in-law was wealthy and rich so he purchased them as brides for his sons. They were welcomed by their mother -in-law whom they call as yen-yen. The first thing that strikes them in their house was poor, dirty and shabby things everywhere. Their expectation to lead a happy life was shattered when they come to know they were refugees. And Pearl says, “It’s as though every person in Chinatown is refugee. No one here is Gold Mountain man -rich beyond imagining - not even Old Man Louie” (135).

In America the Chinese should never own any property and the landlords' would never rent a house to the Chinese. In the life of Pearl and May the thirst for existence in their native land still continues. They had an intension to go back to China and Pearl says, "I tell myself this is just temporary, like Angel Island was temporary" (137).

To escape from poverty and suffering everyone in the family want to work hard to lead a satisfied life in the alien land. Even Pearl was forced to work with her husband Sam she even never had time to look after her child Joy. They worked for more than six hours without any break. Pearl and May alone was not longing for their existence in the native land the entire family wishes the same. Yen-yen who left China long ago when she was young was sold as a servant and bundled in a sack and she was send to America. Old Man Louie bought her for cheap price and she was still living with him.

Even Pearl's father-in-law Old Man Louie also longs to exist in his native land China. He used to send money to Hong Kong, his home village as funds. But Sam asks him not to send money and it will create problem. Sam says, "Maybe the communists will confiscate it. May be this will be bad for the family in the village" (236). He wanted his grandchild Joy to grow in a Chinese way. Not alone the old people long for their nation Uncle Charley and Uncle Wilburt shares their "captured images of their lost home" (258).

Without fulfilling their desire the old man and their mother-in-law was passed away. At first they thought that America was temporary for them but later Pearl herself feels that America will be permanent for them. Pearl wants her daughter Joy to learn in the English school and so she gets her admission in the Castelar School in the China town.

Spiritualism has a close association with existentialism. Spiritualism or faith in God is also one of the important in the life of Pearl. She used to go to church with her daughter Joy in the Sundays. The faith in Christianity and in Jesus Christ was deeply rooted in Pearl and she used to remind her daughter with the statement "God loves everyone" (252). Pearl believed that with God she can lead a happy and good life in America.

After her schooling, Joy was send to the University of Chicago in which she plans to learn history. As they were in America they decided to accept and adopt American culture. Every day the news from the American government was bad. Angel Island through which Pearl and

May entered into America was long been closed and the procedure to enter America was devised with new principle.

As they were in the alienated country they were in fear and distress. The family tried their utmost to live the life of an American but the laws which were imposed on them made the family to feel alienated. They even started to forget their home land, China and they became American with their clothes, their food, their language, their desires for Joy's education and future. Though they decided to live an American life they were missing their hometown.

Sam who was brought to America as a paper son was identified by the American government. The investigators put questions against Sam and he tried to answer it but he had no proper evidence for his answers. Sam was compelled to reveal about the other paper sons of Old Man Louie. To save his wife and daughter Sam committed suicide. The investigators said to Pearl that her husband and father-in-law were dead and they can never prove anything. Joy feels sorry for her membership in the Chinese association and this was one of the reasons said by the investigators through which they identified Sam, her father.

After the death of Sam, Pearl was sad and was filled with grief. They went into her room and she finds the photograph of Sam. She fixes the photograph in the family altar in which the photograph of Old Man Louie and Yen-yen was placed. Pearl remembers the person they lost while their existence and Pearl says, "... we've lost: my parents, his parents, brothers and sisters, and our son" (291). Pearl believes in God that she would meet her husband in the Heaven. In the funeral of Sam, they followed the tradition of China and America. Pearl believed that Sam would go the Chinese Heaven. For the existence in the alien land the whole family was forced to follow the American culture. As to live a satisfied and happy life the family lost few members of the family.

Freedom is another factor that constitutes a better existence in this universe. Lack of freedom leads to anguish and despair. In this novel *Shanghai Girls*, Lisa See deals with the main idea of getting freedom to exist in the native land. The whole family was gnawed by the hunger for freedom. A life without freedom can be explained through the poem, *The Caged Bird* by Maya Angelou. Through this poem Maya Angelou contrasts the difference between the caged bird and the free bird. In this novel, *Shanghai Girls* the Chinese like the Pearl's family are the caged bird. As in the poem the poet writes:

But a bird that stalks,
Down his narrow cage,
Can seldom see through,
His bars of rage ...,
Caged bird stands on the grave of dreams,
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream. (Maya Angelou, 1)

Getting freedom and free native land was only a mirage to the Pearl's family. They tried their best to adopt in the alien land. But they were ill-treated by the foreigners. Finally the family lost the important members who tried their best to get freedom and find a free native home land. But their attempts were in failure.

Thus, Existentialism was the literary prospective that focuses on the experiences of an individual in this universe. Normal existence was based on life and death. But it get affected in an individual's life due to hunger, poverty, war, lack of self-confidence, and lack of freedom, even though existential philosophy explores that life is the choice of the individual. This events and painful process of existence in the native land was discussed in this novel, *Shanghai Girls*.

Works Cited:

Angelou, Maya. *The Caged Bird*. America: Random House, 1983. Web. 31 Mar. 2015. 27

Jan.2019

See, Lisa. *Shanghai Girls*. Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2009. Print.

Tidd, Ursula. *Simon de Beauvoir*. NewYork: Routledge, 2007. Nov. 2015. Print.