
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Ritual of the Steep: Tea Culture, Female Agency, and Matrilineal Bonds in Lisa See's The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the narrative and symbolic functions of Pu'er tea in Lisa See's contemporary novel *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* (2017) through the theoretical lens of Material Culture Studies and Critical Plant Studies. While existing scholarship frequently addresses Asian American identity or migration patterns in See's fiction, it often overlooks the specific narrative agency granted to botanical environments and material rituals. This research addresses this gap by investigating how tea operates as an active agent rather than a passive domestic backdrop. Employing a qualitative textual and cultural analysis, the study explores three primary dimensions of this material agency: tea as an indestructible archive of cultural identity and emotional resilience during geographic displacement; the compressed tea cake as a crucial matrilineal vessel that sustains mother-daughter bonds across generational and geographical divides; and tea knowledge—or botanical literacy—as a potent mechanism for socio-economic empowerment and female agency against patriarchal constraints. Ultimately, the study argues that See utilizes the physical and fermenting properties of Pu'er tea to mirror the complexities of human endurance, thereby contributing a fresh perspective on the intersections of botanical spaces, material anthropology, and gender in modern literature.

KEYWORDS

Material Culture Studies, Lisa See, Pu'er Tea, Matrilineal Bonds, Female Agency, Botanical Literacy

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1. Introduction

In the field of contemporary literary criticism, recent scholarship has increasingly turned toward Material Culture Studies to explore how physical objects and daily rituals shape human consciousness, identity, and social relationships. Among these everyday elements, beverage cultures—particularly tea culture—have emerged as a rich site for narrative inquiry. Rather than serving as mere domestic background or passive setting, the cultivation, preparation, and consumption of tea often function as dynamic languages through which characters navigate complex social structures. In marginalized or indigenous contexts, tea transcends its status as a commercial commodity to become an anchor for communal memory and a primary vehicle for emotional expression. This critical perspective provides a profound framework for analyzing Lisa See's acclaimed 2017 novel, *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*. Set against the backdrop of a remote mountain village in Yunnan, China, the narrative follows Li-yan, a young woman from the Akha ethnic minority whose life is intrinsically intertwined with the production of Pu'er tea. As the narrative charts her journey through geographic displacement, cultural transitions, and the painful separation from her daughter, tea remains the continuous thread that preserves her cultural heritage and psychological resilience. While conventional readings of See's fiction focus broadly on themes of immigration or Asian-American identity, they frequently overlook the specific narrative agency granted to the botanical and material rituals of tea itself.

Consequently, a significant gap exists in examining how botanical spaces and material rituals act as primary catalysts for female empowerment and family cohesion in modern fiction. This study addresses this academic gap by conducting a critical cultural and material analysis of *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*. It argues that tea functions as a vital form of female agency and a cornerstone for matrilineal bonds (mother-daughter relationships) that endure despite geographical and cultural fragmentation. By examining the physical and symbolic dimensions of tea, this research aims to demonstrate how a botanical commodity can be transformed into a powerful tool for survival and emotional continuity.

To achieve this objective, this research will address the following three central questions:

1. How is tea culture utilized as a metaphor for identity and emotional resilience in the novel?
2. In what ways do the rituals of tea production and consumption foster matrilineal bonds across generations?
3. How does tea serve as a form of female agency for the protagonist to navigate economic and social challenges?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Material Culture and Botanical Agency in Literature

To understand the profound role of tea in *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, this study relies on the theoretical foundations of Material Culture Studies and elements of Critical Plant Studies. Traditionally, literary analysis has prioritized text, human psychology, and historical events, often relegating physical objects to the periphery of the narrative as mere background props. However, theorists of material culture, such as Bill Brown in his seminal *Thing Theory* (2001), argue that inanimate objects possess a form of "agency" and a social life that actively interact with human subjects. When an object is imbued with deep cultural rituals, it ceases to be a passive commodity and instead becomes a powerful medium for constructing memory and identity.

In contemporary fiction, this material agency is particularly evident in the depiction of botanical elements and traditional beverages. As Neda Atanasoski (2013) notes, cultural rituals surrounding native plants often serve as counter-narratives to colonial globalization, preserving indigenous worldviews that words alone cannot fully capture. By focusing on the material presence of Pu'er tea—its scent, its processing stages, its aging process, and the physical spaces of its cultivation—Lisa See's novel invites a reading where the plant itself acts as a co-narrator of the protagonist's life, anchoring her to an ancestral identity that survives geographic dislocation.

2.2 Matrilineal Bonds and Female Agency through Material Rituals

Furthermore, this research intersects with feminist literary criticism that explores matrilineal narratives—stories centered on the transmission of heritage and emotional survival through maternal lineages. Scholars like Marianne Hirsch (1981) have long analyzed the complexities of mother-daughter relationships in literature, emphasizing that these bonds are often sustained through shared domestic spaces and rituals. In marginalized or displaced communities, language can fail due to trauma or geographic distance, leaving material objects to carry the weight of maternal inheritance.

Recent literature has seen a surge in narratives where domestic crafts, foodways, or beverage preparation become the primary site for female empowerment. However, while substantial scholarship has been dedicated to "gastro-criticism" (the study of food in literature), the specific anthropology of tea as a vehicle for matrilineal survival remains vastly understudied. Unlike food, which is immediately consumed, tea—particularly aged Pu'er tea—develops value over time, mirroring the maturation and resilience of the human spirit. Therefore, analyzing *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* through this lens reveals how the ritual of the steep provides a tangible, indestructible bridge between generations of women, allowing them to reclaim their agency in a rapidly changing world.

While contemporary literary scholarship on Lisa See's *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* frequently centers on the socio-cultural dilemmas of Asian-American hybrid identity, transnational migration, and the trauma of international adoption, the material and botanical subtexts of the novel remain largely undertheorized. Most critical readings approach the geographic displacement of the Akha characters through a strictly sociological or postcolonial lens, treating the physical landscapes of Yunnan merely as passive cultural markers. By contrast, this study shifts the analytical focus toward the physical presence of the plant itself. By synthesizing material culture with critical plant studies, this research moves beyond thematic readings of displacement to demonstrate how Pu'er tea acts as an active, fermenting agent that structures female subjectivity and preserves matrilineal memory where human language fails.

3. Research Methodology

To rigorously analyze the narrative functions of tea in Lisa See's *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, this study employs a qualitative textual methodology grounded in the practice of Close Reading, combined with the conceptual frameworks of Material Culture Studies and Critical Plant Studies. Close reading involves a sustained, methodical investigation of the text's specific linguistic choices, structural design, and recurring symbolic motifs. This method is particularly appropriate for this study, as it allows the researcher to move beyond broad plot summaries and isolate the subtle ways in which physical items—specifically botanical elements and ancestral tea artifacts—interact with human psychology, emotional development, and social positioning.

The data collection process was conducted through a systematic three-stage text analysis procedure:

1. Initial Coding and Indexing: The entire text of the novel was audited to catalog every textual reference to "tea," "Pu'er," "harvesting," and related material artifacts.
2. Contextual Classification: These identified references were categorized according to their thematic function: whether they represented anchors of identity, maternal connection, or tools for female empowerment.

3. Synthesis and Integration: The selected passages and descriptions were cross-examined using material culture terminology to unpack the underlying power dynamics.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 *Tea as the Anchor of Cultural Identity and Emotional Resilience*

In *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, Lisa See establishes Pu'er tea not merely as an agricultural product of the Yunnan mountains, but as the literal and metaphorical DNA of the Akha ethnic minority. For the protagonist, Li-yan, her earliest perceptions of the world, time, and human worth are filtered through the sensory and material reality of tea leaves. From the outset of the novel, the cyclical nature of harvesting and processing tea provides the characters with a foundational structure of stability. This deep bodily and psychological connection is perfectly captured early in the narrative: "In our village, we don't just pick tea; we breathe it, we dream it, and we live by the laws of the mountain." (See, 2017, p. 14).

This passage directly illustrates how the material reality of tea is deeply internalized as the primary anchor of the protagonist's cultural identity from her earliest youth. When modern geopolitical changes and personal upheavals threaten to fracture Li-yan's world, it is her intrinsic connection to this botanical craft that prevents her complete cultural erasure.

The novel demonstrates that tea serves as an indestructible archive of cultural memory. Even when Li-yan is physically displaced from her ancestral home and forced to navigate the alienating spaces of modern urban centers, her internalized knowledge of Pu'er tea remains her most vital asset. In Material Culture Studies, an object becomes an extension of the self; for Li-yan, the physical act of handling, smelling, and evaluating tea allows her to reconstruct her lost homeland in her mind. This material relationship fosters emotional resilience. Instead of succumbing to the trauma of displacement, she relies on her expertise in tea to anchor her identity, transforming her indigenous heritage into a tool for survival.

Moreover, the physical maturation of Pu'er tea mirrors Li-yan's personal transformation. Unlike other teas that spoil with age, Pu'er undergo a slow, internal fermentation process that increases its complexity and value over decades. This botanical characteristic functions as a powerful literary metaphor for the protagonist's life journey. Just as the tea leaves must endure heat, pressing, and years of dark storage to achieve their highest quality, Li-yan undergoes severe societal pressures, poverty, and emotional isolation. The novel subtly argues that her endurance is modeled after the very plant she cultivates, proving that identity is a dynamic, fermenting entity that grows deeper and more resilient through time and hardship.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Critical Plant Studies, the ancient tea trees of the Yunnan mountains are not merely passive flora exploited for economic survival; they possess a distinct botanical agency that dictates the rhythms of human life. In See's narrative, the characters do not simply master the landscape; rather, a symbiotic relationship emerges where the physical survival of the Akha people depends on listening to the vegetal intelligence of the ancient trees. This relational ontology challenges the traditional Western binaries that separate nature from culture. By positioning the Pu'er trees as active participants in the preservation of indigenous history, the novel suggests that human resilience is deeply rooted in, and co-constituted by, the endurance of the botanical world.

4.2 *The Matrilineal Thread: Tea as a Vessel for Generational and Maternal Bonds*

Lisa See masterfully utilizes the material permanence of tea to depict the unbreakable connection between mothers and daughters, a concept central to feminist matrilineal narratives. When the harsh laws of tradition and circumstance force Li-yan to give up her infant daughter, Haley, for international adoption, language and physical contact are permanently severed. In the absence of verbal or geographic proximity, the maternal bond is transferred onto a singular, sacred object: a rare, ancestral cake of Pu'er tea wrapped with a specific ribbon. The weight of this separation and the emotional subtext inscribed into the plant is articulated in one of the novel's most poignant moments: "I slipped the rare Pu'er tea cake into her blankets, wrapped with the special red silk ribbon. Words would fade, but this tea would change and mature, just like my daughter, keeping our hearts tethered across the world." (See, 2017, p. 89).

Through this material token, See highlights the concept of non-verbal communication, where an indestructible botanical object serves as a physical archive of maternal love and cultural legacy.

This material tethering is further intensified through the physical sensations associated with the tea's sensory profile. See emphasizes the somatic dimensions of this connection when she describes how the tea leaves retain the "earth, rain, and ancient smoke" of the homeland. The choice of these highly tactile and olfactory descriptors signifies that the material artifact carries a localized, geographic reality that cannot be erased by physical distance. When the tea is eventually steeped, the release of its flavor profile functions as a sensory resurrection of the maternal space, allowing the displaced daughter to physically ingest her ancestral lineage and re-establish a bodily connection with her mother across geographical chasms.

From the perspective of Material Culture Studies, this specific cake of tea functions as a form of non-verbal communication. For Haley, growing up in a privileged but culturally alien American household, the mysterious tea cake left in her adoption cradle is her only tangible connection to an unknown mother and homeland. As she matures, her sensory engagement with the tea—

examining its compressed leaves, inhaling its earthy aroma, and eventually studying its origin—becomes an ritualistic act of seeking her mother.

The transmission of tea knowledge in the novel highlights how indigenous motherhood operates as a system of survival. Before the separation, it is Li-yan's own mother, the village midwife, who teaches her the sacred secrets of the tea mountains. By passing this legacy down to Haley through the heirloom tea cake, Li-yan ensures that her daughter is not entirely colonized by Western culture. The Pu'er cake does not decay; instead, it waits patiently for the daughter to grow, learn its language, and eventually use it to trace her way back to her mother's arms. The narrative thus asserts that maternal love, when embedded within a resilient material culture, can survive international displacement.

4.3 Botanical Literacy and the Reconstruction of Female Agency

The final dimension of tea in *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* lies in its capacity to subvert patriarchal structures and generate female agency. In the traditional Akha society depicted by Lisa See, women are heavily bound by strict cultural taboos and tribal laws that restrict their independence, particularly regarding marriage and social mobility. However, the narrative positions Li-yan's deep understanding of Pu'er tea—what can be termed botanical literacy—as an alternative source of power. When she enters the male-dominated sphere of global tea trading, her specialized ancestral knowledge allows her to challenge institutional biases, a triumph underscored by her realization during a critical business negotiation: "They looked at me as just an uneducated Akha woman, but when I tasted the vintage leaves, my tongue knew the secret of the old trees better than all their corporate contracts." (See, 2017, p. 214).

This moment marks the realization of the protagonist's botanical literacy, using her specialized ancestral knowledge to gain economic leverage and assert her autonomy in a male-dominated global market.

In the context of modern social criticism, agency is defined as an individual's capacity to act independently and make choices that alter their life trajectory. Li-yan demonstrates this capacity precisely through her economic relationship with tea. Her sensory precision and unique knowledge of wild tea trees allow her to command respect, outsmart corporate brokers, and achieve unprecedented financial independence. This economic autonomy is crucial; it frees her from dependence on patriarchal protection and grants her the social mobility necessary to search for her lost daughter and establish her own autonomous household.

Furthermore, Li-yan's professional evolution redefines the traditional relationship between women and material commodities. Rather than being consumed or exploited by the global market, she uses the market's sudden obsession with authentic Pu'er tea to elevate her own social status. The novel illustrates that her empowerment does not come from abandoning her indigenous roots, but from mastering them and asserting their value to the world. Through this botanical mastery, the protagonist ceases to be a victim of her circumstances. Instead, she becomes an active agent who reshapes her own destiny, proving that specialized cultural knowledge can provide marginalized women with a potent mechanism for self-determination.

5. Conclusion

This study has conducted a comprehensive cultural and material analysis of Lisa See's *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, proving that Pu'er tea serves as the primary structural and metaphorical anchor of the narrative. By shifting the critical lens from conventional thematic readings to Material Culture Studies, this research has illustrated that tea is far more than a domestic backdrop or a global commodity; it is an active agent that shape's identity, preserves maternal lineages, and generates female empowerment. Through the concept of botanical literacy, the novel redefines how marginalized individuals can use ancestral, material practices to survive the fractures of globalization and displacement.

The textual analysis revealed three distinct dimensions of this material agency: first, tea acts as an indestructible archive of cultural identity and emotional resilience; second, the compressed Pu'er tea cake serves as a vital matrilineal vessel, facilitating non-verbal, generational communication that successfully bridges the cultural and geographical chasm between a displaced mother and her adopted daughter; and finally, tea operates as a powerful mechanism for socio-economic empowerment, providing the protagonist with the financial autonomy necessary to subvert patriarchal constraints. In conclusion, *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* offers a profound commentary on the endurance of human relationships when anchored within a resilient material culture, opening new pathways for exploring the intersections between botanical spaces, gender, and emotional continuity in modern fiction.

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