

The price of indebtedness in may-lee chai's saving sourdi

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Whether stabbing a man with a paring knife or getting a friend to punch her sister's husband in the face, Nea always manages to start trouble for her and her sister, Sourdi. She doesn't do it on purpose, it's just that Nea will do anything to protect her older sister. The issue stems from when the family lived in their native Cambodia; Nea was only four and Sourdi carried her across a minefield on her back. Ever since that moment, Nea has felt indebted to her older sister and has been determined to protect her at all costs. However, the costs seem to be high as her identity has become tied to this notion of debt.

In May-Lee Chai's "Saving Sourdi," Nea's identity is shaped by her feeling of indebtedness to her sister Sourdi, which compromises her ability to grow and objectively see the world. The cause behind the story's central conflict lies in Nea's devotion to Sourdi, which in turn was caused by a distant memory. "Once upon a time", Nea recalls, "Sourdi had walked across a minefield, carrying me on her back" (Chai 140). With the terrible war background on the Khmer Rouge-era in Cambodia as an exposition, Nea recalls her sister Sourdi carrying her across a field by stepping on countless dead bodies to avoid the mines.

This is something that Nea views as secret between just her and her sister, one she will never reveal to another soul. It is because of this single incident that Nea vows to "walk on bones" and "rotting flesh" to "save Sourdi," which itself foreshadows events to come (Chai 140). It is this event that defines Nea and motivates her actions throughout the story. It is because Nea's identity is derived from this debt to her older sister that causes Nea to respond in such a haphazard manner.

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Not only do her responses create tension in the story, but they further develop Nea as a character. I would walk on bones for my sister, I vowed. I would put my bare feet on rotting flesh. I would save Sourdi"(Chai 140).

These words were spoken by Nea after Sourdi sacrificed herself to carry Nea through a treacherous mine field reeking with the stench of dead bodies.

Only a few people in the story know about this incident it is a highly guarded secret of Nea's. This single incident defines Nea's identity through out the story, which clarifies Nea as a static character her identity never changes.

From the time when these two young girls reached America Nea always has Sourdi's back, she is overly protective like that of an older sister which is ironic because she is the youngest daughter. Nea will always feel like her life was saved by Sourdi so she will do anything to repay her. Sourdi develops throughout the novel at first by being very brave, strong, and independent as she carries her baby sister across of the mine field. It is almost as if that identity transferred from her to her younger sister Nea.

Sourdi does not speak up for herself when she disagrees with her mother or Duke. She does not even try to put up a fight when her mother arranges her marriage. This classifies Sourdi as a very dynamic character or round character. As a result of this, Nea has never really lived her life for herself. Everything that she has done and the decisions that she makes are based upon the events that occur in Sourdi's life. This in turn leads to Nea's inability to grow, because she is constantly caring and looking after her sister, instead of worrying about herself and moving on with her own life.

Because of these events Sourdi can be labeled as the foil to Nea's character in this story. Just like the examples that were given earlier, when Nea jumped up and stabbed the man that was hassling Sourdi at the restaurant, or when she and Duke went knocking on Sourdi's door because they thought she was in trouble, all of the actions that Nea took were always a reflection of the situation that Sourdi was in at that present moment. One of the major effects of Nea's identity being tied to her indebtedness to her sister is that it clouds her ability to be objective.

This leads her to make spur-of-the-moment decisions that may not be in her or Sourdi's best interest. One example took place in the family restaurant at the beginning of the story. Sourdi was serving some old drunk men when one decided to put his arms around her. This immediately sent Nea into a blind rage in which she "ran into the kitchen", "grabbed the knife", and "stabbed the man" (Chai 131). Luckily, the knife she had grabbed was only a paring knife and it got caught in the man's sleeve of his jacket.

Obviously, the girls' mother became quite upset and apologized to the men while scolding Nea. Nea, overcome with anger, had not stopped to consider the consequences of her actions. Had she actually injured the man, he could have sued the restaurant and Nea could have faced criminal charges.

Obviously, this was not the best way to handle the incident. This is again illustrated when Nea overhears a conversation between Sourdi and her mother. She becomes convinced that Sourdi's new husband is abusive and convinces their mutual friend Duke to drive her to Sourdi's house in Des Moines.

Upon their arrival, Duke, having only heard Nea's interpretation of events, ran inside and "punched Sourdi's husband in the nose" (Chai 142). Sourdi's husband was surprisingly understanding about the matter and another disaster was narrowly avoided. However, the event still must have had a profound effect on Sourdi and her husband's home life. Again, it was Nea's impetuous attitude and blind calling to protect her sister that led to the encounter. Ever since Sourdi carried Nea through that minefield on her back, Nea has been trying to find a way to repay her sister's kindness.

However, as the years have passed, the protection of Sourdi has become a compulsion. She is consumed with her desire to protect her sister from harm without regard for the consequences. This has clouded Nea's judgement and hindered her ability to objectively look at a situation. And, consequentially, her "solution" often causes more harm than the perceived threat she is fighting. Unless Nea can somehow overcome her need to protect her sister, she will never be able to live a normal and happy life. Maybe Sourdi is not the one who needs saving.