

Margaret Gaan's *Red Barbarian*: A Study on Grandparenthood in China

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Abstract:

Margaret Gaan is a prolific writer who has handled varied themes in her novels. Most of her novels bring out the culture, tradition and custom of Chinese culture. Grandparenthood is a subject of minor importance in the works of many authors. Gaan has given enormous weightage to this rare theme in her novel *Red Barbarian*.

The aim of the research paper is to bring out grandparenthood in the novel *Red Barbarian*. The major question raises in the article is why grandparents in China are showing so much of love and affection to their grandchildren.

Keywords: Chinese culture, grandparenthood, generation gap, human values, family, society.

Grandparenthood is a significant role in the life of older adults in China. The children in Chinese family are usually reared by the grandparents. Elders won't ponder childrearing as a burden but as a pleasure of their life. It helps them to live a stress-free life. In the article Hongwei Xu says, "grandparents caring for grandchildren and great-grandchildren reported better health outcomes, including greater life satisfaction, fewer depressive symptoms, and less hypertension compared with non-caregivers". (8). In the process of rearing grandchildren, they happily enrol themselves as it is in their traditional culture and gives utmost joy to their lives.

At the same time, children enjoy being with grandparents. Due to work pressure parents show their anger towards and are cajoled by the grandparents.

Margaret Gaan (1914-1998) was born in Shanghai, China. Her family backdrop was part European and part Chinese. It helped her to be well-versed in English and Chinese cultures. She spent her young days in China, she is well aware of the effects taken by the Britishers to open free trade with China. During her days in China, she became acquainted with the culture, customs and tradition of the country. In her writings readers can visibly notice the difference of culture in China and Britain. Most of her novels depict the Opium Wars as the major theme, she talks of characters of British origin make their living in China feels completely out of place.

Gaan's novels are *Last Moments of a World*, *Red Barbarian*, *White Poppy*, *Blue Mountain*, and *Little Sister*. For the present study *Red Barbarian* is chosen. In *Red Barbarian*, Gaan portrays the culture, tradition and custom of China. The prime character of the novel Charlie Tyson comes from England along with Sir George Seaton as his father sends him out of the house as he is so “-er- rebellious” (28). After reaching China, in a month's time George sets back to England whereas Charlie wishes to remain in China. Wei works as a servant of George, from him Charlie learnt about the system of China and he wants to try his luck in opium trading. Wei introduces him to How-kwa, Chief of the Co-hong.

Charlie along with Yin-kwa, How-kwa's son involve themselves in opium trading without the knowledge of Wei and How-kwa. Charlie then marries Wei's daughter Ling-ling. The couple gives birth to Jin-see and Little Sister. From the beginning Jin-see is fond of his grandpa Wei. For business purpose Charlie sails to another island at the time his wife and children decide to stay with Wei. For months Jin-see has not seen his grandfather, his reaction at the meeting is described “Jin-see almost falling overboard in his excitement. He hadn't seen his grandfather since the last time Wei visited Macoa, almost four months ago.” (108)

Children in the China are reared with the help of “amahs”. In the book *Superior Servants: The Legendary Cantonese Amahs of the Far East*, Kenneth Gaw explains about “amahs” as, “The Cantonese amahs were involved in three main areas of domestic activity: minding the children, cooking, and household work. The one looking after the children was the *chow tsai* or baby amah.” (91) They in return gets food and lodging from their masters. It is again a great surprise for Charlie and his friend Blogg.

“They just get food and lodging, and a set of new clothes at New Year. The only cash they get is tips from visitors to our house. Ling-ling and Ah Sam tip their friends’

servants, when they visit them. Adds up to quite a bit for the servants, and costs the employers no more. Chinese system-you pay your friends' servants and they pay yours.”(109)

From the beginning Charlie doesn't like the pampering of Wei by Jin-see. He wants to punish him whenever he is doing mischievous things. If Jin-see wants something he will go to any extent to get his things done. His sulks get positive response from all except Charlie. The punishment meted out on Jin-see is intolerable for Wei, amah and also for Ling-ling and Ah Sam. “Jin-see had sulked, but what had really astonished and dismayed Charlie was that his pouts had sent not only the amahs but also Ling-ling and Ah Sam into a fever of appeasement. By God, it was high time to apply discipline!” (109)

According to Charlie, Jin-see is extravagantly spoilt in Wei's company. He wants to rear the child in different way. Save Charlie all the members of the family are pampering Jin-see. Charlie doesn't like the role played by Wei in Jin-see's life. In the view of Charlie, parents are the important persons in the life of any child. But when Wei takes important decision in the life of Jin-see, he is not even discussing with the important persons.

He'd spend the next month constantly in Wei's company, and Wei would do just as he liked with his beloved grandson. He would never dream of consulting so unimportant a person as his grandson's mother, and neither Ling-ling nor Ah Sam would dream of interfering between Wei and his grandson. (112)

Charlie becomes a well-established businessman in China. He wanted to show his lifestyle and his family to his father, so he decides to visit England. He expresses his wish to his friend Blogg. Blogg is well aware of the nature of Wei. He is sure that Wei will never permit him to take his family to England. This irritates Charlie. He asserts his power of making decision in his family members' lives but it is not welcomed in the culture of China.

“Of my father. . . . One day soon I'm going home to see my father.”

“Mmmm. . . . What about Ling-ling and the Children?”

“They'll come with me.”

“Wei won't like it.”

“It'll only be for a couple of years.”

“You think Wei'll let you take Jin-see away, even only a couple of years?”

“How can he prevent me? Jin-see’s my son.”

“And Wei’s grandson. Could be he’ll make trouble.”

“Oh Blogg, could be you’re getting more Chinee than the Chinee!” (121)

Charlie cannot show his real affection towards Wei. His thinking is that Wei is spoiling Jin-see with his unconditional love. He turned blind eye towards the wrong doings of Jin-see. Charlie openly states Wei’s role in spoiling Jin-see to Ling-ling, “I’m always glad to see your father, but when he’s here something strange happens with Jin-see.”(145)

Charlie contemplates a strain in the relationship of Jin-see and himself because of Wei. In Wei’s absence Jin-see gets along with Charlie in a good way. But Wei’s presence is bringing some hindrance among the two. Ling-ling clarifies the doubts of her husband, she tells him that Jin-see is the heir of Wei. He is the one who performs kowtow on Wei’s death. In China the family members show respect to their elders through kowtow. Andrew B. Kipnis describes the practise of kowtow as, “kowtow,” means literally “to knock one’s head” and refers to a bodily gesture in which one performs a kneeling bow and touches one’s head to the ground. (74) But this practise is not followed by the westerners and Charlie is not aware of this practise and Wei’s doesn’t expect kowtow from Charlie.

I don’t know what it is-it’s as though he and Jin-see have a secret that nobody else knows.”

“Oh!” She nodded understandingly. “Is because Jin-see is the one who will make kowtow for my father when my father die. You cannot because“- she sparkled at him for a moment-”you are Red Barbarian. So Jin-see must do. Jin-see know, and my father know. This is not secret-this is . . . *knot* between my father and Jin-see. You don’t angry, Chahlee!”

“I know Jin-see’s your father’s - well, *heir* - and I’m not angry about that, darling. But -”(146)

Charlie when he conveys his wish to visit England, Ling-ling replies that his father won’t like it. Charlie tries to convince her that he himself will explain his wish to Wei. He adds that in two years’ time they can get back to China. She fears to take up the journey as it kindles Wei’s anger. “It’s not the day of judgement, sweetheart! It’s just a voyage we’re going to take, to my home, and you’ll love it when we get there!”(159)

Repeatedly Charlie gets negative response for his decision to take his family to England. Charlie wants to spend just two years in England. But the situation is not understandable for the people in China. When he tries to persuade, all think from Wei's perspective and they are not taking the points of Charlie into consideration. Charlie conveys his wish to Yin-kwa, he is so shocked to hear.

“*What?*” Yin-kwa stopped again and stared at Charlie. “You think you’re going to take Jin-see away from China?”

“Just for a year or two.”

“Wei will never permit it, Charlie.”

“By God, Yin-kwa! Doesn’t anybody remember that Jin-see is *my* son? Everybody, even Ling-ling sometimes, behaves as though Wei has more rights over him than I have!”

“In a way, he does. Jin-see is Wei’s spiritual heir. It’s Jin-see who’ll perform the rituals for Wei when he becomes an ancestor.”

“I’ve no objection whatever to that! All I want to do is take him home for a year or two to show him to my father!” (197)

Charlie’s decision finally reaches Wei, he then shows too much anger on Ling-ling. Wei takes Ling-ling and children to Ningpo, this area is inaccessible to foreigners. Foreigners are allowed only in limited areas and they are not permitted in China region. The decision of Wei irritates Charlie, he shows his anger to Ah Sam.

“God rot it!” He leaped, roaring, to his feet, sending a small table crashing. “Are you telling me she went with him because he threatened to take Jin-see? Ah Sam, how could you let her go?”

She yelled back at him, standing her ground.

“How I stop her? She don’t want go! She *cry!* But Wei take Jin-see, she must go too, and Little Sisters, and *how I stop?*” (212)

The situation in China gets bad because of Opium War. Foreigners are treated as rivals by the Chinese. Wei fears about Jin-see and Little Sister as they look like foreign children. He guards them in a safe place and explains the situation to Jin-see. At one point Wei, Ling-ling

and Little Sister cannot stay together so Wei sends Ling-ling and Little Sister to Chapoo, the safest place and takes Jin-see along with him. Till his last breath he doesn't want to part with Jin-see.

Finally, Charlie understands the culture of Chinese people and he badly wants to re-join his family members. Charlie wants to ask his pardon to Wei. "Ah Sam, I'm not angry with Wei anymore. In fact, I want to ask his pardon. I came to understand who Jin-see is- *what* Jin-see is to the family. I want to give him back to Wei. I want us all to be together, because now I understand that the family is forever. . . . (372) Wei also forgives Charlie before his eternal rest, "he'd longed to see Charlie. He'd done something that would seem very wrong to Charlie, and he wanted to ask his pardon. He loved Charlie". (406) Though Charlie and Wei are not staying together, they both forgiven each other at same point of time.

Wei works as informer for China side during war. Foreigners have smelled the deeds of Wei and he is ultimately assaulted by them. He knows that one day he will be killed, so Wei has made proper arrangements for Jin-see to be united with his family members in case of his death. Sadly, all died in Jin-see's family due to war and he is given to Yin-kwa's family.

The paper gives a detailed account of the role of grandparents in rearing the grandchildren. Gaan has taken great effort to bring out the culture and custom of China. Charlie poses himself as a dynamic character throughout the novel. He vehemently objects to the pampering of Wei. He doesn't openly state his views to Wei. Wei also understands the anger of Charlie in return he doesn't show his anger to Charlie in a direct way. Strong bond between Wei and Jin-see is revealed throughout the novel. Jin-see is attached to Wei at the same time he doesn't act indifferently to Charlie.

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