

Chinese cinderella

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Adeline Yen Mah's novel *Chinese Cinderella* is an autobiographical novel about 'the secret story of an unwanted daughter.' The novel is memorable because the story is intriguing and it is also historical as it depicts the chaos of China in the early 1940s. The novel is also remarkable for its strong depiction of characters. The novel is based on a girl called Adeline who is neglected and unloved by her family members. There are few people who love her. Adeline's family considers her bad luck because they believe she killed her mother. Big Sister [tells] me, '... Mama died giving birth to you. If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.' (Yen Mah, 1999: 3). *Chinese Cinderella* is the story of Adeline's struggle for acceptance and how she overcomes the odds to prove she is worth a chance. She does this by excelling in her studies at school. She is born the fifth child to a wealthy Chinese family where her life began tragically due to her mother's death. She then struggles to find a place where she feels she belongs.

With no love given from her parents, she finds a special relationship with her grandfather and Aunt Baba, who she is later separated from. She is then sent to a convent boarding school in Tianjin where the communists enter under their leader Mao Ze-Dong. Soon she is the only child left in the convent due to communism. After many months she is collected by Aunt Reine Schilling who is Niang's sister. "Adeline!" she smiled and greeted me in English. '... Do you remember me? I am Aunt Reine Schilling, your Niang's older sister. '... ' Come here! Don't be afraid! ... (Yen Mah, 1999: 154). Adeline was then taken to Hong Kong. The characters in *Chinese Cinderella* are portrayed very well. Every character is three dimensional. The horror of Adeline's life is

depicted vividly in the novel. The characters in this novel vary in personalities. The aspect of the story that impacts on the reader is the terrible treatment Adeline endured. Niang, who is the stepmother, has a particular hatred towards Adeline. Her father, who is a mysterious character loves her at times and at others uncaring towards Adeline. “ Is this medal for topping your class? he asked. I nodded eagerly, too excited to speak. ” (Yen Mah, 1999: 11). This was the only time he congratulated Adeline. Adeline has three brothers and one sister. She is attached to Aunt Baba most who is a loving character. She shows great love and affection towards Adeline unlike her other family members. Her grandfather (Ye Ye) is one of her most passionate supporters throughout the story. Her grandfather believed in her so much that Adeline said “ And if I should be so lucky as to succeed one day, it [is] only because you [believe] in me. ” (Yen Mah, 1999: 208).

This proves the influence her grandfather had on her. Chinese Cinderella is so well written that one could envisage what China was like in the early 1940s. In the late 1930s to the early 1940s China was a strict society. People expect you to be obedient and respectful. Adeline’s life starts in Tianjin where she is born. She studies kindergarten with her older sister Lydia at St Joseph’s French Convent School. As soon as she starts school she shows her talent and skills. “ What’s that hanging on your dress? ” “ It’s something special that Mother Agnes gave me in front of the whole class this afternoon. She called it an award. ” My aunt looked thrilled. “ So soon? You only started kindergarten one week ago. What is it for? ” “ It’s for topping my class this week...” (Yen Mah, 1999: 1) Adeline continues her success at school. A few months later in early 1942 Adeline’s Nai Nai dies of a massive stroke.

Adeline's family is planning to move to Shanghai due to the Japanese communists but waited six weeks till after Nai Nai's funeral. Then Adeline, Big Sister, Big Brother and Second Brother left to Shanghai to live with Niang. On the way to Shanghai "[They] were delighted and astonished... (Yen Mah, 1999: 24) when they came face to face with their father. Even in Shanghai Adeline continues to succeed at school. The reader can imagine the conditions to which Adeline was subjected. One could imagine the misery of having to walk home from kindergarten. One afternoon, " Not long after Father and Niang [return] from Tianjin, Mr and Mrs Huang [come] to visit. They [bring] gifts for all seven of us children in a large cardboard box with several holes punched in the lid...When we [open] the gift from the Huangs, we [are] delighted to find seven little baby ducklings. (Yen Mah, 1999: 83). Adeline names her duckling PLT (Precious Little Treasure). After a few days Adeline's father suggests testing Jackie's, the pet dog's obedience after dinner. He orders fourth brother to fetch a duckling and he came down with PLT. That night is PLT's death. Fourth brother has been with Adeline during PLT's funeral. Soon Niang decides to get Lydia married. After the wedding Niang moves Adeline into Tianjin and sends her to a convent boarding school. By December that year she is the only student left due to the communists.

Aunt Jeane Schilling comes to pick her up and take her to Hong Kong where she studies secondary school. Later Adeline studies medicine in England. The language in Chinese Cinderella successfully describes Adeline's life, particularly the hardships. Upon hearing that Adeline wins the writing competition and her father being pleased she imagines, "[Her] whole being

[vibrates] with all the joy in the world. I only [have] to stretch out my hand to reach the stars. ” (Yen Mah, 1999: 220). This quotation means that Adeline feels as though all the joy is inside her.

She had so much joy she is vibrating. She thought the joy lied in the stars, which she obtains by stretching towards the sky. The language is also very emotive because the novel describes the feelings of every character, such as the scene when Adeline’s little duckling PLT is killed by their dog. “ I [am] overwhelmed with horror. My whole world [turns] desolate. ” (Yen Mah, 1999: 96). Adeline says this in a very small amount of words, but it is so descriptive you can feel the emotion.

This quotation means that she is suffering through too much horror and sadness to cope with. Adeline felt that the whole world was deserted, nothing but grief. Through the language the reader is able to resonate with the hardships Adeline endured. Chinese Cinderella is a novel which depicts the chaos of China in the early 1940s. It is an autobiographical novel telling the story of an unwanted daughter. The novel is memorable because the language is captivating. Chinese Cinderella is remarkable for its strong interpretation of the characters.