

## An Overseas Chinese Author on Chineseness: A Study of Catherine Lim's Novels

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### Abstract

The objectives of this documentary research are to study Catherine Lim's concept of Chineseness in the Chinese diasporic context as well as to investigate the identity and existence of the ethnic culture of the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlement. This study is analyzed through Lim's three novels: *The Bondmaid* (1995), *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998), and *The Song of Silver Frond* (2003). All the novels present stories of the Straits Chinese or the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlement, the territories under the British occupation in the age of colonisation. The findings reveal that Lim's cultural and social upbringing in Straits Chinese society helped mold her as a female diasporic Chinese. Straits Chinese society in Lim's novels is one that adheres to Chinese beliefs and cultural norms as well as their cultural roots. However, Lim still reflects how the context of displacement from the motherland becomes an important factor to dilute the sense of Chineseness among the Straits Chinese. Moreover, Lim also interestingly presents the images of Chinese diasporic women in various dimensions in her novels.

### Keywords

The Chinese diaspora, Straits Chinese, Catherine Lim, the Straits Settlement, female authors from Asia

### Introduction

Diaspora is a significantly global phenomenon that can be traced back to the history of humanity. Etymologically, the word "diaspora" derives from the Greek words *dia* ('through' or over) and *speiro* ('dispersal' or 'to sow'). Originally, the

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word “diaspora” was given its specific historical association with the dispersions of the Jewish people (Lal, Reeves and Rai 14). The first significant Jewish diaspora was the result of the Babylonian Exile of 586 BC. After the Babylonians conquered the kingdom of Judah, part of the Jewish population was deported into slavery. The term of “diaspora” has kept expanding its meanings in response to historical, cultural, and social developments. The word “diaspora” was linked to other groups of people like the Armenians and Africans who had triggered waves of forced and voluntary migration and slavery. Subsequently, the term of diaspora covers migration of all kinds. These developments help explain not only why the term diaspora has become so popular but also why it is used in such a wide variety of ways (Kenny 7-9).

Among the diasporic people across the world, the Chinese diaspora or *Huaqiao* are one of the largest in world history. According to Lynn Pan, the Chinese diaspora are one of varieties of Chinese people. The Chinese diaspora can be any overseas Chinese or the nationals of China living abroad. It also means Chinese by descent or Chinese descendants with non-Chinese citizenship and those (of Chinese ancestry) who ceased to call themselves Chinese (Pan 4). Historical evidences pinpoint that the phenomena of the Chinese diaspora can be traced to 206 BC when Zhang Qian, a diplomat, was dispatched by Emperor Wu to explore Central Asia for the purpose of seeking allies to fight against the Hun tribe. His expedition had established a linkage between China and Central Asia. As a result, this linkage was extended to Europe by Arabian merchants, and eventually developed into a profound and well-known trade route, the Silk Road. Again, around the fifteenth century, at the time of the Ming dynasty, seven mass maritime expeditions were implemented by *Zheng He*, a grand admiral who was Muslim with Mongolian heritage, under the commission of Emperor *Yongle* between 1405 and 1433. Due to continuous migrations, the Chinese diaspora is one of the biggest diasporic populations and the most influential groups in the world. The number of the Chinese diaspora living in 151 countries totals approximately 40 million (Kenny 100).

The Chinese diaspora in the Straits of Malacca, or the Straits Chinese, is very large. Historically, the Straits of Malacca used to be under the British Empire in the colonial period, from 1826 to 1946. The issues of the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlement can be mentioned in various ways. The study of the displaced Chinese through literary works is one of the most effective ways to gain a deeper understanding the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlement. Importantly, Catherine Lim is a Chinese diasporic author, who has been born and raised in the Straits Settlement. With a Chinese diasporic background, Lim has absorbed the Chineseness and has a close tie with the Chinese diasporic world in the Straits Settlement. As a result, she is uniquely famous for reflecting in her works themes of traditional culture in Chinese diasporic society in the Straits Settlement. As an accomplished and critically acclaimed author, Lim proclaims

the Chinese diasporic world to readers' eyes. Revealing the vivid pictures of the Straits Chinese, her works consist of short stories, novels, political commentaries, and other genres (Varuhese 172-173). They are also immensely recognised and currently studied in local and foreign schools and universities. It is no exaggeration to say that Lim currently becomes a logo of the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlement.

### **Chinese Diasporic Society in the Straits Settlement**

Lim's novels serve as a mirror reflecting the Straits Chinese's world to the readers' eyes. Images of Chinese diasporic society in Lim's novels are presented into four major issues: a society dominated by a patriarchal concept, a society believing in supernatural powers, an afflicted society under the Japanese occupation, and a society diluted from its motherland culture. Initially, Lim reflects that the Straits Chinese is a society dominated by a patriarchal concept that accords male superiority following the Confucius code of conduct (Bhatia and Wagne 205). Apparently, the son preference is prevalent in Lim's novels, as characters discern that it is "more auspicious for the production of a long line of sons" (Lim 241). This traditional ideal encourages many Straits Chinese to hope and produce as many sons as possible for the continuation of the father's lineage (Kevin 80). Undoubtedly, when some of Lim's characters give birth to a son, they tend to be joyful and feel that "the cold stone of fear could be fully lifted off her chest" (Lim 329). The son preference makes the characters believe that their sons' umbilical cord is an auspicious thing. Thus, they "preserved in the lucky red paper, tied with lucky red string" (Lim 5). Similar to many Chinese in motherland China, the Straits Chinese strongly believe that a family without a son is seen dying out. Only men constituted and reproduced the social order (Harris 17). Interestingly, the son preference brings different life opportunities between sons and daughters. Compared with daughters, sons seem to be privileged in their own family. Sons are differently treated from daughters. Conversely, nearly all of daughters are considered nothing in their parents' eyes.

In a patriarchal society, Lim observes that fathers are basically assumed to be the most powerful in the family. Father characters are almost treated as gods in their family. According to the Confucius ideology, fathers theoretically possess traditional legal rights over all members in a family (Duiker and Spielvogel 25). Unsurprisingly, the Lim's father characters are unconditionally obeyed, respected or even feared by their children. Father characters sometimes tend to be dictatorial to other members and possess the most dominant role in the family (Xiao 22). Incidentally, the Straits Chinese's patriarchal belief results in the great expectation and responsibility from their family. This social phenomenon is sometimes regarded as men's disadvantages in patriarchal society as well. In Lim's novels, the father and son characters are often expected to be

leaders of the family. Moreover, Lim's characters believe that it is very important for father to have a son because son can carry on the family name (Conyers 39).

Apart from a society under the patriarchal concept, Lim's novels still illustrate the supernatural belief among the Strait Chinese. Generally, the supernatural belief has existed throughout human history. Irrefutably, Chinese diasporic society is fully aware of supernatural belief. Lim employs her novels to reflect upon this social phenomenon in Straits Chinese society. Initially, Lim shows the Straits Chinese's belief in an afterlife. Her characters believe that death is not the end of life; conversely, human souls will live on beyond a physical world. In this case, the world of the dead still exists parallelly along with the present world. Lim shows that her characters have the ability to touch the spirits in both direct and indirect appearances. For the character's direct experiences to touch the spirits, Lim narrates that the night soil man saw a female ghost appeared in "white dress, swaying in front of him, an immense curtain of hair pulled over her face, which she slowly parted with both hands as she came closer to peer into his face" (Lim 18-19). Not including the direct appearance, Lim paints this social phenomenon by narrating that some characters believe that the souls will come back to the place with which they had a close tie. As it is seen in Lim's novels, the characters touch the invisible and mysterious visiting of the dead through "the distinct footprints in the ash", "a hollow in the pillow", or "at least half of the cup of tea had been drunk" (Lim 204).

Interestingly, Lim presents that the dead have the ways of life as human beings by pinpointing that the spiritual world still need basic factors for their living like humans in the present world. By this, Lim shows the Straits Chinese's social behaviours, as the characters burn many items to the deceased in order that the burnt items are "transported to the other world for this use [...] to maintain a life style in the death that he had been used to in life" (Lim 204). According to the traditional Chinese belief, burning of paper objects is carried as a means of transmitting messages to the unseen and as a method of supplying the deceased with whatever might be needed in the afterlife (Laing and Lui 1).

Lim still illustrates that the Straits Chinese adhere to a belief in superstition. Basically, Chinese society is polytheistic; many gods and deities are eagerly worshipped. Similarly, the Straits Chinese believe that gods are almighty and omniscient. Simultaneously, human beings are under gods' watchful surveillance. According to this belief, the powerful gods are expected to be sources of refuge among them when they are in sufferings or troubles. Lim's characters tend to implore to gods when they are ill, and they repay the gods' kindness by "doing penance during their festival" (Lim 74-75). Interestingly, Lim displays that the Straits Chinese people believe that gods identically share human traits. Their gods have emotions and feelings like human beings. As it appears in Lim's novel, "Gods were averse to the desecrating presence of females in the uncleanness of parturition or monthly flow and could punish severely" (Lim 12).

Apart from their belief in deities, Lim portrays that the Straits Chinese's supernatural thought is still reflected from their belief in superstition. Basically, the Straits Chinese discern that the superstitious beliefs are supposed to make one feel more positive and negative about oneself. For example, Lim vividly shows the Straits Chinese's interest in superstition through the characters' behavior and thought to newborn babies. According to the novel, the midwife characters carefully checked the newborn baby's physical characteristics in order to predict the baby's future following her supernatural belief. By this, she "began to examine her carefully for her harelip, club-foot, a supernumerary nipple, a ready-formed tooth, the sign of the devil" (Lim 3). Furthermore, the characters still believe that a newborn baby "born in the Year of the Tiger and bearing teardrop moles, were fated for misery in this world" (Lim 184). Understandably, the teardrop moles are known as one of the unluckiest Chinese characteristics because it is associated with sorrowfulness.

The Straits Chinese believe that surrounding circumstances and omens are able to affect individuals' life. In Lim's novels, there are many taboos and restrictions among the characters. For example, the pregnant woman is taught that "no snails were to be driven into wall, no mirrors hung up on doorways, no chickens slaughtered in the house" (Lim 244). Lim shows that her characters try to cope with the invisibly supernatural power by naming their children. Additionally, Lim's characters try to give their children easy informal names because they believe that

the resplendent names would be the names only of the birth certificate and school registers if the children made it to school. In daily life, the names would be wisely kept humble and self-deprecating, in order not to offend the gods or attract the jealousy of evil spirits—Bad Smell, Little Pig, Deaf, Little Bun, Fat Bun, Dum, Dumb, No Teeth, No Hair. (Lim 70)

Undoubtedly, the Chinese diasporic people in the Strait Settlement are remarkably prone to supernatural beliefs.

Incidentally, the presentation of Straits Chinese society under the Japanese occupation is one of the most important issues that enthrall readers' intention. The Japanese occupation, between early 1942 and August 1945, was a hard time for the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlement. Apparently, the Japanese soldiers are presented as those who bring the Straits Chinese the unforgettable nightmare. During the Japanese occupation, the Japanese soldiers committed robberies, extortions, and ruthless murders. According to *The Song of Silver Frond*, the characters "remembered very clearly the day the Japanese plunders made their first appearance" (Lim 20). The Japanese soldiers also summoned the Chinese villagers to make their demands and exerted a harsh control over people in Malaya. Punishment, including hitting and slapping by *Kempeitei* or the military police arm of the Imperial Japanese Army. As the

Japanese soldiers want to enlarge their power, military prowess, and wealth as much as possible, the demand to build the Dead Railway was one of the important factors which they believe can fulfil their achievement. Lim portrays the Japanese's cruel behavior through their recruiting the Straits Chinese to join this gigantic project. Japanese soldiers' cruel behavior towards the Straits Chinese is presented through the recruiting process of the labor for a massive and cruel building project. Lim narrates that the Japanese soldiers would arbitrarily enter the Chinese's houses and "searched under beds, behind doors, in cupboards, then had gone out to the pig-sties, woodsheds, even the lavatories and wells, and had hauled out the terrified young men" (Lim 21). Afterwards, Lim continuously narrates that, "the men, whimpering, pleading, were taken away in trucks, thrown into jail or put to work on massive, cruel building projects and never seen again" (Lim 21).

In her novels, Lim still reflects that the Straits Chinese must be afflicted by problems of sexual abuse during the Japanese occupation. Initially, Lim's characters believe that the women's beauty is very dangerous for women themselves because it "would have the marauding Japanese soldiers salivating" and "unbuttoned trousers, ready penises hanging out." The cruelty and lust of Japanese soldiers are emphasised through their behaviour to have sex. Many characters know that "pretty women taken away in open trucks to the enemies' camp. One who put up a fierce resistance was bayoneted and raped anyway" (Lim 32). Moreover, Lim emphasises the image of the lustful Japanese soldiers through the event in the novel that a Japanese soldier had forced a crazy, smelly vagrant woman "to take a bath to get rid of the layers of filth" (Lim 134) in order to satisfy his uncontrollable lust. The pictures of Japanese soldiers in Lim's novels are in accordance with Huen's and Wong's proposal that the Japanese army has to be a kind of animal.

The number of rape cases that happened after the Japanese landed in the Straits Settlement was frightening. Many Straits Chinese women, in addition to being tortured, were humiliated and suffered in ways beyond words (Huen and Wong 114). Interestingly, the economic hardship is still a big problem for the Straits Chinese during the Japanese occupation. Lim pinpoints that the Straits Chinese live in difficulty. Food becomes a rare and precious thing for them. The characters must "guarded their small store of broken rice in a brown stone jar under the bed" in order not to let others know that they have this precious food. Simultaneously, some characters choose to take his risk to steal food from the Japanese camp even though "the punishment for even small thefts was severe" (Lim 33). According to Lim's novels, when the Japanese forces occupied the Straits Settlement, they introduced new currency notes. This wartime money was referred to as "banana money" because the \$10 note carried a picture of a banana plantation. Undoubtedly, the Japanese maintained financial discipline and kept

circulation of this currency under control. After the Japanese occupation, Japanese wartime currency had lost most of its value. Lim narrates that one character “had so foolishly pawned to raise the money for the business. She sat among her bundles of money and beat her chest repeatedly with her fists, moaning (Lim 37). The Japanese occupation is was traumatic period for the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlement. They had to encounter with many sufferings physically, mentally, economically, and socially because they were the main target by the Japanese.

Lim’s novels still reflect that Straits Chinese society is a Chinese diasporic society where people are culturally diluted. Although the characters suffer from yearning for cultural root, they always try to link themselves to the Chineseness and make their daily life connected to Chinese culture. They try at their best to preserve the pattern of the Chineseness in their houses. However, the context of displacement makes many characters turn their faces to their Chineseness and ancestral culture. Lim vividly presents that the geographical distance from their motherland makes the Straits Chinese unable to really understand their cultural root or appreciate ancestral heritage passed down by the former generations. Some Straits Chinese neglect their ancestors’ ways of life. Simultaneously, they lead their life against the ideal principle of Chineseness. One of many examples of their culturally diluted behaviors is a negligence of the virginity loss among some Straits Chinese women. The damage of virginity is a sexually immoral action for Chinese. This value is considered so important in Chinese culture that women who protect their virginity before marriage are honoured (Lui 154). Lim pinpoints this social phenomenon on cultural dilution through narrating the fact happening in her novel that “in the ancestral country, the injured husband could stuff his wife of the round closed baskets made for transporting pigs over the great distances, and drop her over a cliff into the sea” (Lim 51-52). Lim still comparatively pinpoints the different point the social phenomenon in the Straits Chinese community or “the adopted country” that the husband just “in the adopted country, he simply sent her back to her parents” and although the wife “was no longer pristine, allowed her to remain in the household, a target of continuous derision by the other wives” (Lim 50-51). Obviously, they cannot truly link themselves Chineseness because of the lack of understanding of their ancestral culture. The presentation of the Straits Chinese’s cultural dilution still abundantly appears in Lim’s novels in various aspects.

### **The Images of Chinese Diasporic Women in the Straits Settlement**

Lim’s female characters play a pivotal role in reflecting Lim’s perspective on identity, role and duty among the Chinese diasporic women in the Straits Settlement. The images of the Straits Chinese women in Lim’s novels can be classified into four types: mother, wife, daughter, and maiden. For the images of mother characters, they are presented as a mother who has true love and sacrifice

for her children. The mother characters are willing to encounter physical pain from the process of giving birth in order that they can give a life to their newborn baby. Lim uses her novels to show the readers that mothers willingly accept the physical suffering from giving childbirth. Apart from childbirth delivery, mothers' love and sacrifice to her children can be perceived through their daily routines for their children. Lim reflects mother characters' duties on their housework to show their sacrifice as she describes her mother character' hands that they "were as hard as wood with the daily washing and ironing of clothes" (Lim 36). Apparently, mothers' true love and sacrifice to children are still discerned from their burden to keep the troubles and sufferings with themselves in order that their children are happy. Significantly, the mother characters are presented to provide the better things for others. Simultaneously, they tend to keep the bad thing with themselves.

A mother character has a serious illness since she has a lump in her left breast. But "she never uses any of the money she earns to buy better medicine for the lump in her breast, because she wants to make sure that there is always rice in the bin and cooking oil in the pot?" (Lim 74). Lim still pinpoints that mother characters' true love for their children originates from the unbreakable relationship between mother and children. Their bonding can be frequently seen in Lim's novels. As it appears in *The Teardrop Story Woman*, the children tend to be close with their mother. By this, the mother "would allow the child to sit on her lap, until the discomfort of sweat collecting under her breasts or of a numbed knee forced her to complain, adjust her position and cast off the child's weight."

Apart from presenting the images of mother, Lim still reflects the images of the Straits Chinese daughters as the underprivileged ones, compared with sons. Daughters' inferior status appears since they open their eyes to see the world. Lim frequently shows that the daughters are undesirable for their family and they are often a symbol of family disappointment. This social phenomenon is vividly presented through the behaviour of Lim's characters' behaviour. For example, when a daughter is born, "the midwife came out of the room to apologise to her father on behalf of her mother" (Lim 69). The characters' disappointment is emphasised again after the father knows that his wife gives birth to a daughter, he laughed "and left the house to drown his appointment in a beer with his friends at his favorite coffee-and-beer shop in the town" and "he did not come home for three days" (Lim 69). Lim also accentuates that the concept of sexual bias that leads to the destruction of female life. In *The Bondmaid*, Lim reflects that when daughters are undesirable, many newborn baby girls may be authorised to be pushed "into the ash to suffocate it before its next cry, sometimes rags or a bucket of water did the job" (Lim 324). Interestingly, Lim still emphasises the daughters' low status that killing the undesirable newborn girls is ordinary and ubiquitous in traditional Chinese society.



Undoubtedly, the daughter's undesirable condition results from a social value that considers them burdens for the family. It is in accordance with Lorna Gibb's proposal that "traditionally in Chinese society, a son is considered preferable to a daughter, so, with the restriction on having only one child, female children were frequently aborted, adopted or even killed in the hope that next child might be a boy" (Gibb 152). Lim's daughter character "was given thin rice gruel, made from broken grains"; whereas, the son "drank milk" and "the one egg in the house was kept for him, for mixing in the porridge". Moreover, the son "*had good porringer made from whole grain*". Lim summarises their different physical characteristics between the daughter and son that "his limbs grew stout and sleek, her was no more than sticks" (Lim 20). Sexual bias in Straits Chinese society in Lim's novels can be seen from the daughters' living. Lim pinpoints that one of the hard conditions of living for Chinese daughters is keeping their virginity. In male-centered society, virginity is an ultimate gift to the male. In Lim's novels, the mother characters tried to remind their daughter as "severe warning to her to preserve it only for her husband." Apparently, daughters are vulnerable and ready to be unvalued because the characters realised that "nobody wants to marry a damaged woman" (Lim 51). This social fact is accentuated through the characters' belief that "brides found to be unpristine were put in pig-baskets since they had no greater value than low animal" (Lim 85). This is in accordance with Yu's proposal on value of virginity that "virginity in patriarchal culture is a "must have". Woman would desperately want to hold on to it until the wedding night" (Yu 101). The daughters' low status caused by sexual bias might bring them to being to be considered as goods for selling, particularly in the poor families.

Lim also presents the vivid images of the wife in her novels in order to reflect the image of Straits Chinese women. The images of wives can be categorised into two main types: principal wives and minor ones. Even though they uniquely and differently lead their lives, they are identically presented as their husbands' property. Initially, Lim reflects that the principal wives and the minor ones are differently presented. Their difference is relevant to the condition to be a wife. Furthermore, their commitment takes part to determine their living and interrelation with their husbands. Understandably, the principal wives tend to come with commitment to be responsible with their husbands. In this case, their image is shown as a wife who dedicates their life to their husband. Undoubtedly, the principal wives are stereotypically loyal and submissive to their husbands.

Lim gives an example to show the dedication of a wife to her husband by narrating that she always stays by her husband's bedside, "feeding him porridge carefully from a bowl, cleaning the terrible sores on his body, soothing his cries of pain in the middle of the night" (Lim 199). Interestingly, the physical appearance of the principal wife is differently presented from the minor ones who are presented as beautiful women. The duty of minor wives is related to satisfy their husbands. Definitely, their physical appearances are presented with

impressive beauty. Moreover, they also lead comfortable life with no responsibility for their family. Surprisingly, the minor wives tend to be notorious for disloyalty to her husband. Conversely, the principal wives are not presented as beautiful. In *The Song of Silver Frond*, a principal wives' body "become[s] thick with childbearing her face old with worry, her hands coarsened by work." Furthermore, Lim presents that their hands "were as hard as wood with the daily washing and ironing" (Lim 36).

Maiden characters come from penurious and prolific families. Poverty and necessity force their families to sell them to the rich ones. Lim narrates the living condition of the family that decides to sell their daughter as a maiden in order to pinpoint her poor family background. According to *The Bondmaid*, the maiden character lived in the crowded and poor family as Lim narrates that the character must "lay asleep with her five brothers and sisters on the large plank bed, in an enormous entanglement of arms, legs, pillows, bolsters and small possessions impossible to unclutch even in sleep" (Lim 5). Readers can see the low quality of life of the maiden characters and understand how troubled and poverty-stricken they are. The maidens' family poverty can be seen from the lack of food in their daily life. Lim emphasises the character's shortage that a bowl of rice porridge with an egg inside is "only for special occasions such as birthday or the New Year or illness" (Lim 19). Lim's narration on the maidens' family background is in accordance with Jorae Rouse's proposal stated that "poor families sometimes sold their daughters into domestic service or prostitution to help supplement the family income" (Jorae 11). Interestingly, when the daughters are sold as maiden in the rich family, their lives are in the masters' hands unconditionally. Lim pinpoints that when the rich families buy the poor girls from their family, the rich "owned them body and soul, for they had become her bondmaids" (Lim 40). Because the bondmaids' status can be seen as their master's property; they are often treated badly by their master. Lim employs her novel to narrate the incident that the maidens are cruelly hurt by their masters when the bondmaids had let the sons or the grandsons of the house owner to be in the dangerous area.

Apart from poor background and low quality of life, Lim's maiden characters are narrated with problems of sexual harassment and sexual assault in their owner's houses. In Lim's novels, the author reflects that her maiden characters become "sexual victims" for the owners and their relatives. For example, the maiden character Chu is brought to replace her sister who had also been brought in at fifteen and discarded at twenty. Chu's sister went home to die, her young body riddled with disease. Lim narrates the male house owner that he is notorious for "his sustained rampage through a long line of young virginal bodies from which he always arose, he boasted, much re-vitalized" (Lim 182-83). Not only the owner of the house, the maiden characters must inevitably encounter sexual harassment and sexual assault by their owner's relatives.

## **Conclusion**

Lim is a female author of Chinese origin who was born and grown up in the Straits Settlement in the colonial period. Due to her close tie to Chineseness, most of her major literary works deal with the clear portrayal of the Chinese diaspora in the Straits Settlement in the Age of British colonisation. Undoubtedly, Lim's literary works present the Chineseness in the context of displacement and Chinese diasporic people in various dimensions: values, belief, and diverse and appealing range of culture. When the readers read her literary works, they can see the vivid picture of the displaced Chinese who stay away from China, their native land. Straits Chinese society is teeming with cultural ideas and values in terms of ways of life, religion, social norms, ethical superstitions, and organisation attitudes from their motherland. Lim's novels are characterised by nostalgia, yearning for motherland culture, preservation, and search for identity among the Straits Chinese. The world of displaced Chinese in the Straits Settlement in Lim's novels is presented in many issues. It includes the patriarchal society in which men have power over women. The positions of dominance and privilege are primarily held by men. For the image of the diasporic society with supernatural belief, Lim presents through people's belief in afterlife, gods, and superstition. Moreover, Lim's novels still give a vivid portrait of the society afflicted by the Japanese occupation during 1942 – 1945 when the Japanese controlled the Straits Settlement with the aim of bringing Malaya into an integrated Greater East Asian economic zone. Furthermore, Lim presents her readers with the image of Chinese diasporic society where people are diluted from motherland culture. By this, Lim reflects some changing social phenomena in the displaced Chinese community due to the context of displacement: cultural dilution and incompatibility with motherland culture of some Straits Chinese, especially those of young generation.

Lim uses her novels to reflect on the images of the Chinese diasporic women in the Straits Settlement in many dimensions: mother, daughter, wife, and maiden. Mother characters have true love and sacrifice for their children. They provide the better things for others. Moreover, mothers are closer to their children, compared with fathers. Daughters are underprivileged children, compared with sons due to social value and sexual bias. Wives are categorised into two main types: principal wives and minor ones. Their difference can be perceived from the conditions, commitment, living, and interrelation with their husbands. Obviously, these images of Chinese diasporic women in Lim's literary works are presented in both international stereotype and specific characteristics of Chinese diasporic context. Lim is an author of Chinese background who puts Straits Chinese stories on the map of the world literature.

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