

Thresholds of Pain and Passage: War and Immigration in Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls*

Bula Rani Howlader

Abstract

No (normative) history of any Nation tells the complete tale of the Nation, especially the tale behind the facts and beyond the facts. Chinese history is no exception. China, the second largest Asian country, has experienced multifarious social, political and economic upheavals since the early twentieth century. Historically, China was ruled by several imperial dynasties starting from 221 BCE till the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912. Later, it became a republican country. However, the relative peace of the prolonged Qing dynasty was disrupted by the anti-imperialist Boxer Rebellion, which ultimately led to the end of the Chinese monarchy and the birth of the Chinese Republic. This transition, however, ushered in a period of turbulence, including the Chinese Civil War in 1927 and the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. Official Historical records mention these facts, but the atrocities committed against the civilians are not acknowledged in the mainstream historical discourse of both China and Japan. Lisa See, a Chinese-American writer, in her 2009 novel *Shanghai Girls*, uncovers war as a gendered trauma and immigration as a struggle that constructs fractured yet resilient identities. It examines the Chinese immigrants' experience in America in the light of this narrative against the backdrop of the War.

Key Words: *war, atrocity, Chinese, American, immigrant, experience*

Introduction: No (normative) history of any Nation tells the complete tale of the Nation, especially the tale behind the facts and beyond the facts. Chinese history is no exception. China, the second-largest Asian country, has experienced multifarious social, political and economic upheavals since the early twentieth century. Historically, China was ruled by several imperial dynasties starting from 221 BCE till the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912. Later, it became a republican country. However, the relative peace of the prolonged Qing dynasty was disrupted by the anti-imperialist Boxer Rebellion, which ultimately led to the end of the Chinese monarchy and the birth of the Chinese Republic. This transition, however, ushered in a period of turbulence, including the Chinese Civil War in 1927 and the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. Official Historical records mention these facts, but the atrocities committed

against the civilians are not acknowledged in the mainstream historical discourse of both China and Japan. Lisa See, a Chinese-American writer, in her 2009 novel *Shanghai Girls*, uncovers war as a gendered trauma and immigration as a struggle that constructs fractured yet resilient identities. It examines the Chinese immigrants' experience in America in the light of this narrative against the backdrop of the War. It portrays the conflict between the promise of the 'American dream' and the reality of exclusion and destitution of Chinese immigrants' experience, featuring cultural dislocation, systemic racism and challenges of adaptation.

War and Immigration: War has always been perceived as having a profound impact on shaping the pattern of numerous changes, including immigration, which is often a crucial issue during or after war, as immigration often becomes a survival measure. In chapter 2, "The forces drive International Migration" of their book *The Age of Migration*, Castles and Miller refer to war as one of the driving forces of migration, as war involves armed conflicts, persecution and human rights abuses (Castles and Miller 70-71). This denotes forced migration does not make immigration just a demographic shift, but it reflects the tension between global politics, economy and cultural aspects. This alliance is intricate as both phenomena are multifaceted. War can be categorized into different forms, but all of them pertain to humanitarian distress and hardship. War is large-scale political violence that involves issues of trauma, memory, displacement, loss, refugees, forced migrants & immigration. After or even during each war, there are varied routes of migration which end up in a considerable number of immigrants. A huge number of immigrants make the political environment of a Nation unsteady and insecure on the part of the nation of immigration. The United States, which is known as the nation of immigration, though it claims to be a multicultural and transnational 'melting pot,' was never free from the conundrum of immigration. Immigration disrupts ethnic and religious integrity or 'fractionalization' as mentioned by Gebremedhin and Mavisakalyan (Gebremedhin and Mavisakalyan, 2013: 319). Since immigration takes a toll-like social discord and aggressive friction among different ethnic groups and communities, the government of the nation concerned begins 'preventive militarization' (Gebremedhin and Mavisakalyan, 2013: 318). Ward's article titled "Immigration after the War" shows the concern over the 'Eugenic Problem' faced by the United States. He comments regarding the Great European War that,

"There is widespread anxiety concerning the "dumping" of cheap European goods on our markets after the war is over. Goods from abroad concern pocketbooks only. Human beings from abroad enter into our national life. They contribute to the blood of the future American people. They determine what our race is to be. It is the cargo of men, and woman, and children, not the cargoes of goods that are the real problem" (Ward, 1917: 147)

Chinese (Human) Cargos & Immigration: Chinese Immigration in the USA dates to the middle of the 19th century. There is always a “pull” and “push” factor in the case of immigration in any nation, and the Chinese had a history of immigration as they had travelled the world for centuries. The California Gold Rush was one of the major “pull” factors for Chinese immigrants in the 19th century. They heard stories of the gold coming out of the mountains, and they wanted to try their luck by having the riches. The ‘California Gold Rush’ era witnessed a rapid migration due to a sudden surge in the economy of the United States, which caused a rapid migration from all corners of the world to the United States. Once the gold rush ended, the Chinese migrants became cheap labourers, mostly in the industrial sector. In the last quarter of the 19th century, these Chinese American labourers became the most skilled labourers in the United States, but the economic depression of the 1870s caused massive unemployment and extreme antagonism towards the Chinese Americans. Then came a mighty blow on the Chinese people, as in 1882, the American Government banned Chinese immigration by passing the Chinese Exclusion Act. Until 1943, when China became an ally of America in World War II, the Chinese people not only faced negative and hostile attitudes towards them but also legal restrictions in the immigration process due to the Exclusion Act. This is the political trajectory that See has set for the plot of her story. Pearl and May’s journey from war-ravaged China through the immigration station at Angel Island to their settlement in the United States illustrates that migration during wartime involves multiple steps. It is an ongoing process involving the social, economic and political conditions of the nation, hence a collective phenomenon. In the global and transnational context, migration is driven by economic deprivation or economic upliftment, geographical preferences, employment opportunities, etc, but wartime migration concerns violence, persecution, destruction of properties and other resources. Migration caused by war includes refugees, displaced people within the nation, asylum seekers and the growth of diaspora. As such, war and migration work as a cycle. War configures the global refugee flows, Diasporas and identity politics. The devastation of the Second Sino-Japanese War and their eventual arrival in America brings into focus the Chinese Exclusion Act between the period 1882-1943. During this time, on the one hand, Chinese Americans were suffering the unfavourable attitude of the American public and Government; on the other hand, Chinese people were living in the threat of the opposition of their allies, namely, Japan. In 1943, before the repealation of the Chinese Exclusion Act, ordinary Chinese civilians had to suffer the traumas of war and the immigration process, especially the experience of the detention camp or immigration station underscores the structural dimension of systemic racism and thereby forms the part of history of Asian immigration to the U.S. The Chin family is one of the victims of that entrenched racism. Pearl feels at the immigration station, “We are treated more poorly than the cargo that travelled with us” (See, 2009: 58).

Saga of Shanghai Sisters: See's *Shanghai Girls* brings out the traumatic experiences of both war and immigration. Hence, the question of categorization or any debate whether this fiction comes under immigration literature or war literature is illogical. This text converges with both. The literature review shows an inclination towards historical analysis and feminist analysis of this text. However, this paper examines the text through the intersecting framework of war and immigration.

Shanghai Girls by Lisa See was published in 2009, and it became a New York Times bestselling historical novel. See is one of those Chinese American writers who has presented her connection with China and immigration experiences through different fictional representations. See's paternal great-grandfather emigrated from China, and See tries to portray this connection in her other fiction, like *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), *Peony in Love* (2007), *China Dolls* (2014), *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* (2017), and *The Island of Sea Women* (2019). She also wrote a libretto for an opera, *On Gold Mountain* (1995), which is based on her family biography of the same name. Like See, her characters in *Shanghai Girls*, Pearl and May, are also residents of Los Angeles.

The initial few chapters of the story explore the complex yet beautiful bond between two Shanghai sisters, Pearl Chin and May Chin, in pre-war Shanghai. In 1937, before the war, Shanghai was a modern city of riches and glamour. It was a composite city of people from all walks of life, businessmen, beggars, gangsters, gamblers, artists, criminals, leaders and whatnot. She shares her life with her rich parents and 18-year-old sister, May. They seem to enjoy a happy, carefree and luxurious life as they believe themselves as modern girls caring little for tradition and custom. They are beautiful, and they have no inhibition in posing for a commercial artist and being featured in calendar ads. Pearl feels romantically for the artist Z.G., who does not reciprocate her feelings. Pearl's life takes a complete turn when their father loses all their fortune in gambling, and to survive, he sells his two daughters to the wealthy businessman Louie. Their marriage was a contract made between his father and Old businessman Louie. As per the contract, Pearl was to marry the older son, Sam, and May was to marry the younger son, Vernon. After two days, Pearl and May got married to the handsome eldest son, Sam and the intellectually weak youngest son, Vern. But it was just the beginning of their misfortune. After their marriage, both Sam and Vern go to America, where Pearl and May are supposed to follow them after a month. When this family's misfortune meets the great political violence war in 1937, their lives are radically changed. The Japanese attack in China brings them to the immigration station from China to America. Pearl's narration of their horrific experiences is not the experience of the Chin family only; it brings into focus the ravages of war suffered by the Chinese civilians. Pearl and May try to get away from

their post-marriage commitments by travelling to America and meeting their husbands, but the situation holds them back. Their father was threatened to kill by the Green Gang thugs if they refrained from keeping the marriage contracts.

The readers come to know about the war-ravaged China and the precarious immigration station from where people are trying to escape their destiny in the first-person narrative and perspective of Pearl Chin, a 21-year-old graduate girl in 1937 Shanghai. The Japanese attacked Shanghai at that time, and Pearl and May had no other option but to flee from Shanghai with their mother. Their beloved city was ravaged by Japanese bombs, and they began their journey through the Chinese countryside by hiring a rickshaw. But misfortune followed them, and while trying to enter Hong Kong, they unexpectedly came across a contingent of Japanese soldiers and were subjected to inhuman torture and gang rape. Their mother, Mrs. Chin, dies, leaving her two daughters at the hands of fate. They were traumatized and shocked. Pearl gets serious internal injuries that block her chances of getting pregnant.

After this traumatic experience, Pearl and May eventually reached America. Somehow, they landed at an immigration station outside San Francisco. The immigration policy of America detained them for months at an immigration station on Angel Island. They are questioned by government officials on being suspected as Asian spies. Pearl comes to know about May's pregnancy, and later, when the baby, Joy, is born, she gives the baby her identity as its mother, as May and Vern never led a conjugal life. To get out of Angel Island, they worked hard to educate themselves by studying the coaching book and answering all the questions satisfactorily to be able to be shifted as the wives of American citizens. Finally, they meet their husbands in Chinatown of Los Angeles. But soon this contentment of reunion converts to distress. Their father-in-law, the Old Man Louie, engages them in the family business and controls everything about them. After some time, May starts to get small jobs in Hollywood and starts a business of casting Chinese film actors. Pearl puts a lot of labour into the family business. The sisters, like in the Shanghai days, continue to fight over who is better off in life. In due course, they come to know that Old Man Louie and Sam are unauthorized immigrants in America. This jeopardizes Pearl's citizenship status as an immigrant. The family tries to conceal this truth, but when the FBI started an investigation in the 1950s on immigrants, especially Chinese Americans, Sam commits suicide to prevent Pearl's deportation. Pearl, on the other hand, discovers May's affair with artist Z.G. and that he is Joy's father. Joy overheard this conversation and left for China to discover the Chinese roots. May realizes the sisterly bond and takes responsibility for the family business until Pearl finds Joy and returns both.

The profound theme of war and immigration has been realistically portrayed through

the saga of two sisters. The title of this paper emphasizes the ravages of war and the precariousness of immigration stations. This attracts attention to the unfortunate incidents Pearl and May have to suffer, namely, forced migration, the trauma of rape and murder, detention, immigration, hardship, racism, loss and displacement.

War, history and women: In 1937 Japan invaded China, and immediately after, Beijing and Tianjin. The Japanese siege Shanghai. The brutal rape of Chin and Pearl reminds one of the brutal Nanjing massacre, where humanity is shattered due to imperialist policy, “kill all, burn all and destroy all” (See, 2009: 104). According to the record, more than 200000 civilians suffered from looting, rape and mass burial. Modern Chinese history recounts this episode as the “darkest age”, and world history recounts this as the “Asian holocaust” (“Second Sino-Japanese war”) as the most traumatic experience of war in contemporary world history. But both the fact and fiction foreground rape and other forms of sexual violence as a tool of war. According to the UN report “The devastating use of sexual violence as a weapon of war”(United Nations) published in the context of war atrocities in Ethiopia, Haiti, and Ukraine, Armed gangs use rape and sexual violence to “instil fear, intimidate, subjugate, and control local populations (BINUH and OHCHR).” Armed Gangs also apply sexual violence as a strategy in larger regiments of terror and violence as was in Shanghai that time. It was ready for resistance with heavy air, sea and naval opposition with the best-skilled army troops. Japanese soldiers used it as a weapon to punish people of opposition to “assert power and control over people living in their own areas” (BINUH and OHCHR) and the rival soldiers. So, among the victims of any war, usually, women and children are the ones who bear the utmost damage. Therefore, women always remain vulnerable to sexual violence during any conflict, like the war in most nations. Pearl is horrified seeing her mother raped and beaten, “... even her blood and her screams don’t stop the soldiers. They unwrap her feet, the bindings swirling through the air like acrobats’ ribbons. Her feet look the colour of a corpse gone cold-bluish white with shades of green and purple beneath the crushed flesh...Her cries are not those of footbinding or childbirth. They are the deep, anguished screams of an animal experiencing agony beyond comprehension” (See, 2009: 50).

Immigration and Detention: Immigration policy changes from time to time. During the time of conflict, the policy becomes stringent, and the immigration process is thoroughly scrutinized. They became victims of forced displacement and landed at the immigration station to survive the ravages of war. But even that could not save them. IOM Glossary on Migration defines forced displacement or migration as a migratory movement that involves force, compulsion or coercion. Although Pearl and Chin are married to American citizens, their situation is not significantly different from that of refugees. Like the refugees, they are fleeing their country

due to “a well-founded fear” of persecution due to “reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group” (“Criteria for recognizing family status”) or political opinion and who are outside of their country of nationality or permanent residence and due to this fear are unable to or unwilling to return to it. So, fate brings Pearl and May to the immigration station. Through this text, See questions the use of immigration detention. There, they faced everything from medical examinations to interrogation, but the description of the detention centre is horrifying. “Rows of bunks two across and three high are connected to one another by iron poles attached to the ceiling and floor. There are no “beds” to sleep on, just wire mesh....The vertical gaps between the bunks are so tight that at first glance I can see I won’t be able to extend my arm without hitting the one above” (See, 2009: 59). Lucy Fiske calls these detention centres ‘super-max’ prisons where the people are allocated identification numbers and “are subjected to arbitrary rules and sometimes arbitrary and excessive use of force, distanced from legal protections by their incarceration, lack of knowledge, little political voice and their status as non-citizens, non-people” (Fiske, 2016: 3). Fiske also mentions “Life inside immigration detention centres is precarious, filled with uncertainty and monotony and, too often, with degrading treatment. This gives rise to detainee protest” (Fiske, 2016: 3). Their detention at Angel Island recalls the real history of Chinese immigrants during the active period of the Chinese Exclusion Act. It was called the ‘Ellis Island of the West’, (Lee, 2010: 45) where immigrants were kept for detention and interrogation for weeks, months and years. This immigration station suggests the liminal space of migration between the migrants’ old existence and the new one that is to be born. They are neither accepted nor sent back. Constant and prolonged period of bureaucratic violence in the form of interrogation and surveillance turns the detention site into a trauma zone. They are put into ‘threshold trauma’ (Bhabha, 1994: 218), being a victim of cultural and spatial rupture while and after crossing the border. This trauma continues to rupture their psychic and cultural world. They have suffered multi-layers of trauma-pre migration trauma, transit trauma and then post-migration trauma.

Immigration and Its Baggage: Immigration is a phenomenon that comes with a lot of social, legal, and political baggage. The two Chinese sisters’ journey to become Chinese American wives is intricate and unending. The text depicts the immigrants’ predicament in terms of living and work environment in the host country. Pearl and May are uncertain about their life as Chinese Americans as they constantly negotiate and reconstruct their identity. They are stuck in a ‘diaspora space’ (Brah, 1996: 208) as Brah argues “, Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, are contested” (Brah, 1996: 208). Their experience at the immigration station reflects the unfavourable US immigration policy towards the Chinese people. They were barred from emigrating to China

due to suspicious activities surrounding them. The diplomatic relationship between China and America has been problematic and shifting from time to time.

Displacement results not just in material loss, but in an existential crisis in general. The social roles and codes are eroded; the gender roles of men and women are redrawn in a bid to survive the new environment. The larger social support and the kinship ties that bind a community vanish. Often forced to live in refugee camps, the mobility and opportunities of a community become heavily restricted.

But finally, when they land in America, destiny thrusts them into newer challenges. They realized the sharp contrast between their past life and their present immigrant life. The Chinatown of Los Angeles was in sharp contrast with their real Chinatown. The prosperity, lustre, abundance, and authenticity of the original Chinatown were replaced by shabbiness, loss, discomfort and derangement. A strange sense of disruption and dislocation engulfed them as the people in Chinatown were refugees. Though Pearl and May's identity was also that they were the wives of American citizens, and in that sense, Chinese Americans' loss was no different from other refugees. Volkan in his article "Mourning, Large-Group Identity, and the Refugee Experience" mentions, "Since moving from one location to a foreign location involves loss of family members and friends; loss of ancestors' burial grounds; loss of familiar language, songs, smells, and food; loss of previous support system, all dislocation experiences can be examined in terms of the refugees', and even voluntary immigrants', ability to mourn and/or resistance against the mourning process (Volkan, 2018: 24) The first thing Pearl experiences is culture shock. The two sisters entered a "dual-edged phenomenon: more willing than men to accept menial and low-paying jobs, they more quickly become wage earners and are thereby introduced to new configurations of traditional gender roles" (Castles and Miller, 2009: 182). She shows how, in their immigrant life, they often suffer racial discrimination. In American society, Asians, especially Chinese people, are considered 'perpetual foreigners' (Tuan, 1998: 5). So, Pearl and May are seen to face discrimination everywhere, starting from the immigration station to the different places of their host country. Pearl notices at the immigration station, "The white passengers are pulled out of the line and brought forward, while a couple of squat and very solid guards push away the Chinese who've made the mistake of standing at the frontline... They are, I realize, White Russians. They're lower than the poorest Shanghainese, and yet they're given special treatment" (See, 2009: 58). The Chinese Exclusion Act and the prohibition of the naturalizing process of the Chinese people are two obvious proofs of the anti-Chinese sentiment of the West. The Chinese immigrants survived in fear until the repeal of the Exclusion Act. But they fight and try to accept this new life as Chinese Americans.

Conclusion: In this narrative, See's portrayal of Pearl and May's experience in war-ravaged China and at the precarious immigration station reinforces the gendered violence in both war and the immigration process through sexual exploitation, familial silencing, and cultural erasure. See connects psychological and cultural estrangement through gendered trauma. As war victims and then forced migrants, Pearl and May carry trauma which gets imprinted in their diasporic psyche. Yet this trauma functions as a catalyst for a counter-discursive agency, allowing Pearl and May to reframe victimhood into survival. They succeed in negotiating between their two existences by evolving through memory, language, and culture. Thereby, *Shanghai Girls* interrogates the intersection of gender, migration, and ethnicity in the context of war and displacement. See, through this narrative, reclaims trauma as a narrative strategy for resistance, resilience, and reconstructed identity across transnational boundaries.

Works Cited:

- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Brah, Avtar. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge.
- Castles S. and Miller, M.J. (2009). *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. (4th edition). Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan
- "Criteria for Recognizing Refugee Status: A Closer look at the 1951 Convention". February 13, 2024. Criteria for Recognizing Refugee Status: A Closer Look at the 1951 Convention Law Notes by TheLaw Institute.
- Fiske, Lucy. 2016. 'Introduction'. *Human Rights Refugee protests and Immigration detention*. pp.1-17
- Gebremedhin Tesfaye A. & Mavisakalyan Astghik. August 2013. "Immigration and political stability". *KYKIOS: International Review for Social Sciences*. vol. 66.Issue.pp.317-341
- Kapp, Caroline. November 1, 2022. 'The devastating use of Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War'. *Think Global Health*. <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/devastating-use-sexual-violence-weapon-war>.
- Lee, Erika. 2010. *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*. Oxford University Press.
- "Second Sino-Japanese War: The 'Asian Holocaust.'" *War History Online*, 2022, <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/world-war-ii/second-sino-japanese-war.html>.
- See, Lisa. 2009. *Shanghai Girls*. ebook. *Shanghai Girls: A Novel - PDF Free Download*
- Tuan, Mia. 1998. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience in the United States*. Rutgers University Press.
- United Nations. *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the Secretary-General*. United Nations, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3979634>.

- United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). *Sexual Violence in Port-au-Prince: A Weapon Used by Gangs to Instill Fear*. 14 Oct. 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/20221014-Report-on-Sexual-Violence-haiti-en.pdf>.
- Volkan, Vamik, D. 2018. "Mourning, Large-group identity and the refugee experience. In T. Wenzel& B. Drozdek. Eds. *An Uncertain Safety: Integrative health care for the 21st century refugees*. pp23-25.
- Ward, Robert De C. April 1917. "Immigration after the War". *Journal of Heredity*. Volume 8, Issue 4, pp.147–152
- "Who is a Refugee?".USA for UNHCR:The UN Refugee Agency. <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>

Bio Profile of the Author:

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Dhruba Chand Halder College, Dakshin Barasat, South 24 Parganas, Pin: 743372

West Bengal, India

Email : bulahowlader12@gmail.com