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The Undeserved Disadvantages

Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone* and Cristina García's *Monkey Hunting* both tell tales laden with slavery and servitude, but from wildly different perspectives. *Monkey Hunting*'s Chen Pan is a Chinese man who was deceived into indentured servitude under the pretenses of a false job offer (landing him in Cuba), while Fela of *Daughters of the Stone* is an African woman who was taken from her home and sold off to work on a plantation in the Caribbean. They both share the same general fate but are brought to it and handle it quite differently. Naturally, both novels heavily revolve around race and sexuality. This is handled uniquely given their separate nationalities, creating two entirely different perspectives and sets of experiences on the topic across two novels. While they cover similar ideas, that does not make them fully similar beneath the surface. Fela and Chen Pan's skin and sexuality drive either book in separate directions. These qualities work together to limit Fela's status and opportunities and to elevate Chen Pan's by comparison, as the significant ancestors of these two novels establish the impact of these qualities.

While Pan lands in a similar position as Fela, he signs away his rights, something that Fela (to the slave traders) does not possess, marking a clear difference between the two characters. With the novels both initially taking place in the mid-19th century, the passage of time would not have been responsible for this drastic difference. This initial contrast highlights the major divide between the two novels: the race of the characters involved. Fela's skin marks her as an individual without rights to her abductors, who are free to capture and possess her. However, in Chen Pan's case he is not even technically a slave, but instead an overeager man

who sealed his own fate as an indentured servant. The most significant source of separation between these two pieces is that it is clearly established that Chen Pan had a *choice*, while Fela was taken away without a second thought. A subtle distinction, but one that highlights the vast disparity in how Chinese and African people are viewed. Even Pan himself illustrates this gap in thinking, as his immediate description of the African slaves he first encounters comes across as describing a wild animal more than a human. He expresses how they were "twice as wide as him, with thighs thick as oaks. Teeth that could grind his bones" (García 23). He presents them like one would an animal, with a lack of any detail that would suggest humanity. Even this idea of them "grinding his bones" in the first place presents them as these savage beasts who are not only a separate species, but hostile and out of control. He refers to them as one would a trapped lion in a zoo enclosure; filled with awe and fear at such a wild/fearsome beast. Pan's first impression of them furthers the idea that Africans are viewed far more negatively than Chinese people, as he barely recognizes them as people.

Both groups are treated terribly but comparing the two novels showcases a sickening hierarchy of people. Of course, white individuals have placed themselves at the pinnacle of this, with Chinese people and Africans following behind in that order. The attitudes towards either race (shown off by Pan in particular) displays how even among slaves, Africans are treated and seen as subhuman. It characterizes *Monkey Hunting* as a triumphant and inspiring escape, while *Daughters of the Stone* creates dismay within the reader at the hopelessness and horrific treatment involved. It too, is certainly inspiring, but the sadness of this tale creeps in throughout every page, as even happy points such as Tía Josefa's recounting of her love for Clemensio are tainted by his graphic and unprovoked whipping. This treatment foreshadows the events of both novels while provoking thoughts on the treatment of Africans as a whole.

Pan establishes his views of African people, while the slave trade itself showcases the horrific acts committed against them by white individuals. When considering Pan's method of capture, this further cements this order of mistreatment. Throughout the time of these novels, Africa was viewed as full of resources to conquer and overtake, and the African people unfortunately fell under that label. Before the infamous Scramble for Africa, where the continent was conquered and divided up by Europe, it was still seen as a resource for highly developed countries to exploit. Its people were woefully exploited, as West Africa was the "epicenter for the capture of slaves for transport across the Atlantic" (Alanuma). As abolitionist movements began to sweep Europe, the illegal slave trade only expanded, while Christian missionaries even entered the continent, hoping to "enlighten" its people by explaining how African beliefs were false, and Christianity was the only true religion. Such occurrences highlight the air of superiority among the white man and emphasizes how deeply associated the African people had become with slavery, as this was continuing no matter what movement attempted to stop it. The identity of Fela and other Africans labeled them as grossly inferior from their birth, and as a result this history stays with the family through the text's entirety. Fela's struggles are particularly remembered by Mati, who upon viewing the old Plantation lands thinks of them as "where Fela had lived and died" and as the fields where "many of her people lost their lives" (Llanos-Figueroa 158).

While Chen Pan also succumbs to this idea of one's skin marking them as different, it is on a significantly lesser scale, and does not affect him as deeply. While he "dresses in white linen suits and Panama hats, his face and his accent betray his origins. The contrast marks the impossibility of belonging" (Igartuburu García 456-457). However, he is still "inserted in the national tree" of his new land, to which Fela is entirely absent. Her identity still lies in Africa,

while Chen Pan's is now in Cuba, even describing how "he wasn't the least bit nostalgic" of his homeland and its events in comparison to his Chinese friends (García 81). And as Pan moves towards assimilation, Fela never truly appears to feel at home, unable to associate with anything other than the land she was stolen from. Pan certainly does endure his share of discrimination, inevitable given the obvious difference from the Cuban people, however in his case, "a gracious tip of his hat" was more than enough to ward off harassment (García 66). In Fela's case, any sign of falling out of line would be met with extreme punishment, as Tía Josefa explicitly states how "for black people, pride was a sin punishable by death," noticeably saying "black people" as a whole instead of Black slaves (Llanos-Figueroa 8). In addition to this, Fela's attitude brings along the assertions of Don Porfirio, who claims that "If she were mine, I'd teach her a lesson or two," while clearly alluding to rape (Llanos-Figueroa 40). It is in this sense that the pitfalls of her African race and femininity conjoin, as not only does it open her to worse treatment, but to horrific sexual punishment that permanently affects one's mental state.

The increased racial discrimination against African people is further displayed within *Monkey Hunting* itself. While the buying of slaves is included in either text, each novel highlights a unique perspective of such. Fela herself is taken to auction and sold away, and ultimately lives a life where those she cared about could be taken away and sold off/relocated at any moment. Chen Pan eventually finds himself involved in the slave market as well, except as a buyer. Pan's Chinese nationality, masculinity and newfound freedom places him above African individuals on this horrific hierarchy of people, and while he utilizes such power in an unharmful manner, the existence of this power alone is enough to separate the two novels drastically. Following his escape, Pan becomes successful and *buys* a Black woman who comes to be his companion. Her race marks her as a slave, while her femininity presents her as a helpless being

who needs to be rescued (by Pan). This idea is furthered by her timid and reserved behavior. Intentions aside, this act separates the novels from each other entirely, as it marks a clear distinction between the lives these two characters are allowed to lead.

There is far more to their comparison than them simply being slave narratives but looking at the texts in conjunction acts as a commentary on racial discrimination within the 19th century and beyond. African individuals are viewed as inferior to Chinese people, and while they both face heavy discrimination, Pan acquiring Lucrecia showcases the levels of racism that exist. While she and her son were kept as slaves, Pan does not escape the situation without harassment, as he is bid goodbye with Don Joaquin yelling, "Now get out of here, you dirty *chino*" (García 68). It is evident that the color of their skin marks them both as inferior, just on distinct levels. Certainly, this distinction does not suggest that Pan's journey is simple or easy, but instead it displays the increased levels of difficulty Fela, Lucrecia, and other Africans face, as even amongst slaves/former servants they are treated the worst. Ultimately, *Monkey Hunting* forces readers of both texts to reevaluate *Daughters of the Stone* and look once more at its characters and all the unseen challenges they had to overcome. As the novel continues, it becomes increasingly difficult to equate Chen Pan's and Fela's experiences, as their paths grow further and further apart.

The heavily contrasting attitudes towards escape marks yet another divide between the opportunities either character had. Fela's determination over freeing herself is met with immediate pushback from the other women she was enslaved with, with them saying that she will be here *forever*. Clearly all their hope has been eradicated, but Chen Pan finds himself in a significantly easier situation to navigate by comparison, escaping after only two years and becoming a free man. He was able to slip away undetected, and even to him it all seemed "too

easy" (García 38). Pan's masculinity works to foreshadow this endeavor. It opens himself up to more opportunity, whereas in Fela's case the idea of escape is impossible, with the women's spirits around her being broken. The male slaves are consistently pictured as far stronger and infinitely more defiant, while females are seen as fragile. Numerous male individuals are introduced in this manner, particularly Clemensio who was "a head taller than any other man" and "appeared to be surveying his own land rather than bowing to the ownership of another" (Llanos-Figueroa 23). Such defiance within women is specifically warned against, while it is tolerated within men such as Clemensio due to his value. As one might expect, such defiance/spirit leads to escapes such as Pan's, while the topic is immediately buried among the women, making a similar plan impossible.

This glaring difference of sexuality continues to root itself in these characters, with this yet again having a major impact on either novel's development. Fela's narrative is driven by her appeal to the male gaze, resulting in her being relentlessly pursued by Don Tomás, while being horribly objectified by the other white men of the area. This is quite clearly shown when she is brought up in conversation amongst them, who assert how "if she were mine, I'd teach her a lesson or two," or how "that Fela makes my blood boil every time she waltzes by. I sometimes catch myself wishing…" (Llanos-Figueroa 40). These experiences instill further discomfort upon the reader, and clearly Fela is aware of this attention. As a slave she is viewed as an object by default, but her femininity marks her as a sexual object as well, unfortunately causing the reader to expect this on some level and creating yet another hurdle for her to overcome. It places her further down the "social ladder" as it gives men yet another source of power over her. Even Tomás' (who is presented as significantly more civil than the other slave owners) "noble goal" of seeking her consent is a farce, as her repeated rejections of his advances does nothing to dissuade

him. His self-righteousness over his approach only indicates how horrible the norm truly was, and the mental strain Fela is forced to endure just because of her sexuality.

In contrast, Chen Pan endures no such sexual objectification throughout his servitude given his masculinity. While being a male is a massive advantage during this time in regard to general rights, the lack of objectification is a major benefit. Chen Pan's narrative is not one that includes hurdles of horrific sexual objectification. It is in this sense that sexuality does dominate the text however, as at every turn the reader can identify masculinity's existence and the advantages it provides Chen Pan, and what it allows him to avoid. Menial tasks such as cooking are assigned to Lucrecia for example, as he ensures she knows how to create all his favorite dishes. And as he arrives and encounters the masters and other slaves, there is an absence of expectation of sexual pursuit, which Tomás constantly instills within Fela. While her mere existence as a woman marks her as someone to use sexually, such a horrid additional struggle is non-existent for Pan throughout the novel.

In an interesting turn however, Llanos-Figueroa works to eradicate these earlier roles, with the power of the stone among Fela's lineage allowing for the women to finally take control of their lives. Mati does this most notably with her graphic manipulation of Don Prospero, who attempts to take advantage of her by withholding land that is rightfully hers. However, she squeezes all the precious land that she is owed out of him in both a literal and figurative sense, as he was "choked by screams of agony as his body arched into a human bow on the bed. His arms and legs went taut" as his "head jerked back" (Llanos-Figueroa 114). This is a significant point in the novel, where women are finally given a semblance of power/control over their captors that is not just brought upon by beauty/attraction. Fela herself is regarded as "in control" as well, particularly in the sense of allowing Don Tomás to lay with her. It is often that he is sent into a

panic at the sight of her, at one point realizing he did not want to "take" her, as "the moment his eyes fell on Fela his forcefulness disappeared" (Llanos-Figueroa 44). These instances illustrate the ability to overcome the unfortunate limitations that have been thrust upon them, emphatically stating that a person is more than their sexuality and the color of their skin. She overcomes her oppression and manages to take power from it. While in Chen Pan's case the advantages he is given do not help to pull him away from an isolated, and anti-climactic end.

Fela's advantage comes from her intense motivation, brought on by the legacy of the stone that she must protect. It is this that drives her and gives her the strength to carry on and push forward at every chance, marking her as a powerful character. She is never devoid of a purpose in life, which is unfortunately a luxury that Chen Pan does not have. This is clearly displayed near *Monkey Hunting*'s end, where it is said "he'd bought a revolver and polished it every day. He couldn't decide whether to go on living, or simply shoot himself" (García 240). Pan's life ends in a saddening state, as it disintegrates around him. Despite the advantages masculinity and race provide, it is evident that they are hardly the whole of oneself. While these traits helped to elevate Pan and give him the keys to success, they were not a guarantee at lifelong happiness, as is shown by his demise. Fela's perseverance through her added challenges once again indicates that even under the intense added stress that her race and sexuality provide, it can all be overcome given the right person. Unfortunately, these specific cases still highlight the disparity between the two groups, as it is clearly established that Fela is an outlier. Her rebelliousness/strength that allows her to survive is denounced by Tía Josefa, as she fears Fela "would have to yield or be broken" (Llanos-Figueroa 8). Overall, these traits are typically beaten out of strong-minded women. While the limitations set upon oneself by society can be transcended, it is a great feat to do so.

Sexuality and race define these two texts, shaping them in their entirety, but the advantages and disadvantages they present are established as significant edges. They are not a *complete* foreshadowing of one's character, as clearly they can be overcome or squandered. What lies at the heart of either novel is a showcase of the tragedies people are forced to endure because of things they cannot control. The twin perspectives offered on this by a Chinese man and African woman allow for the reader to understand the individual challenges posed to each, while clearly displaying the different struggles their identities bring upon themselves. Upon the close of either text, it is made evident that these traits and the advantages or disadvantages they bring do not define an individual, despite their ability to hinder or help them. As the two pieces progress, race and sexuality begin to draw parallels to social status, particularly one's wealth. While wealth does not define someone, the lack of it can significantly hamper someone throughout their life, or an abundance can act as a great aid at any time. These works act as powerful statements on the lives of people across different communities, clearly outlining forms of oppression that many readers may not have been subject to. The discomfort and sadness they evoke are purposeful, as it works to immerse the reader in the lives of the less fortunate.

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