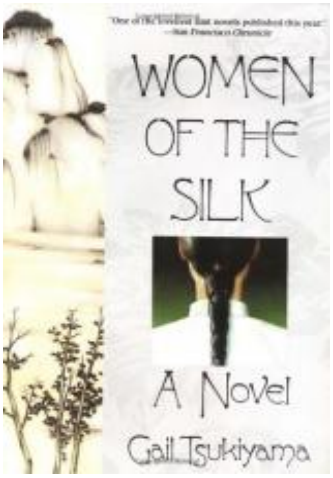
Women of the Silk

by Gail Tsukiyama



About the Book

In WOMEN OF THE SILK, Gail Tsukiyama takes her readers back to rural China in 1926, where a group of women forge a sisterhood amidst the reeling machines that reverberate and clamor in a vast silk factory from dawn to dusk. Leading the first strike the village has ever seen, the young women use the strength of their ambition, dreams, and friendship to achieve the freedom they could never have hoped for on their own. Tsukiyama's graceful prose weaves the details of "the silk work" and Chinese village life into a story of courage and strength.

Discussion Guide

1. One of Gail Tsukiyama's talents is her ability to reveal a whole world and a culture though subtle details. This novel opens with a very graphic scene, in which Pei's mother gives birth to yet another daughter. How does this one scene introduce the dynamics in Pei's family --- and thus a Chinese family --- to its audience? What details are important and what larger issues do they signify?

2. The theme of the Chinese family remains in the foreground of the novel throughout. Once Pei arrives at the girls' house how does her own experience in her family compare to the other girls' experiences? Mei-li's family, for example?

3. Once Pei arrives at the girls' house she is struck by the fact that all the girls there look the same-same hairstyle, same clothes. How does this homogeneity affect Pei? For example, examine the scene where Pei looks at herself in the mirror for the first time after being dressed like the others.

4. What are the dynamics between the girls at the silk house? For example, how does Moi affect the girls? How do they regard Chen-Li?

5. On page 90, Lin's mother is described as having lost her "voice" after her husband's death. What implications does this

statement have? How does it relate, for example, to Pei's later statement that her own family remained "silent" --- meaning they never responded to Pei's letter, nor did they ever come to visit her?

6. Compare the hairdressing ceremony with the wedding ceremony of Lin's brother. How are they similar or different, and what do they symbolize?

7. What drives Pei to participate in the hairdressing ceremony and join "the sisterhood?"

8. What does the ending scene, with Pei leaving for a "new life" in Hong Kong, suggest? How does it affect the way you view the novel and Pei's progress?

Author Bio

Gail Tsukiyama was born in San Francisco, California, to a Chinese mother from Hong Kong and a Japanese father from Hawaii. She attended San Francisco State University where she earned her Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Master of Arts Degree in English. She is the bestselling author of such novels as WOMEN OF THE SILK, THE SAMURAI'S GARDEN and A HUNDRED FLOWERS, and has received the Academy of American Poets Award and the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award. She divides her time between El Cerrito and Napa Valley, California.

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Publication Date: October 15, 1993
Genres: Fiction, Literary Fiction
Paperback: 278 pages
Publisher: St. Martin's Griffin
ISBN-10: 0312099436
ISBN-13: 9780312099435