

Longing and Belonging, Exile and Home in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*

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Abstract

In Abdul R. JanMohammed's seminal work "Worldliness-Without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual," he poignantly explores the themes of home, exile and homelessness through an analysis of Edward Said's and Richard Wright's works. He explains that both the syncretic intellectual and the specular border intellectual are posited between at least two different cultures.

The syncretic intellectual, more "at home" in both cultures than his or her specular counterpart, is able to combine elements of the two cultures in order to articulate new syncretic forms and experiences....

By contrast, the specular border intellectual, while perhaps equally familiar with two cultures, finds himself or herself unable or unwilling to be at home in these societies. Caught between several cultures or groups, none of which are deemed sufficiently enabling or productive, the specular intellectual subjects the cultures to analytic scrutiny rather than combining them; he or she utilizes his or her interstitial cultural space as a vantage point from which to define, implicitly or explicitly, other, utopian possibilities of group formation. (97)

Set against the backdrop of the 1969 race riots in Malaysia, the multifaceted 1980s United States and the "second-most globalized country in the world" (Holden 2) Singapore, Shirley Lim's first novel *Joss and Gold* traces the female protagonist Li An's trajectory to find a sense of home and belonging in multivalent Malaysia and Singapore. Utilizing JanMohamed's theory of the syncretic and specular intellectual, this paper intends to examine the themes of longing and belonging, exile and home in Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold*, and focuses on Li An's journey from an emotionally homeless orphan, a specular, to a syncretic intellectual.

Keywords

Home, belonging, exile, diaspora, identity, alienation

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The word “exile” is traditionally associated with forced migration. It often refers to an involuntary geographical separation from one’s home or homeland for economic or political reasons or a combination of both. Paul Ilie suggests that exile is not only a forced “territorial break,” but also “a state of mind” often associated with the feeling of physical, cultural as well as emotional uprootedness and displacement, homesickness, and a general sense of loss, nostalgia and longing (11). While most scholars focus their studies of exile on the “territorially departed,” Paul Ilie asserts that there are two types of exile – territorial and nonterritorial. The former is often experienced by those who territorially depart their homeland while the latter is experienced by those who reside in their native lands. Ilie notes that a portion of the domestic citizenry that do not partake of the prevailing beliefs becomes what he calls the “‘other’ population” (11). As a result of the “other” population’s nonconformist beliefs and/or behaviour, though they live in their homeland and their cultural and communal roots even remain intact, they still feel as though they have been exiled. Both territorial and nonterritorial exile is “a condition of ‘otherness’” (Ilie 11).

Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Joss and Gold* captures her protagonist Li An’s trajectory of nonterritorial and territorial exiles and her continuous search for a place called home. To demonstrate the complexities of the notion of home, Lim fittingly divides her text into three parts, “Crossing” in Li An’s homeland Malaysia, “Circling” in suburban United States and “Landing” in cosmopolitan Singapore, Li An’s adopted homeland. Through the positioning and repositioning of her characters within Malaysian, American and Singaporean sociopolitical contexts, Lim’s *Joss and Gold* captures and redefines the complex nuances of exile and home. Imbued by a strong sense of homelessness and exile and the longing for a sense of home and belonging, Lim’s text is about emotional, cultural, ideological and physical borders, the closing and opening of visible and invisible borders, and the crossing into new territories in order to forge lives in new places and engage in the act of “home-making.”

In “Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty asks “Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space?” (352). Avtar Brah also puts forward the question, “When does a location become home? What is the difference between ‘feeling at home’ and staking claim to a place as one’s own?” She further claims that it is quite possible for someone to “feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhabit public proclamations of the place as home” (193). Many studies on home, exile and homelessness acknowledge them as a mental as well as a physical condition; they do not, however, connect the sense of exile or homelessness with issues of marginality, alienation and the disadvantaged gender and political position experienced by women and racial minorities. Lim exposes the intricate layers of

home and exile through the narration of Li An's personal life as well as an exploration of her position within the context of traditional Chinese cultural norms and Malaysian politics. As an emotional construct, Li An's sense of home and exile is multifaceted; it is entangled with her Chinese ethnicity in a politically and culturally Malay-dominated society, Malaysian and Chinese gender dynamics, and her immigration to Singapore in an increasingly globalised world.

In JanMohammed's seminal work "Worldliness-Without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual," he introduces his readers to the concepts of syncretic intellectual and specular border intellectual. He explains that both the syncretic intellectual and the specular border intellectual are posited between at least two different cultures.

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Set against the backdrop of the 1969 race riots in Malaysia, the multifaceted 1980s United States and the "second-most globalized country in the world" Singapore, Shirley Lim's first novel *Joss and Gold* charts the female protagonist Li An's trajectory to find a sense of home and belonging (Holden 2).

Li An's sense of home and security vanished with the death of her father and her mother's subsequent remarriage when she was only four years old. Though she is not culturally or territorially uprooted, her childhood experience renders her homeless and plunges her into what Ilie calls "nonterritorial exile" (11). In her stepfather's house, as a despised and unwanted "intruder" from her mother's "intemperate youth," Li An has witnessed firsthand how her stepfather has "commanded every atom of her mother's body ever since [the marriage] – in childbearing, housecare, cooking and dutifulness to his family, his loud bossy sisters and infirm yet ever-present parents" (*Joss and Gold* 6). Her mother is too busy and too dutiful to her second husband and his family to even notice Li An's existence. With a scholarship to the university in the nation's capital, Li An flees "a home more pathetic than an orphanage," and intentionally distances herself from her natal family (*Joss and Gold* 6). In

renouncing her family, Li An rejects the patriarchal system it represents and deems it responsible for her and many women's sense of alienation and exile in male-dominated Malaysia. Her intentional emotional and physical separation from her family is her first attempt to forge an alternative self, one that is free from the demands of the patriarchal traditions. But her futile attempts at dismantling the patriarchal family structure further dislodge her from her sense of home and belonging.

To dispel the sense of homelessness and exile she experienced from within her own family, Li An, like the protagonists in her British children's books, dreams of "flight, exploration, conquest" (*Joss and Gold* 16). Li An's exilic and homeless state is at the heart of tension between her longing for a secure and steady home, and her desire to leave home, to experience the world. These two opposite states are co-existing, rather than being mutually exclusive. At the university, in her hardly ever washed jeans, she turns the throttle of her motorcycle until it roars, and smokes a pack of cigarettes a day. She acts like a "Western girl – bold, loud, unconcerned about her reputation" (*Joss and Gold* 10). Her rebellion against her family and her refusal to follow the Confucian female decorum that have rendered generations of women silent, fatigued and in despair, and her determination to construct her identity outside of the prevailing values place her at odds with the rest of the society and further intensifies her sense of exile and homelessness within her native community and culture. As an escape from the sense of homelessness and exile, she creates an ideological space with her Chinese girlfriends and Chester, an American Peace Corps volunteer, where she can temporarily ignore the encroaching cultural and social expectations, and seeks emotional refuge through her love for English literature. Ironically, the ideological space she shares with her friends and her love of English literature serve as her self-created exile, her rebellion against social and cultural decorum and her sanctuary. Like JanMohamed's "specular border intellectual," she is "unable or unwilling to be at home" (97) in an increasingly mono-cultural Malaysia. Although Li An appears to be free-spirited and "had never thought of her life as something belonging to a group, rather than herself," in her loneliness, she gives in to traditional gender expectations by agreeing to marry Henry (*Joss and Gold* 16). In her search for a sense of home, she wishes her marriage will restore the sense of security, the warmth and love she so desired from her own family. But in reality, she soon realises that by agreeing to marry Henry, she has "accepted responsibility for some lifelong task she didn't want" (*Joss and Gold* 16), and has renounced her fragile sense of freedom of mind and body, her "independent subjectivity" (Quayum "Nation" 23).

As a child, Li An has been a silent witness to her mother's physical and mental torment in her stepfather's home. After her marriage, she finds herself unwilling to play the socially and culturally assigned gender role. Although it is

apparent that Li An is provided with everything most women desire – the love of her husband Henry, money, a respectable family and social status, she feels that her life is empty and meaningless. As a married woman and the wife of a wealthy Chinese man, she is frequently reminded that she has familial and social obligations to fulfil. Though Henry is “objective and tolerant,” he insists that Li An should “accept what people say. If you cannot agree, you must still be quiet. Men get upset when women contradict them” (*Joss and Gold* 57). Marginalised and deprived of her right to live her life on her own terms and to think independently, she fears that she is going to become a victim of the social control that bade her and millions of other women to be oblivious to their own desires and needs. She knows Henry wants to save her from “poverty, carelessness, and loneliness” (*Joss and Gold* 173), but she is convinced that their relationship must be based on mutual respect. Her failed attempts to break the walls of alienation in a house that Henry’s father bought them and the confinements of the marriage institution have become another form of exile. This painful realisation and her restless internal conflict between being a good wife and a woman of free will plunge her into a dark abyss of despair, and further deepen her sense of homelessness and exile.

In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Edward Said suggests that exile is fundamentally about the experience of banishment and of bearing the stigma of being an outsider. Kinga Olszewska echoes his view and suggests that exile involves “a sense of loss of identity and separation or even banishment from indigenous culture, community, language, tradition and history” (86). In the post-independence nationalistic frenzy, Li An’s struggles to claim her sense of home and belonging are further complicated by dominant racial and political discourse. Contrary to Li An’s friend Abdullah’s assertion that Chinese, Malays and Indians cannot mix, Li An believes that the Malaysian society and cultures should resist racial, political and cultural division and a one-race domination. Rejecting Abdullah’s “monocular, exclusivist and totalising view of nationalism, devoid of dialogism and constructive engagement,” Li An believes that the races should put aside their differences, and work toward a new Malaysia with a “collective soul and an encompassing identity” through a “process of cultural cross-fertilisation” (Quayum “Self-refashioning” 35, 30, 38). In the introduction to “The Postmodern Dilemma for Life Writing: Hybridising Hyphen,” Lim asserts that home is where individuals and relationship can leap “territorial and national boundaries” (3). In her hopes to dismantle socio-political, territorial, national, cultural, racial and gender boundaries, Li An asserts:

Everything in Malaysia is champor-champor, mixed, rojak. A little Malay, a little Chinese, a little Indian, a little English. Malaysian means rojak, and if mixed right, it will be delicious.... Give us a few more years and we’ll be a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people. (*Joss and Gold* 44-45)

However, historically after the departure of the British, the Malay-dominated government was eager to adopt an exclusive nationalism based on the promotion of Malay culture and language. The Chinese are deemed as “questionable and problematic” by the Malay government (Nonini 207). The condition of the Chinese, their statelessness, their anxiety and sense of exile are vividly captured in the novel. As a Chinese Malaysian in newly independent Malaysia, Li An feels disempowered and alienated from the Malay culture that rejects her. Because of her Chinese ethnicity, the Malays perceive her as alien and undesirable. Perplexed about her personal and racial identities, she wonders: “Would China want me?” and laments “I am a Malaysian. I don’t exist” (*Joss and Gold* 63, 75). Though economically prosperous, the Chinese remain politically and socially marginalised in multi-ethnic Malaysia. In the fierce competition for dominance between the races in her native land, Li An desperately seeks her sense of home, self, community and a sense of belonging. The bloody race riots in which Li An’s father-in-law was brutally murdered has shattered her dream of an utopian Malaysian society where all races and cultures co-exist harmoniously. Confronted with the dilemma of both belonging and not belonging to the Malaysian culture and society, feeling lost and homeless, Li An laments: “You cannot be born and live in a place all your life without that place belonging to you” (*Joss and Gold* 82). Li An’s dream of a “Bangsa Malaysia,” one that emphasises “inclusivism, futurism and syncretism” (Quayum, “Nation” 207) of all races and cultures in Malaysia, fades away as she painfully realises that her views on Malaysian society differs drastically from the dominant racial and political discourse. Dejected and unable to reconcile her personal identities and emotional homelessness, Li An embarks on another journey to seek a sense of home, belonging and self-fulfilment.

Disheartened by Malaysian racial and political discourse, and unwilling to bear the make-belief bliss in the home she shares with Henry, Li An pursues Chester as though he were her lifeline. Caught in an emotional whirlwind, she and Chester were like “two homeless orphans,” and she “felt at home only with him and with Ellen” (*Joss and Gold* 64, 65). As a married woman, Li An’s interracial affair with the American Peace Corps volunteer Chester not only has changed the course of a few people’s lives, but also challenges Chinese and Malaysian gender and racial politics. Though the affair is not justifiable morally, it is, as Joan Chiung-huei Chang pointed out, a site of “contact and contention between different cultural, racial and national forces” (151) in Li An’s desperate quest for freedom and liberation from her prescribed gender roles in the Malaysian society. This quest for freedom has taken her out of her home – the secure, sacred space sanctified by society and her marriage to Henry. In a male dominated society, Li An’s transgression is an unpardonable sin. She is now damaged goods and a castaway forever. There is no mercy, no forgiveness for a

woman who dares to deviate from her assigned gender role as the angel of the domestic space. Li An's interracial affair has violated the acceptable cultural and racial norm, rendering her even more homeless than she had ever been. Ironically, her intimate relationship with Chester, though home-shattering in nature and in reality, can also be interpreted as an act of "home-making," Chester and America have merged as her object of fascination, an emotional place she wants to call home. Joan Chiung-huei Chang states:

America is a symbol of hope, fun and escape from the dullness, arrogance and idiosyncrasy of Malaysia. For her Chester embodies everything American and shows up in her life like the answer to her dreams. (153)

Locating her sense of home in a utopian dream space, Li An attempts to dispel her alienation and homelessness, and seeks emotional and spiritual refuge. However, this euphoric experience is short-lived. Chester, instead of being her "agent of salvation," leaves in the wake of the race riots, abandoning Li An and their unborn child. Confused and heartbroken, Li An again loses sight of where she belongs, and is suspended between where she is and where she desires to be, reality and dream.

After the birth of her daughter and her divorce from Henry, Malaysia has become a more inhospitable place for a woman who has committed the unpardonable sin of adultery. Li An attempts to rebuild her life by forgetting, and struggles to escape from the memory of her past. Lim writes,

In Kuala Lumpur she had felt the ostracism of friends as a horrible abuse. She had determined never to meet them again, the childhood intimate who had called her evil, the colleagues who had greeted her with distant eyes....
(*Joss and Gold* 178-79)

Li An is left with no choice but to become a "territorially departed" alien in Singapore – a "stony paradise" (*Joss and Gold* 171). Her immigration to Singapore further complicates her sense of home and exile. As a woman who has transgressed the gender and racial boundaries, Li An is forced to start anew in a place where nobody knows her past. Singapore is a place where she can nurse and rehabilitate her wounds, a safe haven, but it is also a place of banishment. Lim vividly captures Li An's stinging sense of homelessness and alienation even after Li An had been a resident of Singapore for nine years: "It was their culture, their world, their lives, and she listened with skillful attention, grateful to be included in the conversation..." (*Joss and Gold* 168). To find her sense of home in Singapore, Li An devotes herself to her work and is transformed by the demands of being a single parent in a postmodern globalised world. Lim writes, "Embrac[ing] the empty depth in the glittering surface of things" has been "the hardest poem for her to read." Being the

Editor in Chief and Communications Vice Director at BioSyn-Sign, Li An now uses a new language of symbols that pays attention to “every good omen and sign” in order to keep the investors loyal to the company. Poetry and literature have long vanished; she is trying to “make a buck. Singapore is go, go, go. Everyone is trying to make a buck” (*Joss and Gold* 177, 179, 214). Lim, through Li An’s daughter Suyin, proclaims “Singapore is money and home” (*Joss and Gold* 233). Joan Chiung-huei Chang poignantly points out, “The power of money is candidly and sarcastically disclosed here” (159). Dissatisfied and disillusioned with Malaysian and Singaporean socio-economic and political directions, Li An encloses herself in her misery and feels displaced and disoriented. Her journey to Singapore is not only a social banishment but also another form of self-imposed exile. Wrapping herself around her daughter’s life and work, Li An’s exilic experience and her sense of homelessness and displacement intensify until she engages in what Quayum refers to as “self-refashioning,” and once again embraces the spirit of reciprocal accommodation and reconciliation which she had held dear in her heart in racially, culturally and politically tumultuous post-independence Malaysia.

Mohammad A. Quayum’s “Self-refashioning a Plural Society: Dialogism and Syncretism in Malaysian Post-Colonial Literature” is illuminating in its analysis of how Li An searches for a sense of home in Singapore and how Singapore serves as a place of rehabilitation for Li An, Chester, their daughter Suyin, Henry and their multiethnic friends. The return of Chester and Henry to Li An’s life, or more specifically to her daughter Suyin’s life, her decision to provide them a contact zone, and “the spirit of dialogue” have enabled the individuals involved to move between multiple spheres without having to station oneself in a fixed locale (Quayum, “Self-refashioning” 33). Echoing Quayum’s view, Chattopadhyay and Shrivastava point out that “Such a situation not only allows the individual to be located across many sites but provides him or her the flexibility of exercising multiple subjectivities” (116). By locating the story and bringing Chester to Singapore, Lim displaces the importance of Li An’s home country Malaysia and that of the United States. Confronted with the “simultaneous desire for and rejection of the ‘West,’ the 1980s Singapore is a globalized metropolis which embodies both the possibilities and contradictions of Asian modernities in a new millennium” (Holden 18). Instead of America, Singapore is now where everything is happening, and it is where the past can be reconciled with the present, reality with dreams. Quayum states,

The lack of tradition, or a single history predating the colonial time, has served as an impetus for the construction of a new composite, inclusive national identity, through a process of transcultural and mutuality of cultures. (“Nation” 204)

At the end of Book Three, fittingly titled “Landing,” Lim’s characters arrive at the realisation that if they accept people around them as fellow human beings, not as representatives of a particular culture or race, they can transcend the narrow scope of nationalism, racism and self-complacent conservatism. Through the reconciliation of Li An, Chester, and Henry, the acknowledgement of Suyin as their daughter, and the facilitating role Li An’s Malay and Indian friends who have played a part in bringing together Li An, Chester and Suyin, Lim wishes to point out that it is not hatred, divisiveness, narrow-minded nationalism and conflict, but love, harmony, and acceptance of differences that would transcend their exiled experiences. It is this vision of home where individuals and relationships can leap “territorial and national boundaries” that should be celebrated (Lim, “Introduction” 3).

Andrea Riemenschmitter and Deborah Madsen note in *Disaporic Histories: Cultural Archives of Chinese Transnationalism*:

It is no longer feasible to view the globe as divisible into discreet, territorial nation-states with homogeneous populations and political sovereignty more or less exclusively controlled by representative governments. (1)

Collapsing national, racial and cultural boundaries, Lim exalts forgiveness and harmonious co-existence of different religions, cultures and races. Instead of having her characters feel that they had lost their native country because of their exilic experience, Lim demonstrates that their exodus has provided them with a new opportunity and a new direction in human history in the age of globalisation. Challenging the notion that exile represents emotional, cultural and physical uprootedness and psychological dismemberment, Lim unlocks her characters’ close-mindedness and redefines their exilic experience as “placement rather than displacement, advancement rather than confinement, affiliation rather than dissociation” (Chang 150). Skilfully and in the spirit of proactive cooperation and engagement, they negotiate their sense of self, community and home in what Homi K. Bhabha has theorized as a hybrid “Third Space” (Rutherford 220) where native and disaporic racial, sexual, socio-economic, cultural and political hegemony is contested and acts of “deterritorialization and reterritorialization” of national, racial and cultural boundaries are performed and celebrated (Lim, “Immigration” 297). Their composite heritage and their geographical, cultural and psychological crossovers have enabled them to construct a more fluid sense of self, a self that is engaged in the search for “a new identity through a process of cultural cross-fertilisation” (Quayum, “Self-refashioning” 38), the acceptance of “processual dialogism and creation of new contact zones” (Quayum, “Nation” 195). Li An’s revived interest in her long-forgotten *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, the return of “a muse of feelings she thought she had forgotten” and the realisation that “nothing she lived through

was finally over” symbolically connect her past with the present while forging a new future (*Joss and Gold* 264, 263). After a long journey of “crossing,” “circling,” and “landing,” rejecting rigid national and ideological fixities, Li An has finally found a sense of home and has become JanMohammed’s “syncretic intellectual” who simultaneously embraces multiple subjectivities in her desire to weave a new fluid composite identity.

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