

ARTISTS IN THE FLOATING WORLD: THE PROSE FICTION OF LEE KOK LIANG, LLOYD FERNANDO, K. S. MANIAM AND SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM¹

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This essay provides an overview of four of the major writers of anglophone Malaysian literature since Malaysian independence in order to assess the supposed "evolution" of the thematic concerns within these texts. The anglophone literature of Malaysia has moved beyond traditional colonial/postcolonial binaries and is now as much represented through a prism of diaspora and transnationalism. While such a position provides fresh opportunities for a reinterpretation of Malaysian history and society and its broader relationship to the forces of globalization in terms of the perceived dissolution of national and cultural boundaries in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it also carries with it the associated perils of accepting transition (or impermanence) as an oxymoronic, permanent state. The essay examines the role of each of the authors, from a biographical and textual perspective, in addressing these issues and finds that while a guarded resolution may be seen to take place for those authors whose work and lives have been predominantly located in Malaysia (Lee Kok Liang, Lloyd Fernando and K. S. Maniam), the prose fiction of Shirley Geok-lin Lim indicates progress on a transnational basis but regression on a more, localized Malaysian scale.

Keywords: Malaysian anglophone literature, postcolonialism, diaspora, transnationalism, globalization, marginalization.

Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision and a construction – that takes you "beyond" yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present.

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

All men are made in order to tell the truth of their land, and some tell it in words, some in blood, and others with a true grandeur

which is to live with the land, patiently and conquer it like a lover...And if a man (choosing so to live) says that he has seen this or that, no one can contradict him, as long as (the story is like) a dream whose roots spiral downwards into the earth...

Edouard Glissant, *The Ripening*

The idea of a *centre* to which one writes and in response to which one defines and constructs identity(ies) has, of course, always been a conundrum. Given that centres (and in postcolonial literature these include, most importantly, ideological, cultural, political and artistic foci) are constantly mutating – strengthening, disappearing, existing concurrently and overlapping – it follows then that if, in fact, the marginalized postcolonial or, indeed, the diasporic writer is addressing these shifting centres, he or she is, in the act of writing, responding to that which no longer exists in the same form. Whether that writing involves revisionist narratives addressed to a colonial European/American power base or the debunking of myths emanating from a neocolonial power base within Malaysia (the focus of my article) itself, the marginalised Malaysian writer has sought to resist subjugation and define a sense of individual and national identity in relation to a point inevitably already past. Yet despite the inherent contradiction in their task, the specific goals of the marginalized Malaysian writer have remained those of deconstruction, redefinition and reclamation. By revisiting and revising not only colonial and neocolonial myths, but also the diverse mythologies of their own diasporic heritages, Malaysian writers from immigrant ethnic groups may challenge others' – but most importantly their own – definitions of themselves and their nation through contesting the hegemonic histories in which they find themselves inscribed and often overwhelmed.

The most prominent English-language Malaysian prose fiction during the past 55 years has dealt with the complex and problematic task of defining and redefining self and nation(s) and positioning these constructs in relation to a mutating and increasingly globalized, broader – though some would argue perhaps more dissipated – consciousness. The texts examined in this essay span that period, during which time the immigrant ethnic groups of Malaya/Malaysia have experienced the often salutary but invariably painful task of redefining themselves in response firstly to European, most specifically British, colonization and ideologies, secondly to the increasing Malay-Muslim cultural and political dominance within post-independent Malaysia and finally through a more fluid notion of self in relation to surroundings and the problematic effects of globalization: a seemingly *amorphous* existence, if you will, but one located within an indeterminate structure which carries with it the arguably more positive connotations of adaptability that also reflects, as Arjun Appadurai terms it:

The new global economy [which] has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing-center periphery models (even those that may account for multiple centers and peripheries).²

Although colonization and its shadow still constitute an important part of the Malaysian writer's psyche, as has "the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics,"³ the thrust of thematic schema in more recent English-language writing related to Malaysia, and most particularly in the prose fiction of the last 25 years, has primarily focused on navigating a path toward egalitarian national, cultural and ultimately transnational identities, which simultaneously retain individual identity while accepting collective ideals. This essay examines four Malaysian authors with a view to assessing the ability of each to transcend the restrictive binary of the colonial/postcolonial polemic in which their early writing (certainly in the cases of Lee, Fernando and Maniam) invariably positions itself, into texts that more comprehensively reflect the increasingly complex dynamic of post-independent and contemporary Malaysia. Having discussed the work of Lee, Fernando and Maniam in a number of previous essays, I will provide a relatively brief overview of each of these authors' work in order to contextualize the evolution of their thematic concerns in relation to Shirley Geok-lin Lim's two novels. Such a reading will, I hope, better bring into relief the success or otherwise of these two works, which are ostensibly more "global" in content but which nevertheless draw heavily on key Malaysian post-independence events and the inherent social and racial divisions associated with these occurrences.

That the first novels of Lee, Fernando and Maniam (*London Does Not Belong to Me*, *Scorpion Orchid* and *The Return* respectively⁴) reflect a consciousness still very much reacting from the perspective of colonial subject, and defining itself through a declining imperial centre, is readily apparent. Despite the chronological gaps between the writing/publication of these three novels and the diverse settings (London and Paris, Singapore, and Malaya respectively) each novel is still very much immersed in the issues of European centre *vis-à-vis* Southeast Asian colony. The narrator of *London Does Not Belong to Me* records an odyssey through a fading colonial centre; in *Scorpion Orchid*, the Eurasian Peter (one of four central characters) reveals the separation angst and transcultural confusion of the individual caught between Orient(s) and Occident(s); and a similar anxiety is depicted in *The Return* through its protagonist Ravi, for whom an English-language colonial education provides an immediate escape of sorts, but ensures long-term disillusionment. The colonial/postcolonial angst so central to the plots of these three novels, however, gradually evolves into the broader poly-ethnic Malaysian canvas rendered in Lee's *Flowers in The Sky*, the social and political concerns of nation-building seen in Fernando's *Green is The Colour*, and, finally,

to Maniam's plea in *Between Lives* for the resurrection of ancestral memory and a nurturing, symbiotic relationship with the land as paths to true nationhood. Though lingering reminders of the influence of British imperialism remain, the colonial hangover has all but dissipated to be replaced by concerns with what the author sees as the inherent falsity in present-day Malaysian political and social structures – a catharsis that is achieved, I would contend, not only through distancing oneself chronologically from the echoes of empire but also through the act of writing as a purgative mapping of self and as a reflection of the need in the postcolonial/diasporic psyches for continual reinvention.

In keeping with the anglophone prose tradition of those writers who ultimately locate themselves physically, if not completely ideologically within Malaysia, Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001) and *Sister Swing* (2006) also narrate through multiple voices and cultures, though both texts are more immediately concerned with transculturalism and the establishment of individual (and particularly female) identity in relation to this fluidity of movement and in the context of the more recent global cultural dynamic that has been so dominated by American ideology and presence. Lim's writing maps and explores many of these central challenges which confront mid to late 20th century (and contemporary) societies. In their multiple settings of Malaysia, the USA and Singapore, her novels and memoirs embody – in both their temporal and spatial framework and in their thematic drive – the notions of movement, even continual transience, as self-defining and ultimately empowering moments within society and individual consciousness.

To assess whether the central concerns of diaspora and marginalization that invariably propel these authors' works are dissipating becomes the crucial question in more recent Malaysian English-language prose. As Lim herself has rightly noted when analyzing novels by Lee, Fernando, and Maniam (but in what may also look forward to her own prose fiction in part), "[many prominent Malaysian English-language texts] are identity-haunted books spiraling from their fringe locations."⁵ That a peripheral awareness dominates most areas of these writers' work can be seen in their persistent efforts to reshape and redefine self in the face of mutating centres of alterity. Thus the initial rewritings of canonical literature, reflected particularly in Lee's European experiences and the wasteland settings of much of his fiction, in Lee's and Fernando's repositioning of the Conradian voice, and in Fernando's critical responses to the tag of *postcolonial* are conscious attempts to reevaluate the relationship between Malaysian and Western literature and theory.⁶ Lee's *London Does Not Belong to Me* and sections of his unpublished journal, *Sketches, Vignettes & Brush Strokes*, for example, ironically invert the stereotypical occidental views of *primitive* and *civilized* cultures in line with Conrad's purpose "so as frequently to erode and question one another before the eyes of the reader, who is subtly urged to compare them."⁷ But

Lee also offers in these early texts mutual considerations and connections, however fraught and tenuous such links are.

In the English-language Malaysian literature written during the period of Malayan colonization and its immediate aftermath, the centre is inevitably more clearly defined and the colonized writer will invariably seek, consciously or subconsciously, to subvert its authority through counter-colonial discourse. Lee Kok Liang's unpublished journal and first novel, set in Europe, provide ample evidence of this, but in a postcolonial and increasingly globalized context, who or what do Malaysian English-language writers write towards? What, if any, is their common purpose? The language used by these four writers is of course the most universal and also greatly associated with colonization, though each writer adapts it to suit his or her geographical and psychological landscapes. Despite differences in methodology and style, the common connection between the four writers is that each attempts to define self and nation not only through a range of alterity but also in the knowledge that self is intrinsically protean, and each writes with the belief that the continual redefinition of one's cultural and multicultural identities ensures the progression of self and, implicitly, the survival and progression of one's culture(s) and nation(s). Further, each writer indicates that the solution, seemingly simple yet immeasurably complex, resides in communication and connection.

As I have discussed in previous essays in relation to the work of Lee Kok Liang,⁸ the inability to communicate which has its genesis in the characters of *London Does Not Belong to Me* is emphasized through the narrator being geographically and socially displaced in a fading imperial centre (London and, to a lesser extent, Paris). The deep mistrust of language as a tool to signify, and through which to be signified, is clearly evident throughout the text: "Language was a loose string of beads to me. I got tired easily trying to express it in a logical way. Even in my native language."⁹ Language, and the social interaction it supposedly represents serve merely to reduce and exclude:

I felt completely isolated – an apparition surrounded by wraiths. Although I had opened up my pores drinking in everything I could from these new civilizations, remoulding my mind, so much so that I carried on conversations in my head in their language, I neither felt, however much I tried to, their anger nor their pity, their worry nor their intensity. Their words bounced against me softly like ping-pong balls.¹⁰

The inability to articulate self is, ironically, exacerbated upon Lee's return to his homeland. Lee's earlier fiction is marked by both this aphasic tendency and, oxymoronically, by a multitude of competing narratives that is also seen in the prose of Fernando and Maniam and, to a certain extent, in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's

fiction, in which the juxtaposition of multiple landscapes provides a similar effect but one which is context- rather than character-driven.

Lee's body of prose-writing may collectively be seen, in chronological terms, as a portrayal of colonial rejection (*London Does Not Belong to Me*) coupled with the angst of marginalization and rejection in Malaysia itself (*The Mutes in The Sun*). The latter ultimately transforms itself into a plea for Malaysian ethnic inclusiveness and a quest for an artistic wholeness, the guarded resolution of which may be witnessed in *Flowers in The Sky*, in which:

...a finely wrought though at times discordant equilibrium between not only the superficial binaries of temporal and spiritual, tragic and comic, Occident and Orient, but between the polyglot and multidimensional existences of immigrant Malaysians, returns, with qualifications, a clearer narrative voice(s) to Lee's fiction. Whereas the heteroglossia of "Return To Malaya" emerges through a series of disparate sketches and leads through its closing portrait to the terrifying silence of *The Mutes*, the multiple discourses in *Flowers in the Sky* are revealed in a balanced dialogue between eclectic cultural perspectives and philosophical standpoints.¹¹

But if Lee Kok Liang's prose may be seen as focusing primarily on universal, humanist concerns through its depiction of the individual in relation to his invariably alienating surroundings, the principal thrust of Lloyd Fernando's writing is, by comparison, significantly more political in its aims. In *Scorpion Orchid*, Fernando, as I have noted previously,¹² provides a critique of attempts at ethnic integration while also depicting the increasingly ubiquitous *bumiputera* control in contemporary Malaysia at both its covert and overt levels. Concerned with the discursive formation of a national identity and the cost to individual identity that this entails, the thematic preoccupations of his two novels display the angst of what I term the *floating* self in a transitional state of imagining nation. To better clarify the complexities of this state, it is worth reiterating Anne Brewster's observation that this entails the negotiation of "a border or frontier between the self and the other that is ambiguous because it is constantly in danger of dissolving. When this border dissolves, the subject is faced with a sense of the loss of self, a loss of identity."¹³ These imaginary borders also extend to negotiating the dissolution of self in response to the creation of national ideologies, and Fernando's prose fiction reflects the conundrum of a rapidly modernizing Asia: at what point is the imperative of individual and ethnic identity subjugated by national identity? He examines, in his own words, the effects of "detrribalization anxiety" and the consequent threat for individuals who seek a broader multicultural perspective of an existence in flux:

A person becomes aware, at some point, that the effort of cultural growth and development and the dedication to a widening sensibility have no foreseeable natural conclusion but are part of an unceasing process, capable of continuing as if in infinite series, with every stage of the series having no lasting validity.¹⁴

The interracial violence in Singapore in the 1950s and Malaysia in 1969 form platforms from which, in Malaysia, an overwhelming shift towards Malay political, cultural and linguistic control has taken place, and in many regards *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is The Colour* spring directly from these events. Fernando's two responses to these upheavals are, despite the gap of almost two decades between their respective releases (1976 and 1993), equally relevant to the political machinations and ethnic divisions that exist in contemporary Malaysia. Though Singapore, where the principal action of *Scorpion Orchid* is set, may be seen to have made considerable progress in addressing such divisions and differences (albeit through at times draconian restrictions regarding freedom of speech and legitimate political opposition), Fernando's first novel still provides a pertinent examination of the path to racial integration and national identity for both countries.

Green is The Colour provides a necessary thematic progression from *Scorpion Orchid*, moving as it does increasingly beyond what Fernando sees as the less relevant issues of colonialism to assess Malaysia in terms of its (successful or otherwise) transition from colony to ethnically-integrated nation. Both texts deal with marginalization through culture and language, but in *Green is The Colour* Fernando portrays a more rigidly defined cultural and political hierarchy, and a social structure that is significantly more restrictive in terms of individual liberty. Fernando's treatment of language in this text as encapsulating the potentiality for nation and *dissemination* probes more deeply the problematic spatial position of the individual and nationhood in Malaysia. Language, particularly in the postcolonial and neocolonial circumstances in which Malaysia has found itself, is invariably employed not only for the purposes of propaganda and subterfuge but increasingly for a self-perpetuating myopia, a blighted potentiality that is articulated through the character of Sara:

She developed and clung to the use of the plural personal pronoun because they soothed her: they stirred feelings of patriotism, of love for her fellow citizens whether Malay, Chinese, Indian, or Eurasian. They exempted her from asking what really happened.¹⁵

The thematic concerns of *Green is The Colour* move beyond the more simplistic ethnic stereotypes and linguistic concerns of *Scorpion Orchid* as the author seeks

to distance himself from a colonial/postcolonial binary. Though Fernando addresses the immediate and long-term effects of European colonization, he concerns himself equally with internal wrongs in Malaysian society and politics and, in doing so, promotes a process of healing and regeneration as the route to mature nationhood. That this course, and its chance of success, is problematic is evident in both texts, an uncertainty encapsulated in the author's choices of the oxymoronic title *Scorpion Orchid*, and of the colour *green* in his second novel to embody the enigmatic nature of Malaysian society. Though the reference to Islam in this title is readily apparent, the colour in itself embodies a far greater significance than obvious religious associations in its representation not only of the protean nature of language and the concepts and ideologies it may (mis)represent, but also in its multiple and often opposing layers of interpretation: "The colour of the leaves differed from bush to tree, and from tree to tree, in dazzling shades of green after the rain."¹⁶ Thus *green* functions as both synonym and antonym in its metonymic import, representing as it does the green of youthful nostalgia and *kampung*, of envy, of the Islamic flag, but also the green that is rebirth on the one hand, and putrefaction on the other.

The novels of K. S. Maniam, similarly to those of Fernando and Lee, reflect an overriding sense of dispossession and displacement – dispossession of language and culture for immigrant Indians in Malaysia, but also the forfeiture of the opportunity for soul-sharing which has its roots in past mythologies and, equally as importantly, the earth itself. It is through returning to these narratives, Maniam suggests, that one may regain a lost sense of self and further the process of imagining the Malaysian nation as a truly collective social and political entity. His novels, short stories and plays invariably reflect the plight of the marginalized primarily from the perspective of the Indian diaspora in Malaysian society but, more broadly, "redefine concepts of *self* and *nation* through an exploration of the origins of ancestral memory and myth."¹⁷ His trilogy of novels – *The Return*, *In a Far Country*, and *Between Lives* – explore paths towards Malaysian identity on what is essentially rendered a canvas of lost opportunity whose inception may clearly be witnessed in *The Return*, most notably through Kannan's doomed attempts to connect with the Malaysian landscape, and the ultimate rejection of his adopted homeland voiced in Ravi's dedication to his father at the conclusion of the novel:

Then words will not serve.
They will be like the culture
you refused at adolescence,
drinking from the tap
instead of the well.

The dregs at the bottom
of well water is the ash
of family prayers you rejected.
The clay taste
the deep-rootedness
you turned aside from –
for the cleanliness of chlorine.

Words will not serve.¹⁸

While the mistrust of language in this poem is clearly evident, it nevertheless also provides the genesis in Maniam's writing of an exploration of social and ethnic inclusion in Malaysia through a reinterpretation of sacred narratives and a symbolic immersion in the land itself, a central imperative that is further clarified through *In a Far Country* and brought to problematic fruition in the final act of his trilogy, *Between Lives*. The prescriptive path to a national ethnic unity is evinced in this novel not only in Arokian's relationship with the Malay, Pak Mat, prior to and after Independence but also, in part, through the retrospective details of Sumitra's childhood education, which reveals a burgeoning multiracial interaction that is ultimately stifled by the promulgation of bahasa Malaysia (after the passing of the National Language Act in 1967), Malay cultural values, and the subsequent linguistic and cultural marginalization of other ethnic groups in the 1970s. The emergence of a strident Malay nationalism and the ongoing tendency toward totalitarianism that are evident in contemporary Malaysia are symbolized in *Between Lives* by the machinations of the Social Reconstruction Unit (SRD). It is this reconstruction of immigrant (and in some instances even *bumiputera*) ethnic identities in line with the cultural – and most importantly global economic – imperatives of Malaysian society which Maniam highlights in an ironic inversion of the "harmonious ethnic integration" and "fully developed country" that Mahathir Mohamed advocated in his 1991 template for the country's development, "The Way Forward: Vision 2020."

The SRD's paired antithetical versions of Malaysia's future, ultimately presented in a newspaper advertisement in response to Sumitra's recalcitrance, offer a false dilemma of two extremes that (mis)appropriate the events of conventional history to underpin political and social imperatives; the first advertisement delineates a sanitized and superficially cohesive Malaysian society; the second is a portrait of chaos that closely alludes to the ethnic violence of 1969:

Study the newspaper story and the advertisements carefully. The older generations don't need reminders, but the young must learn to remember. There was only that one deviation in the history

and development of our society. The SRD was set up to discover the reasons, and to prevent it from happening again.¹⁹

In responding to the Social Reconstruction Department's newspaper article and advertisements with a montage of eco-art which depicts the history of Malaya/Malaysia as cyclical and overlapping, Sumitra and her supporters provide an interpretation of *nation* that does not deny the manifest narratives that comprise its formation:

First the jungle in its mystifying glory: trees, creepers, bushes, insect-and-wild life, all intertwined and inter-dependent. An old-world paradise. Then a young boy's face among the shadows, following their activities, trying to merge, like them, into the environment. Men behind him, in a time leap, offering prayers to the guardians of the jungles and hills, plucking certain leaves, gathering certain nuts and gums, and taking them away with grateful faces. Then those benevolent faces of the tigers turning slowly savage, the deer nervous with the intrusions; fruits, rattan and certain bushes falling to plundering hands. Then fugitives. Men fleeing into the dark shelters the jungle offers. Other men in brutal chases. Hunting, savage kills. The fugitives camouflaging themselves, and their habitations, from the searching eyes of the enemy. Small gaps, here and there, of the destruction wrought by fights and battles. Most telling of all: a leap into a new-world paradise, the faces of men, all kinds of men...blended into the trunk and branches of a tall age-old tree.²⁰

Reclamation and belonging as both collective and individual responsibilities in achieving nationhood, then, are crucial thematic concerns for each of these marginalized Malaysian writers. Yet, the extent to which any of these writers offer a positive outcome in terms of individual, ethnic or national identity is perhaps, at best, problematic. To validate oneself, all four authors examined in this essay variously suggest that one must simultaneously revisit and reinterpret history on both its micro and macro levels: an ethnically inclusive national identity may only occur through an individual acknowledgement of the past, which Maniam defines as "[making] the country in which he has lived for so long a country in his soul."²¹

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's prose fiction is also concerned with the fraught relationship between heterogeneity, transience and identity. However, one crucial difference in Lim's approach to her two novels, *Joss and Gold* and *Swing Sister*, is the proposed acceptance of the permanence of the role of the artist in an impermanent (or at least transitional) world. Diasporic writers have invariably

been perceived to function in the claustrophobic binary of *longing* and *belonging*, a subtle yet distinct variation on the colonial/postcolonial binary, and one which essentially constitutes a yearning for *belonging* which in many locations today may be interpreted as a desire for stasis amidst the constant fluctuation induced by the forces of globalization: one seeks validation either through the nebulous source of ethnic origin, or through the site of problematic arrival, or both. With this definition in mind, it is readily evident that Shirley Lim's texts occupy an artistic space that is in essence overtly globalized *and yet still* essentially positioned within the diasporic limitations of longing and belonging in its approach to personal identity(ies).

Though Lim's prose is perceived by some critics to be increasingly "evolved,"²² this is a pejorative term that implicitly depicts transnationalism as a positive and empowering force. Transnationalism is, in general terms, perceived as implying liberation from the restrictions and rigidity of a specific geographical location and the at times overwhelming myopia with which rigid national boundaries are associated. Yet the fictive representation of transnationalism (in some aspects similar to the now less fashionable literary representations of postcolonialism), in which one may often witness multiple characters traversing multiple global settings, is not in itself evidence of a liberating and "unshackled" identity. As such it is useful, in this instance, to refer to Wilson and Dissanayake's discussion of the "transnational imaginary" in its sociopolitical connotations and relate it to the thematic thrust of Lim's novels:

Pluralization and relativization are processes, stressed within the newer globalization theories of postmodern social theory, that would give more power to local heterogeneity and locally situated political struggles within the world-system model. Attention to local conjectures needs to be linked, at all points, to global processes without falling into the by-now-tired modernist binary of the universal (global) subsuming the particular (local), explained through a colonizing master-narrative of undifferentiated homogenizing forces meeting endlessly specific and hyper-detailed adaptations doomed to defeat...What we would variously track as the "transnational imaginary" comprises the *as-yet-unfigured* (their italics) horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence.²³

The true test of Lim's prose, I would argue, and the state it purports to represent, rests in the universal import of its themes and in its ability to viably connect those themes through localized and globalized locales without *sublation*. To be "trans-national," as Lim prefers to envisage herself,²⁴ a label which she views as embodying these positive aspects of liberation in terms of geographical and political boundaries but one which nevertheless carries with it the caveat of fragmentation, does not necessarily equate to universality from a literary perspective: universal themes, it may be argued, often emerge more fundamentally in localized rather than global settings. As Lim proposes in relation to this fluid identity in her poetry, but in an argument which may just as readily be ascribed to the principal function of her prose writing:

This territory, whether set in Malaysia, Singapore, the United States, Hong Kong, or "anywhere,"...is really ontological; that is, it has to do with questions about the relation of an individual to the exigencies of making sense of itself in the world, with or without others.²⁵

What best describes Lim's two novels is that they reside in the realms of *glocal* literature – a combination of global and local – though the multiplicity of locations tend to at times overwhelm the central thematic concerns of transience in each. Both the structure and setting(s) of *Joss and Gold* provide a template for this crucial notion of flux that is so synonymous with Lim's perspective, and significantly the three sections – *Crossing* (Malaysia), *Circling* (America), and *Landing* (Singapore) – denote in their use of the present continuous tense an ongoing quest towards liberation and validation, areas which within Lim's writing have often been viewed as primarily feminist in their import. In its revision of the Occident/Orient dynamic of *Madame Butterfly*, the thrust of the prose is, despite its use of symbolic and culturally stereotypical extremes, fundamentally humanist in its attempted argument for non-exclusive validation across gender and ethnicity, and in its exploration and inversion of traditional family structures from Occidental, Oriental and cross-cultural perspectives.

Sneja Gunew's treatment of diaspora, and what may loosely be termed as *diasporic writing*, as "an endless process of travelling and change rather than simply being framed by leaving and arriving, with mourning or nostalgia as its dominant markers,"²⁶ is also useful as a basis from which to assess Lim's "evolution" as a writer and indeed the "evolution" of Malaysian Anglophone writing as a whole. Lim, while still predominantly concerned with the function of diasporic identity, seemingly provides a more pragmatic approach to validation and the formation of self in that, unlike much of the other prose examined in this essay, the oft-depicted polarities of material possession and spirituality are not functioning in direct opposition. Li An, the protagonist of *Joss and Gold*,

ultimately finds confirmation of self not only through the subtle fusion of language, body and family witnessed in Sellama's and Sumitra's epiphanies in *Between Lives* and echoed in the concluding passage of *Joss and Gold* as Li An contemplates her Malaysian-American daughter, symbolically conceived at the height of the racial riots of May 13, 1969: "A muse of feelings she thought she had forgotten, more than words, more than poetry, returning to the spaces inside her body its silent and eloquent touch;"²⁷ but also, just as validly, through location and monetary success – in this instance through Singapore, a nation: "self-sprung from the ashes of a shabby of a shabby colonised city, looked down upon even by the British who claimed to govern it, and then again from its ashes as a partner in the nation-state called Malaysia."²⁸ As Jeffery Partridge has noted, the novel at times oscillates between cultural resistance and cultural adaptation,²⁹ but Lim is clearly arguing that both may be seen as intrinsically linked or, more accurately I would suggest, as not only mutually compatible but a legitimate response to, and acceptance of, the forces of globalization and hybridity. Resurrection of self through claiming an essential space in the modern hybrid city (forged by colonialism but now moving well beyond its limiting influence in terms of contemporary self-definition) provides a modern validation of identity(ies). Material acquisition and the polyglot language of globalized business are now significantly positioned alongside spirituality and ethnic origins.

Yet whereas the shift to Singapore in *Joss and Gold* may be interpreted as a problematic but cathartic repositioning of "home," Swee's American experience in *Swing Sister*, conversely, represents a more complete regression into the diasporic angst of displacement and the overwhelming need to belong. The story of three Malaysian sisters—Swee, Yen and Peik (Pearl)—who are confronted with an America (predominantly California) that is experiencing an influx of immigrant cultures but which remains overwhelmingly mono-cultural in mindset, reflects Lim's own "arrival" in the late 1960s:

The U.S. has changed tremendously in the last 30 years; especially, demographically, it has become less of a white majority and in some regions has become a minority-majority society. But Massachusetts in 1969 – the world of academia and graduate students – was still heavily white...It took me a while to recognize the subtler shades of cultural differences in America.³⁰

This "excluding" America of decades past, discussed at length in Lim's autobiographical *Among the White Moonfaces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist* (1996), has continued to inform her prose fiction. Lim's Malaysian characters have either rejected the dream of an American homeland or, at the very least, have transplanted their hopes into the next generation, a generation that represents the potentiality of a hybrid future. In *Swing Sister*, despite the qualified

success of Yen's acceptance into working class American culture through her relationship with and ultimate marriage to Wayne, Peik's rejection of 1980s America and return to her homeland and Swee's heavily ironic relationship with the covert white supremacist, Sandy, each indicates a diasporic regression in the author's outlook. Swee's vision of Ah Kong's metamorphosis from falcon peregrine to common ghost bird within the confines of New York City clearly symbolizes dislocation in the face of heterogeneity and entrapment within one's own cultural roots (at least for previous generations) but also, in keeping with the nameless narrator's exorcism of Cordelia in Lee Kok Liang's *London Does Not Belong to Me*, embodies a necessary stage on the journey to the acceptance of transience as a permanent state and a new immigrant revision of the failed American Dream. The transference of expectation, as in Lim's previous novel, is for the next generation – effectively, given the chronology of the novel, contemporary American society – but such a position offers tentative hope rather than confidence: "*She will have to be the promise of America for all of us, the littlest one, bearing the dreams we have left standing.*"³¹

Lim, herself, as Gunew has noted, has railed against characterizations in simple diasporic terms, preferring to envision immigrant existence (and no doubt the role of the artist within that immigrant experience) as chains of ongoing dialogue with multiple locales:

"Diaspora" was appropriate at a time in human history when if populations left a location of origin, it was difficult for them to return...I think some of us prefer the notion of transnationality as opposed to diaspora, a sense of continuing relationships with the location of origin.³²

Perhaps partly because of this, Lim's relevance to contemporary Malaysia has been increasingly questioned. Like the author, Tash Aw – now associated as much if not more so with the UK than Southeast Asia – her texts and personal background place her, for better or worse, in a nebulous global context. What is manifestly evident, though, is the overwhelming extent to which her upbringing in Malaysia has informed her prose and, as Andrew Ng Hock Soon argues in a convincing critique of Lim's female characters in her two novels,³³ her depictions of her homeland are seemingly mired in stereotypical and anachronistic portraits of Malaysian females. Thus, although she ostensibly examines the hybrid realities of a world in which boundaries have supposedly dissipated and cultures have overlapped, Lim, as Ng correctly surmises:

...frequently writes about women and their socio-ideological positions within symbolic systems that structure them in rigid, circumscribed ways. They are either weak, submissive and silent,

and therefore embody the feminine ideal as promoted by Confucianism; or aggressive, potent and dangerous, thus subscribing to the transgressive female who must be shunned and denied.³⁴

Such a position, he further argues, fails to acknowledge the complexities of the female role(s) in modern Malaysia, invariably employing as its foundation, outdated tropes and regressive cultural clichés. Taking these justifiable criticisms of her prose into account, in an era of transnationalism I would contend, the world, precisely because of transnationalism and the effects of globalization, now *floats* and the artist must float within it. The position that Lim accepts thus provides an opportunity for a form of unfettered liberation but remains unconvincing in its anachronistic depictions of elements of Malaysian society. Lim attempts to acknowledge the strengths of origin but is relatively more successful in depicting the realities of 21st century dynamics on a global, rather than localized, Malaysian scale.

In literature, as in life, transition in multitudinous forms has become for many the defining essence of self despite retaining the residual of "the tensions between individualized lives and the necessity for community in diaspora – that will to belong which survives, it seems, every attempt to dismantle or undermine it."³⁵ Gunew's observations of this tension, then, are crucial to an understanding of the relationship between diaspora and transnationalism, and to a greater understanding of Lim's intent in her prose. Just as the ghost of colonialism haunts postcolonialism and infuses it with its very meaning so too does diaspora and its inherent retrospect infuse transnationalism. As such, Gunew argues that:

...it may be time to consider the role of writer as inventor of community where community is conceived not in the sense of the nostalgic response to the past and a lost place but as the impulse forward, the potential carried by the seeding of diaspora in hybridity.³⁶

Yet the "invention" of a conceived community through diaspora, while promoting transience as a self-validating force does come at a cost. Inevitably, it has been difficult for critics not to closely associate the biographical details of each author with their respective texts. Certainly for the early works of Lee Kok Liang, K. S. Maniam, and for both of Lim's novels, structural and thematic concerns may be closely linked with the authors' respective personal experiences both within Malaysia and abroad. The transnational (but principally American) existence which defines Lim's life over the last several decades, thus provides a positive, albeit qualified, impetus in its dissolution of the traditional boundaries of culture and state, but also ensures that the author's depictions of Malaysia remain locked

in the stereotypes of a time past which show little inclination to confront the complexities of contemporary Malaysian society. In this sense, Lim's portrayals of her country of birth are located, to a certain extent, in an anachronistic vacuum that reflects a close understanding of contemporary transnational and American diasporic issues, but offers only a superficial treatment of local Malaysian society.

Inevitably, the English-language fiction of Malaysia and the Malaysian diaspora emanates from a void in identity that is represented through the transience of its characters. But in these authors' multi-focused probing of this inherent state of impermanence over the last 55 years they do provide a topography, if you will, of the problems confronting marginalized, immigrant and diasporic/transnational Malaysians. Reflecting the complexities of the problems facing Malaysian society and the diversity of their own ancestral heritages (Chinese, Eurasian, Tamil-Indian, *Peranakan*), they offer no simple solutions, no definitive manifesto for nationhood or individual identity. Their writing is often didactic but only occasionally prescriptive, depicting the concept of identity as consisting of fraught and constantly evolving symbioses. Identity of self both creates, and is created through, cultural and national identities. Race, of course, also plays its part – the Malaysian constitution alone has ensured this – but race alone should never be construed as equating to culture. Each borrows from the other but neither is interchangeable. This search for self-identity through cultural and national identities is both problematic and crucially necessary for the individual in a postcolonial or transnational setting and is, in part, a direct response to the subjugating forces of a remembered colonialism, a (presently-lived) neo-colonialism, or the onset of globalization and transculturalism.

As such, the question of how the individual creates and/or retains identity is a theme which, whilst evident in many forms of literature over the centuries, has dominated Malaysian anglophone texts. Malaysian writers who convey their message in English are, of course, aware of the limitations that such a discourse carries with it: namely, the taint of empire and the double marginalization of a language that commands the dominant position in global communication but occupies a peripheral regional position. These are factors that have inevitably affected the development of Malaysian writing in English, particularly internally in Malaysia itself, for as Quayum and Wicks observe: "essentially a product of the colonial scheme of things, literature in English (or English language for that matter), like in other post-colonial societies, cannot assert a strong cultural or emotional bond."³⁷

In a wider context the Singaporean poet and academic, Edwin Thumboo has noted the problems, and potentiality, confronting English-language literature in the poly-ethnic settings of former colonies:

Almost everyone writing in English in the ex-colonies inhabits a literary eco-system with at least two literary traditions. What might seem part of the background in the older traditions of formed nations, is often so acute as to be part of the foreground. These usually concern the building up of a literary infrastructure, such as the search for a viable idiolect, the use of literature to appropriate and place particular themes. They are all concerned with the filling of gaps in essential spaces.³⁸

Thumboo's comments are particularly relevant to the Malaysian writers discussed here. Through an exploration of language, religious and political interrelations, social structure and, most particularly, human interaction, Lee, Fernando, Maniam and Lim – for so long fringe-dwellers in both a literary and cultural sense – attempt to define the problematic cultural interstices so crucial to their existence. Their writing bears witness to a period of momentous political, cultural, social and economic change within Malaya/Malaysia itself (and, naturally, these aspects of Malaysian [d]evolution are of considerable importance) but of at least equal significance is the clear universality of many of their integrated themes, a universality that finds a somewhat fractured voice in the new millennium in Lim's two novels. The authors' broader concerns may be viewed in terms of a postcolonial and diasporic fraternity/sorority. They may also reflect considerations with which the immigrant inhabitants of numerous formerly colonized nations are closely familiar: the paradoxical bonds between colonizer and colonized; the rite of passage and the disillusionment involved in the journey to the colonizing centre(s); the associated traumas of achieving independence; the angst of separation from ancestral homelands; the potentiality and divisiveness that co-exist in all plural societies; and, more latterly, the role of women in both patriarchal and post-feminist societies. All of these aspects manifest themselves in a journey into self that navigates a path towards collective national sensibility(ies) and – more crucially – individual accountability in the shifting dynamics of transcultural space.

The intrinsic human need for belonging, for an acknowledgement and acceptance that implies a sense of permanence, is by its very nature paradoxical; concepts of self and nation, most particularly in multi- and trans-cultural locations which are in themselves invariably defined through the interrelated, multiple discursive phases of imperialism and colonialism, cannot remain fixed. Lee Kok Liang, Lloyd Fernando, K. S. Maniam and Shirley Geok-lin Lim write, to varying degrees, while suspended in what Julia Kristeva has termed a state of "perpetual transience:"³⁹ that is, they write from positions which constantly address a range of alterities that, because of the multiple forms of marginalization which they have encountered, constitute their shifting awareness of self. They address a complex sense of discordance that resides not only within Malaysia but within themselves,

and it is this at times overwhelming but artistically fertile *strangeness*, to again borrow from Kristeva, that ensures that their prose comprises an array of competing and often seemingly incompatible voices and histories.

Yet, although the literature of diaspora, transnationalism, and ethnic marginalization almost inevitably portrays at its heart the anguish of separation and the burden of a confrontation with antipathy to transplanted cultures, it remains equally true that this same literature argues for the necessity for metamorphosis: a recognition of the need for constant mutation to negate the predominant sense of displacement and rejection that is the leitmotiv of these texts. Their prognosis for Malaysia, and Malaysians in the broader world, is tentatively hopeful though invariably pessimistic, but perhaps this sense of absence and the transitional quality to their writing is in part because, as the British academic John McRae notes:

...in every growth, of empire, of nation, of an individual, there will somewhere be the seeds of decline. No empire, perhaps especially no Utopia, is forever. So if a sense of loss can be detected in a writer's work, it is no more and no less than the necessary accompaniment to growth: regret and hope are two sides of the same coin.⁴⁰

These four writers, then, fashion parables of the émigré, of renunciation, return and re-birth, and it is invariably absence that propels their fiction: absence of human connection, of belonging, of equality, of voice. Positioned as they are amidst the "postmodernist collapse of geographical/cultural boundaries into global fragmentations" (Lim, 1994: 154),⁴¹ the natural desire is towards a poly-ethnic future that integrates individual ethnic voices into a functional collective ideal, the sum of which, while greater than its parts, does not ignore the cultural diversity and disparate pasts that are, they contend, its greatest strengths.

NOTES

1. The reference to the title of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel plays not just on the Japanese sense of *mono no aware* – that is, its associations with an empathy for ephemera and changeability and a rigorous acknowledgment of the past – but also on the role of the author/artist whose work is associated with more than one culture/nation.
2. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 32.
3. Ibid., 15.
4. Evidence suggests that *London Does Not Belong to Me* was conceived between 1952 and 1954, possibly written in full shortly thereafter, but was posthumously published in 2003, *Scorpion Orchid* was published in 1976 and *The Return* in 1981.

5. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Writing South East/Asia in English: Against the Grain* (London: Skoob Pacifica, 1994), 154.
6. Lloyd Fernando, "Postcolonialism: Caught in a Time Warp?," in *A View of Our Own: Ethnocentric Perspectives in Literature*, eds. Fadillah Merican et. al. (Kuala Lumpur: Fakulti Pengajian Bahasa, 1996), 50–58.
7. Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 232.
8. See Bernard Wilson, "Why Can't I Talk?": Aphasia and Social Devolution in Lee Kok Liang's Malaysian Fiction," in *London was Full of Rooms*, eds. T. Barnett, N. Bierbaum, S. Harrex, R. Hosking and G. Tulloch. (Adelaide: Lythrum, 2006), 91–98; Bernard Wilson, "Physician, Heal Thyself: Nurture and Corrosion in Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky*," *Asiatic: IUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 1, no. 1 (2007): 1–10. <http://asiatic.iium.edu.my>
9. Lee Kok Liang, *London Does Not Belong to Me* (Kuala Lumpur: Maya Press, 2003), 26.
10. Ibid., 55.
11. Wilson, "Physician, Heal Thyself," 1–10.
12. Bernard Wilson, "Do You Wish to Join This Society or Not?: The Paradox of Nationhood in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*," *Kunapipi* XXII, no. 1(2000): 11–16.
13. Anne Brewster, "Post-colonial and Ethnic Minority Literatures in English in Singapore and Malaysia: A Cultural Analysis" (PhD diss., Flinders University of South Australia, 1989).
14. Fernando, "Postcolonialism," 13.
15. Lloyd Fernando, *Green is the Colour* (Singapore: Landmark, 1993), 82.
16. Ibid., 192.
17. Bernard Wilson, "Memory, Myth, Exile: The Desire for Malaysian Belonging in K. S. Maniam's *The Return*, 'Haunting the Tiger' and *In A Far Country*," *Textual Practice* 2 (2003): 391.
18. K. S. Maniam, *The Return*, 1981 (London: Skoob, 1993), 183.
19. K. S. Maniam, *Between Lives* (Kuala Lumpur: Maya Press, 2003), 378–379 (emphasis in the original).
20. Ibid., 386–387.
21. Bernard Wilson, "Interview with K. S. Maniam," *World Literature Written in English* 33, no. 2 (1993): 23.
22. Teh Chee Seng, "Women's Issues in Selected Malaysian English Writings," in *Writing a Nation: Essays on Malaysian Literature*, eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf (Kuala Lumpur: IUM Press, 2009), 123.
23. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, Wimal, *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 6.
24. Teh, "Women's Issues in Selected Malaysian English Writings," 123.
25. Mohammad Quayum, "Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview," *Melus* 28, no. 4 (2003): 96.
26. Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms* (London: Routledge, 2004), 107.
27. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Joss and Gold* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 285.
28. Ibid., 260.
29. Jeffrey Partridge, "Claiming Diaspora in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*," in *Asian Diasporas: Culture, Identities, Representations*, eds. Robbie Goh and S. Wong (Hong Kong: HK University Press, 2004), 131–147.
30. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, quoted in Pauline Newton, *Transcultural Women of Late-Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 166.
31. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Sister Swing* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2006), 230 (emphasis in the original).
32. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, quoted in Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 108.

33. Andrew Hock Soon Ng, *Intimating the Sacred: Religion in English Language Malaysian Fiction* (Hong Kong: HK University Press, 2011).
34. Ibid., 158.
35. Sneja Gunew, *Haunted Nations*, 109.
36. Ibid.
37. Mohammad Quayum and Peter Wicks, "Introduction," in *Malaysian Literature Written in English: A Critical Reader*, eds. Mohammad A Quayum and Peter Wicks (Kuala Lumpur: Longman, 2001), xi.
38. Edwin Thumboo, "Essential Space and Cross-Cultural Challenges," in *Crossing Cultures: Essays on Literature and Culture of the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Bruce Bennett (London: Skoob, 1996), 19.
39. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 4.
40. John McRae, "Introduction," in *Skoob Pacifica Anthology No. 1: S.E. Asia Writes Back!*, eds. C. Y. Loh and I. K. Ong (London: Skoob, 1993), 13.
41. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Writing South East/Asia in English*, 154. While Lim is referring to the writing of Lee Kok Liang, Lloyd Fernando and K. S. Maniam she is also, I would contend, analyzing the impetus of, and providing a prelude for, her own poetry and prose.

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