

Celebrating a “Neo-cosmopolitan Globaletic Writer”

This issue of *Asiatic* is dedicated to the works of Malaysia’s preeminent, and certainly the most internationally acclaimed English language writer, Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1944-). The issue has been in the making for well over a year now. It was in March 2013 that we came up with the idea of devoting an issue of the journal to this magnificent writer, who has been promoting Malaysian culture to a global audience for more than four decades, and has, in a way, put Malaysia on the global culture map through her highly acclaimed and award-winning literary works. Malaysia has produced many significant writers in all its major languages – Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil – and while they all deserve our admiration and praise, perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that no one has acted as a better icon of Malaysia’s multiculturalism, or as a roving ambassador of its ethos and spirit, than this Malacca-born writer who has now effectively become a “world citizen,” having lived in many countries and developed a consciousness that is inclusive, multi-layered and multi-dimensional, and transcendent of the identity associated with nation-states.

Perhaps some would think that dedicating an entire issue to a single author would be risky as well as narrow in scope – risky in that we might not attract enough quality submissions, and narrow in the sense that it dwells on a small body of work. However, I had no qualms for any of these from the outset. Having lived in some of the same countries in which Lim has lived – Malaysia, Singapore and the US – I was well aware of the respect and reputation she commanded in these countries, both in academia and in reading circles. Her name features in literary curricula at universities in many countries, and perhaps no other Malaysian writer has attracted as much critical discourse in the form of published interviews, book chapters and journal articles as well as postgraduate and postdoctoral research, than Lim. Of course, I was cognisant of her stature as a writer in Malaysia and Singapore, since my arrival to this part of the world in 1993, but when I went to the US in 2003 to take up a visiting position at SUNY Binghamton, I got a first-hand taste of the impact that she has created in the culture arena on the other side of the Pacific as well. I remember that whenever people, especially those on campus, knew that I had come there from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in most instances the first thing they would ask me was if I had met the writer Shirley Lim; this was the East Coast, thousands of miles away from Santa Barbara, California, where Shirley Lim lived and worked.

As to the other question, of whether devoting an entire issue to the work of a single author would narrow the scope of the publication, it was not something that weighed on our minds seriously, knowing how widely this poet-pedagogue has published, and in several genres: poetry, fiction, prose and criticism. Lim has authored 8 volumes of poetry, 2 novels, 3 collections of short

stories and a memoir – not to speak of the numerous academic books, edited anthologies and research articles that she has produced in her capacity as a professor of literature. Besides, in the literary world, there is an established tradition of honouring writers not only by publishing special journal issues on their work, but sometimes even naming a journal after them, such as *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, *The Hemingway Review* and *Saul Bellow Journal*, to name a few.

Once a decision was made, we sent out a call for papers exclusively to those who had either published on Lim previously or conducted doctoral research on her work, and the outcome is the fifteen articles we have, selected through a peer review process as per the journal’s practice. What is striking is that the selected articles are not from any particular country or region but rather, from almost every part of the world: Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Italy, Malaysia, Singapore and the US, which testifies to the breadth of Lim’s influence as a writer. Moreover, the articles do not focus on only one of Lim’s particular work, but range over her entire oeuvre. Three of the articles approach Lim’s writing broadly, adopting a certain theoretical angle, while the others dwell on one or two books, sometimes comparing her work with that of another, such as the article by Nicoleta Alexoae-Zangi in which she examines the affinities of Lim’s memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996) with Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), to establish the former’s creative filiation and cultural heritage as a Chinese American writer; or the article by Walter Lim in which he compares Lim’s memoir and her novel *Joss and Gold* (2001) to Li-Young Lee’s (a Chinese American writer of Indonesian origin) *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (1995), to show how both Malaysia and Indonesia were subjected to race politics in the process of building their national identities in the aftermath of independence, and how postcolonial history is important in the writing of Chinese diasporic identities.

In her “Foreword” in this issue, Florence Howe, co-founder of The Feminist Press in 1970, and “a founding mother of the women’s studies movement during the 1970s and 1980s,” introduces Shirley Lim through a personal narrative of how they came to know one another and how three of Lim’s books – *Among the White Moon Faces*, *Two Dreams* (1997) and *Joss and Gold*¹ – were subsequently edited and published by her. In a tribute to Lim, she writes, “I knew from the first moment I met her that Shirley Lim was a rare individual, an extraordinary academic, by any standard.” This view not only echoes the

¹ Several of Lim’s books were published concurrently in Singapore and the US, sometimes with a slightly modified title. For example, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands*, which was published by The Feminist Press in 1996, was published the same year by Times Books International as *Among the White Moon Faces: Memoirs of a Nonya Feminist*. *Joss and Gold* was simultaneously released by The Feminist Press and Times Books International in 2001.

sentiment of many who know Lim personally, but also sets the tone and tenor of the articles that follow. She also points to an “oddity” in Lim’s career: that although Lim is an accomplished scholar, it is more for her creative work, “for providing especially for younger scholars the literary material... for *their* scholarship,” that she is celebrated; Howe justifies this by pointing to the articles in this issue which are all devoted to Lim’s literary works, and none to her literary criticism or the canon formed by the anthologies, special journal issues and critical handbooks that she has produced.² This is a shortfall in the issue which we seriously regret; however, an answer to it can be found in the article that follows, by the renowned scholar Sneja Gunew. Gunew points out that “the kind of institution building” work that Lim has done conscientiously and with profound dedication over the years, both as a scholar and as an academic, “are crucial but often thankless tasks because while making an absence visible they are also regularly attacked for the form these manifestations take.”

Gunew’s article indeed provides a new assessment of Lim and her work, and brings a new dimension to Shirley Lim scholarship. Gunew proffers that although it is customary to view Lim as a transnational, multicultural or “ethnic” writer and her texts as “postcolonial, diasporic, or Third World,” she should preferably be recognised as a “neo-cosmopolitan” and “globaletic” writer, or as a “culturally inclusive” and “mediating” figure, who is capable of “navigating the structures of belonging in multiple ways” and “facilitat[ing] new relations between national cultures and the global.” Moreover, since Lim’s work seeks to weave “the local into the global,” advocate “global cultural mingling” (Appiah’s phrase) and allow readers to, as she says using Ngugi’s expression, “read a text with the eyes of the world... see the world with the eyes of the text,” there would be

some advantage in considering Lim’s work as forming part of a revised notion of world literatures that sees them as parables or allegories of a new cosmopolitanism that displaces the old universalisms associated with colonialism for a new sense of the world inflected by local details.

The next two articles, by Katrina M. Powell and Silvia Schultermandl respectively, also bring new light and perspective to the study of Lim’s work. Powell argues that Lim’s work is characterised not only by layered identities but also layered genres; there are geographical border crossings but also genre crossings in her writing; so the question she addresses is the kind of difference that this genre crossing or shift in form “makes in representing identities and reconciling the conflicting identities within.” Powell addresses the themes of “shifting identities, loss, displacement, belonging and borders,” but through the

² There are, though, passing references to Lim’s critical work in several of the articles.

lens of multiple and layered genres, moving freely between Lim’s poetry, novels, short stories, memoir and a select body of her academic work. Schiltermandl, on the other hand, examines the relevance of aesthetic education apparent in Lim’s fictional and non-fictional work: whether her work contributes to the shift “away from national as representational category and towards the embracing of transnational concepts,” as was suggested by Friedrich Schiller in his 1974 definition of the concept of aesthetic education. Drawing examples from Lim’s novel *Joss and Gold*, memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* and her first collection of poetry *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* (1980), Schiltermandl concludes that in spite of Lim’s personal experiences of belonging to two nation-states and growing up under the influence of British colonialism, there is a recurrent tendency of rewriting established practices and refuting national boundaries in her work, which contributes to the negotiation of a borderless world – at least, the world that we come across in literature – thus instigating her readers to imagine “alternative modes of being and belonging.”

Lim writes in multiple genres, but her native forte lies in poetry. She began writing poetry at an early age,³ and has since been writing it continuously in between her forays into other forms; it was poetry that earned her major international recognition as a writer, when she won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1980 for her first collection of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*, making her the first woman and the first Asian to win this prestigious award. It is therefore fitting that her poetry receives considerable attention from the contributors of this issue. There are sporadic references to Lim’s poetry in many of the articles, but three of them are exclusively devoted to her poetic work. These are by Andrew Ng, Boey Kim Cheng and Pauline Newton.

In his fascinating article, Ng explores the food or food-related motifs in Lim’s work, and discusses how food plays an oppositional role in relation to nostalgia. Food is often evoked by the displaced subject, either to concretise the longing for homeland or to deny it. By drawing examples from Lim’s collections of poetry, *Monsoon History* (1994) and *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* (1998), Ng validates this thesis, and demonstrates the way in which food is used to express as well as to complicate the concept of nostalgia, particularly in Lim’s poetic work.

While Ng’s article demonstrates rigorous scholarship, Boey’s is a delectable mix of creativity and insightful criticism. This article is special because it is written from one leading poet in the region to another, sharing a similar trajectory of being part of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, but

³ Lim’s first poems were published in University Malaya’s student magazines in the early 1960s, while some appeared in anthologies compiled by Ormerod (1967) and Thumboo (1968). For details, see Nor Faridah A. Manaf and Mohammad A. Quayum, *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women’s Writing in English 1940s-1990s*.

currently living in voluntary exile in a third country.⁴ Like Lim, Boey has experienced displacement, marginality, liminality and transnationalism, and in this essay he explores some of these elements by using the trope of walking by a beach, a liminal space, to show how Lim's mundane experience of walking every morning has equipped her with the raw material for her poetry that translates her diaspora identity, with its many contradictions and complexities, by giving it a manifest and tangible form. The article dwells on Lim's latest collection of poetry, *Walking Backwards* (2010), but much of the discussion also focuses on Boey's shared experience with Lim during the former's visit to California, when he spent a few days at her Santa Barbara home. Throughout the essay, there is a recurrent emphasis on Lim's physical energy, restlessness and love for everyday things, which have induced her to turn her experience into poems and stories. The essay ends with a dedicatory poem by Boey to Lim, which enshrines Lim's life-story in a little nugget, but also bears some clues to the history and condition of the poet's own self.

Newton's article, like Boey's, also focuses on Lim's latest collection of poetry, *Walking Backwards*, and addresses the poet's status as a transnational wanderer in her recent work, comparing it with that of her first novel, *Joss and Gold*. The article is enriched by the inclusion of an interview with Lim, in which she responds to various queries regarding her history, culture and background, which a reader unfamiliar with Chinese tradition or customs will find immensely useful.

Lim once told me that her single most successful work, especially in her host country, is her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*. This is certainly true, because the book has brought Lim considerable fame. It was published to glowing reviews and immediate acclaim, and earned her the American Book Award for the second time.⁵ It has since become a fixture in graduate and undergraduate literature classrooms in many universities in North America, where students continue to churn out assignments and academic essays on the book, and graduate students and young academics view it as essential reading for understanding "ethnic" and cross-cultural issues, sometimes considering it a touchstone for comprehending any of Lim's other works, such as her poetry and fiction. That the book enjoys such a special status is also reflective in the number of essays we have on it in this issue, and the frequency with which it is cited in the other articles that are primarily about her poetry or fiction.

Lim's poetry has attracted three articles, but the memoir has garnered four. Two of these I have already mentioned in a different context; the other two are by Srimati Mukherjee and Nelly Mok. Both the essays investigate the

⁴ Boey Kim Cheng was born in Singapore, but he has been living in Australia since 1997 and is an Australian citizen. He teaches creative writing at the University of Newcastle.

⁵ Lim won the first American Book Award in 1989 with her co-edited anthology, *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology*.

text to demonstrate Lim’s representation of the diasporic subject, and the anxiety and ambivalence that come with it, to her gradual reconciliation of the homeland/hostland binary by rising to a transnational third state. Mukherjee’s article, however, focuses on what she calls “negative difference,” where she elucidates Lim’s experience of othering in both Malaysia and the US, and the way Lim uses the narrative to counteract that adverse experience. Mok’s focus, on the other hand, centres on Lim’s gradual progression from her exilic state to the prospect of her socio-political integration within the new land, and eventually to a point when “home re-emerges and thrives beyond the boundaries of national delineation.” All the four articles provide rich and insightful analysis of the text.

The remaining articles in this issue are on Lim’s fiction: two on her first novel *Joss and Gold*, one on her second novel *Sister Swing* (2006) and one on her short stories. It is heartening to see that, in spite of her reputation as a poet and the canonical/commanding status of her memoir, her fiction also has such broad appeal among her scholarly readers. In fact, *Joss and Gold* and many of her short stories, including such “classics” as “Mr. Tang’s Girls,” “Hunger” and “Another Country,” enjoy a healthy degree of popularity in this part of the world, and appear more frequently on university reading lists in Malaysia and Singapore than any of Lim’s other books do.

The two articles on *Joss and Gold* are by Chingyen Yang Mayer and Chitra Sankaran. Both are equally vibrant and intriguing, but they approach the novel in different ways. Drawing on Abdul R. JanMohamed’s theory of the syncretic and specular intellectual, Mayer investigates the themes of longing, belonging, exile and home in Lim’s novel, and argues that her protagonist progresses from an emotionally homeless orphan at the novel’s outset, to a specular individual who is unable to pull together the different cultural forces in Malaysia, and eventually to a syncretic intellectual who is capable of combining the elements of diverse cultures and finding a “sense of home and belonging in multivalent Malaysia and Singapore.” Sankaran sees *Joss and Gold* as more of an “academic” novel that addresses some of the central preoccupations of resistant discourses such as feminism and postcolonialism, and investigates how Lim uses the narrative to write back to the West and its stereotypes about Asia and Asian women in particular. She maintains that the novel’s objective, among others, is to exemplify the construction of the modern Asian woman and a holistic national identity.

Elisabetta Marino’s article is a finely crafted piece in which she explores two of the dominant themes in *Sister Swing*, which are also universally present in all of Lim’s writings – gender and ethnicity. She articulates how, throughout the course of the narrative, the three Wing sisters – Yen, Swee and Pearl – escape their father’s tyranny to find their emancipation and agency in various ways and to different degrees of success. In doing this, Marino associates the journey

towards freedom and finding a “home” with the discovering of one’s body and sexuality, and with movement and travelling. Moreover, she examines how Lim approaches the issue of ethnicity from a transnational perspective to highlight the problematic interaction between the different communities in the US, where people suffer from a considerable lack of understanding and appreciation of each other’s values.

The last article in this issue on Lim is Philip Holden’s brilliantly argued piece on Lim’s short stories, where we come full circle as we are reintroduced to concepts like “local cosmopolitanism,” “cosmopolitan localism” and “de-colonial cosmopolitan ethics and practice” which we first encountered in Gunew’s article. In fact, Holden’s suggested approach to the reading of Lim’s short stories is not far from what Gunew advocates in relation to Lim’s writing in general. Gunew is of the view that, since there is a noticeable tendency in Lim to act as a mediating figure between cultures and facilitate new relations between the national/local and the global, her work should be read as “parables or allegories of a new cosmopolitanism that displaces the old universalisms associated with colonialism for a new sense of the world inflected by local details.” Likewise, Holden suggests that the historicist reading of Lim’s short stories, which places her within the political context of either Malaysia or the US, should be balanced, especially for Singapore readers, by putting them within the context of Singapore which promotes “what may initially seem a paradox: a local cosmopolitanism.” Perhaps here we have touched a new chord and set a new direction in Shirley Lim scholarship.

Works Cited

Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf and Mohammad A. Quayum. *Colonial to Global: Malaysian Women’s Writing in English 1940s-1990s*. Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2003.

Mohammad A. Quayum
International Islamic University Malaysia