

Writing Back: Ethics and Aesthetics in *Joss and Gold*

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Abstract

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's novel, *Joss and Gold*, published in 2001, can be viewed as quintessentially "academic" in some ways because, though it has an intricate plot and a well-paced narrative, it also raises all the pertinent questions that are the central preoccupations of resistance discourses such as feminism and post-colonialism. My paper will examine how these resistant discourses emerge in the text and the ways in which the novel writes back to a western tradition that has typecast Asia in general and Asian women in particular. I examine some of the ethical concerns and aesthetic designs that emerge and discuss how characterisation, plot and thematic concerns push forward ethical agendas. I also discuss how the ethical and aesthetic dimensions meld into each other in order to foreground issues that are central to the debate, such as the construction of the modern Asian woman, the concept of the nation and so forth.

Keywords

Ethics, aesthetics, resistance discourses, stereotypes, Asia

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's first novel, *Joss and Gold*, published in 2001, can be viewed as a quintessential "academic" novel, because, though it has an intricate plot and a well-paced narrative, it also raises all the pertinent questions that are the central preoccupations of resistance discourses such as feminism and post-colonialism. The story begins in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 just before the race riots, jumps to a middle class suburb in New York in the 1970s and finally ends in Singapore of the 1980s, jetting across "three nations and three decades" and is set against "a backdrop of political turmoil and social change" (blurb, back cover, *Joss and Gold*). The plot traces the life of a young Malaysian-Chinese academic, Li An, who teaches English Literature, and her many friendships and attachments; her marriage to the gentle, conservative, Henry Yeh, a scientist and fellow Malaysian-Chinese; her brief attraction to, and a night of physical union

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with, Chester, an American Peace Corps volunteer stationed in Kuala Lumpur for a few months and the consequences of it in the form of the Eurasian child, Suyin. These events constitute the arterial line of the plot.

Li An, the female protagonist, functions at both literal and symbolic levels. At the literal level, her actions are a means through which the text explores the imports of the affective relations obtaining between persons. So, her relationship with Henry: his extreme love for her and her casual affection for him; her growing attraction for Chester, are all portrayed as influencing her life in definitive ways. But the text goes further to examine these relations as relevant, even necessary, for an adequate resolution of concrete ethical questions or dilemmas raised in the text. Thus, just as her attraction for Chester points to the unarticulated problems in her marriage with Henry, her exchanges with Samad and Abdullah, the Malays, serve to expose the fault lines in the social fabric of the Malaysian nation state.

At the symbolic level, Li An stands as a counter to all the Western Orientalist visions of Asian women that depict them as passive, dependent, occupying highly sexualised locations. Li An as the new Asian woman, however, emerges out of pain and guilt, to forge an independent existence that is largely free of her dependency on men, at least, financially, if not emotionally. But though she is able to manage without either Henry or Chester, what gives purpose to her life is the existence of her daughter, Suyin. This circumstance replicates an important preoccupation in current feminist theory. Patrice Diquinzio, discussing feminist approaches to motherhood exposes the complex perspectives involved:

Some feminist assessments of mothering agree that it can unite women in many shared experiences. But of such assessments, some emphasize women's deep and abiding love for their children and/or their pleasures and sense of accomplishment in child rearing, while others focus on the stifling confinement to home and family, and annoyances and frustrations of caring for children, the agonizing losses that mothering can entail, and the lack of control over the circumstances of their mothering that many women experience. (ix)

It is interesting that *Joss and Gold* exposes and tackles both these attitudes – the positive as well as the negative approaches to motherhood. That it does so non-judgmentally and factually is a measure of the mature temperance displayed in the narrative at all times even as it examines highly emotive, personal and political concerns. Indeed, issues of mothering, motherhood and even fatherhood are shown as highly emotive and preoccupy many characters. There are several mothers who feature in the narrative – divorced mothers, surrogate mothers, re-married mothers, grandmothers and “other-mothers” [a term used by Patricia Collins (119-22) and others to signify women as primary carers who

fall under no classified category]. The lack of mothering and its impact on characters are also foregrounded in many instances. For example, Li An is bereft of motherly love since her own mother, whose second marriage to Han Si-Chun, a rubber trader and Li An's stepfather, we are informed,

commanded every atom of her mother's body ever since – in childbearing, housecare, cooking, and dutifulness to his family, his loud bossy sisters and infirm yet ever-present parents. No one ever talked about her father, whom, Li An concluded, was supposed never to have lived if her mother was to prove a good wife to her second husband. (10-11)

It is no surprise, therefore, that for Li An, Henry's stepmother, the Second Mrs Yeh's judgment and support appear crucial (11). Mothers, it seems, are indispensable and the more there are, the merrier. At Henry's and Li An's wedding, we have Henry's own mother and his stepmother as well as Li An's mother being featured as important personages. However, the marked difference between that generation of Asian women and Li An's own generation is their lack of maternal aspirations or commitments. In the American segment, this is foregrounded in Meryl's (and Chester's) decision to forego children. In this, Meryl, the American woman, as well as Ellen and even Li An, at first, i.e. the Asian women, seem to view motherhood from similar perspectives. From the start, these young women seem more focused on their careers than their domestic roles. However, this view changes for Li An with the birth of Suyin who becomes the bone of contention between Chester, Li An and even Ellen, Suyin's "other-mother" since the two women view Chester's arrival after more than a decade of absence with suspicion and resentment.

This tale of marriage, adultery, trust and betrayal, however, goes beyond relating a personal story to encompass concerns in the public realm as well. The narrative is set against a backdrop of national turbulence in Malaysia that probes issues of race, gender, ethnicity and cultural and religious affiliations. Language – the status of English – is also a fairly sensitive issue within the nation-state, one that is close to Li An's heart. But despite an unerring eye for conveying the "local," the essential ethical objective of the plot shines through as an attempt to "write back" to a western tradition that through the ages has persisted in typecasting Asia and particularly Asian women. Edward Said's argument in *Orientalism* on how the West has been discursively "able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (*Orientalism* 3) has been approached from the gendered angle by theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who points out in her influential article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" that even contemporary theorists and researchers involved in constructing "resistance writing" unconsciously replicate orientalist attitudes. Mohanty analyses the

production by western feminist researchers of the “Third World Woman” as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (western) feminist texts. She focuses on “a certain mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’ about women in the third world by particular analytic categories employed in specific writings on the subject which take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and Western Europe” (Mohanty 336). She argues that Western feminists construct the image of a “third world woman”:

This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). (337)

Mohanty suggests this construction is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, and having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions (338). She affirms that not sufficient attention has been paid to the diverse locations of “third world” women.

Mohanty’s views expressed on the theoretical level are echoed by Lim at the fictional level. *Joss and Gold*’s narrative takes issue with several entrenched stereotypes: that of Asia as the Other to the progressive, technologically savvy West; the stereotype of the confused woman entangled in predicaments brought about by her emotions and her lack of reason; and most particularly, the stereotype of the Asian woman of Puccini’s operatic fame.

The novel functions as an ironic reversal of the plot of the renowned opera, *Madama Butterfly*, created by Giacomo Puccini in 1904, which narrates the story of Cio-Cio San, a Japanese Geisha girl and her unconditional love for the American Navy Captain, Pinkerton, to whom she is sold through a fake wedding contract. Her unconditional and extreme love for Pinkerton that leads to her estrangement from family and kin; her patient wait for three years pining for his return while she has borne his son; and her final despairing suicide when he returns with his American wife to claim her child, form a quintessential enactment of just such Orientalist sentiments that have been entrenched in the West.

Unlike the clever, award-winning David Henry Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly*, which describes the love story of the French diplomat, Rene Gallimard, and Song Liling, the Chinese opera singer that enacts an overt ironic reversal of Puccini’s opera, *Joss and Gold* does not foreground this theme but lets it slip insidiously into the narrative only on a couple of occasions. Hwang’s play is a carefully crafted farcical rendition of the white man through Rene Gallimard, who has so internalised this image of oriental femininity that he does not realise

that his fantasy girl is in actual fact a *male* spy! But the irony in *Joss and Gold* works very differently. It carefully orchestrates an oblique but definite verdict on this commonplace western misconception by presenting the reality of modern Asia gradually, methodically and realistically as the plot unfolds. In the process, the hitherto normative western stereotypes of Asia are exposed and gently mocked.

The first oblique echo of the Madame Butterfly trope occurs when Chester confesses his “sexual indiscretion” in Asia to his academic mentor, Professor Jason Kingston:

“I got a girl pregnant. It was just a one-night affair, though she was sweet and all that. She was married. I never gave it a thought, but she had a baby.”

“Ah, an American baby.”

“Well, I gathered that was the case. The husband divorced her after the birth.”

“And she’s putting the screws on you to get them into the United States”

“No, nothing like that. I haven’t heard from her in all these years.” (184)

Jason’s assumptions that the Asian woman would be helpless, destitute and leaning on Chester to save her are given the lie with Chester’s response that Li An had never bothered to contact him. Chester recalls how on his return to the US he had dreaded hearing from her. “The fear that she would write, would claim a relationship with him, had dragged into everything in the first few months home, affected his eating, sleeping, being with his family” (184), until he finally realises that she would never contact him. Later, after he is married to Meryl for a few years, he revisits this terrain. When earlier in their courtship Meryl gets pregnant, they are both unprepared for a child and she opts for an abortion at his urging. Later, forging ahead in her career in the National Parks, Meryl sticks by their initial decision not to have children, despite an oscillating Chester, whom she finally persuades to undergo a vasectomy. After the vasectomy, it appears that Chester suddenly yearns for fatherhood and recalling the earlier rumours that have come his way from his Malaysian friends that he has a child through Li An, goes in search of her and the child.

Therefore, it is particularly ironic that the narrative effectively transfers “the need” from the Asian to the American side. When Chester finally returns to Singapore driven by his curiosity about his child and keen to re-establish contact with Li An, he realises how she is no way in need of his support.

He felt the comic irony of his visit. For the past twelve years, he had imagined, even feared, the image of Li An as abandoned. When Meryl had

dragged him to the Met to listen to Pavarotti in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, he had been overcome by the obscenity of the pathos.... (235)

He had then explained to Meryl that “[t]his was the West’s degradation of Asia, the imago of what had gone wrong in Vietnam” (235-36). Chester’s intellectual reaction to the orientalist trope, however, does not find an affirmation at the emotional level until he personally witnesses the self-confident, professional Li An, the epitome of the progressive “global” woman and her friend, Ellen, whom he thinks “could almost pass for an American female executive...” (281). The predictable binaries fade and make Chester realise that he is the more needy one in this context – the *Madama Butterfly* trope has been effectively revoked through a strong injection of the contemporary reality of Asia.

Joss and Gold's ethical objective to review and contest several stereotypes is also centrally entwined with its aesthetic design. Indeed, the text strikes a complex connection between the ethical, the aesthetic and the literary. This emerges as a productive tension between the intellectual effort to write back and to present a realistic portrait of a corner of Asia, which can be perceived as a dimension of the ethical and the necessarily indirect, aesthetic workings of literary fiction.

The central aesthetic of the narrative is invoked through its sketch of three distinct sections labelled “Crossing,” “Circling” and “Landing” bringing to mind the image of a bird or an aircraft. The primary motifs are those of migrations and/or breached boundaries. Indeed in the first section, “Crossing,” several breaches do occur. When Chester, newly arrived in Malaysia, departs after a brief stay in Kuala Lumpur for his homeland, USA, he leaves behind a country torn by civil strife and an emotionally fraught woman, Li An, who is terrified that she might be pregnant with his baby. Chester’s suburban, middle class existence with his American wife, Meryl, forms the staple of the middle segment of the narrative, “Circling.” Here, it is as if the main action of the novel has been suspended and is in limbo while Chester’s background is being etched in. Even the action is muted since the only major altercation in Chester’s and Meryl’s otherwise fairly equitable marriage is the issue of offspring. The action seems to progress once again only in the third section “Landing” when Chester goes in search of Li An and his child.

In “Landing” Chester arrives in Singapore where Li An now lives. He finds her much changed, leading the life of a high-powered executive, rearing Suyin, their daughter, with the help of her friend, Ellen, now a principal of a school, and the second Mrs Yeh, Henry’s stepmother. Hence, rather than welcoming him back, both Li An and Ellen are resentful of his reappearance in “their” (daughter’s) life. His carefully monitored outings with Suyin, which are overseen by Ellen, betray his helplessness. Given this situation, therefore, his confession to Meryl about his affair and his return home to USA in the hope

that one day Suyin will join him there or that he will arrive in Singapore sometime in the future with Meryl for a brief visit, are acts of a powerless man who has little agency. This reversal in the power equation is sealed, when, at the end of the book, Suyin seems more interested in effecting a bond with her mother's ex-husband in Malaysia, the now remarried, Henry, so that her surname Yeh will become a reality and she will no longer be teased in school and be called "Sin-ner" (297). With Suyin's yearning for affection fixed firmly on Henry as the surrogate father, the focus remains Asia and its complex realities. Near the end of the novel, already, Chester's visit and USA appear distant memories.

It is interesting to note that the narrative's aesthetic design supports this Asian focus. The relentless forward movement of the plot means that the first two sections, "Crossing" and "Circling" move inexorably towards the excitement of the "Landing." And the landing is in Singapore. The inexorable narrative movement towards this city places the emphasis squarely on Asia, specifically a modern, economically vibrant city in Asia in the presentation of the island city-state, which is currently, and indeed in the 1980s & 90s when the novel is set, the envy of most nations of the world. It is here in this extremely successful Asian city that has progressed from "Third World to First" (the title of Lee Kuan Yew's book on Singapore) that all the old Malaysian friends of Chester now live and work. Their affluence and cosmopolitanism effectively controvert old entrenched views of Asia as a backward place steeped in moribund traditions.

Although the Asia depicted may be modern, it is in no way idealised. Indeed, the many frictions and factions within the Asian nation state are never glossed over. Even at the individual level, the dissonances are shown to be multifarious. Though Li An and her two friends, Ellen and Gina are the image of the thrusting women of the late 60s Malaysia – modern, educated, impatient of traditions and keen to forge their way in a global world by making their own rules and setting their own moral standards for the future, their lives appear rather superficial, even directionless. Of the three, at least at the start of the narrative, Gina appears to be the most idealistic, rebelling against age-old prejudices, wanting to make an interracial marriage with Paroo, a Malaysian Indian. Hailing from a very traditional Chinese family with a strict patriarchal father monitoring her every action, Gina is keen to escape the shackles of an old-fashioned Chinese lifestyle. There is great promise in their romance, which appears bold and reckless, playing out the theme of "all for love or the world well lost," the staple of epics. However, her final suicide pact with her young lover, Paroo, that leaves her dead and Paroo shattered, after his failed suicide attempt, exposes the inherent weakness of the puerile lovers and highlights the futility of idealisation. It also serves to foreground one of the central debates in

feminist ethics – the paradox, even impossibility, of complete autonomy since it is always already embroiled in a network of social relations that it cannot escape.

In contrast to the conception of the Self in mainstream ethics as autonomous, in feminist ethics, the Self is conceived of as “relational” rather than discretely individual. As Daryl Koehn points out, feminist ethics insists that “[h]uman beings are thoroughly embedded in a host of involuntary, as well as voluntary, supportive social relations through which we define ourselves” (5). Another feminist ethicist, Jennifer Nedelsky, further expands on the notion of autonomy. She explains that:

[t]he notion of autonomy goes to the heart of liberalism and of the powerful, yet ambivalent, feminist rejection of liberalism. The now familiar critique by feminists and communitarians is that liberalism takes atomistic individuals as the basic units of political and legal theory and thus fails to recognize the inherently social nature of human beings. (Nedelsky 392)

The impossibility of breaking free of one’s social commitments and familial attachments, however much an individual might desire it, is brought home to us through Gina’s predicament. It is easy to see that Ellen and Li An too are equally trapped by their social circumstances and conditioning, though the former is clearly the most independent of the three women. The only daughter of a wealthy businessman who owns a stationery store and bookshop in Kuala Lumpur (26), Ellen sees herself as a citizen of the world, setting her sights on emigrating to USA. But she too is affected by her circumstances and after the shock of Gina’s suicide she settles in Petaling Jaya, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, working for a British firm. Later, after Li An’s marriage to Henry breaks up, she moves with her to Singapore and becomes very involved with Suyin’s upbringing.

Feminist ethicists emphasise the “relational self” and the ethics of care. This means that they also take issue with the traditional position in mainstream ethics that treats the private and the public as two distinct realms. Instead, feminists are firm in the belief that

the so called “private” realm of familial and household relations [are] of public significance [since] [p]ersons who learn to trust and care within the realm of the home bring these virtues with them into public life as well. Conversely, failures in nurturance often lead to violence inside and outside the home. (Koehn 6)

There are many instances in the text where the personal becomes the political. One such moment when personal and public collide most dramatically is when Chester and Li An consummate their attraction for each other while race riots are ravaging the streets of Kuala Lumpur and they are both hiding in Abdullah’s

house during curfew. This is a fraught instant when a moment of extreme intimacy is intertwined with public revolt. The narrative cleverly juxtaposes the intimate with the public.

Chester was exhilarated. “It’s a historic moment,” he repeated. “Do you realize that? May 13. We’re seeing history before our eyes.”

All she saw was the black silent area of Petaling Jaya, the dim fire on the skyline, and webs of feathery smoke.

Later she lay on his bed and wondered what she was feeling.... Chester had given her a sarong to sleep in. She knotted it more securely around her chest, thinking, this is Chester’s sarong.

She couldn’t keep the trouble in her mind. Her heart was beating very fast right under the sarong knot, and her body was vibrating quietly... a tension of desire that was life....

Before he reached for her, he turned off the light. It was only then that she knew he loved her after all. (95-96)

Li An and Chester’s lovemaking in the midst of the riots results in a baby whose Amerasian identity in turn creates great turmoil in the family, leading to a divorce. Thus, actions initiated in the intimate realm are shown to have devastating consequences in the social arena.

Even otherwise, there are several instances when these two domains spill over into each other. One such concerns the question of nationhood. The narrative makes clear that Malaysia as an “imagined community” (Benedict Anderson’s phrase) is constructed differently by the different races that compose its citizenry. The first intimation of this friction is revealed when Chester, completely unaware of local sensitivities, voices the opinion that all “non-Malays” are not truly “Malaysian” and incurs the wrath of the normally temperate Henry.

Henry’s cheeks were spotted with red, and his eyes were yelling louder than his words. “What does that make Li An and me? My family? My friends?... Our traditions are Chinese but that doesn’t make us less Malaysians.... (44)

The Malays, Abdullah and Samad, had evidently convinced Chester of the fairness of a *Bumiputra* (Sons of the Soil) policy – one to which Henry takes great exception. The rocky road of Malay nationalism is made manifest when Li An patiently explains its complications to Chester:

My mother’s family has been in this country for five or six generations and some of the Malays are really immigrants who have just arrived from Indonesia in the last few years. You can’t make any judgments based on who or what is “original.” Sure, the Chinese traditions came from China, but Islam came from Saudi Arabia, didn’t it? (44)

The fraternity that is conceived of as “intrinsic” to the notion of nationhood, which Benedict Anderson explains an “imagined community,” because, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 7), demonstrates how the personal and the public are inextricably linked. But the nation is splintered not only along racial lines but also along linguistic ones:

... Abdullah said. “Don’t want you to feel bad, yah, Li An, but English is bastard language. In Malaysia we must all speak national language.” (69)

The logical Henry views the problem from a more pragmatic perspective: “But what will happen when you go overseas?” Henry shook his crossed leg a little impatiently. “I’m learning German now, so I understand how difficult it is to study a foreign language. But I have no choice” (70).

The most sensitive divide for Li An is the one that occurs along gender lines. When she enters this debate and voices her opinion, the conversation ceases and the men withdraw into themselves. When, later, after their departure, she demands desperately of Henry “What did I say wrong?” (71) Henry is forthright: “Men get upset when women contradict them.”... Li An burst into angry tears.... A woman has no right to a mind of her own. She should only listen and echo what men say” (71). The reality of the double standards and the gender discrimination practiced in the nationscape is inescapable.

[Ellen’s] job at Weston Allen was so-so, she said. It didn’t pay as well as it should because it had three levels of pay for the same work: a high salary for the British brought over on two-year contracts, a lower salary for the Malaysian men, who were all scrambling for promotion, and the lowest pay for women like Ellen.... (73)

As a corollary of the public/private domain, that most familiar of philosophical conceptions, namely, the age-old split between reason and emotion comes under scrutiny in feminist ethics and is also an important binary examined in the novel. In the area of moral theory, the priority accorded to reason is based on Kant’s “Categorical Imperative” (See Guthrie’s discussion, 2005), which suggests that all moral problems can be approached by applying an impartial, pure, rational principle to specific cases. Also, the principle of utility suggests rules of rational choices for maximising personal desires and interests. However, Virginia Held clarifies that

Rather than interpreting moral problems in terms of what could be handled by applying abstract rules of justice to particular cases, many of the women... tended to be more concerned with preserving actual human relationships and with expressing care for those for whom they felt

responsible. Their moral reasoning was typically more embedded in a context of particular others.... (Held 11)

Li An and Henry epitomise this dichotomy. We are told that Henry is the epitome of Reason:

Henry was interested only in science. From an early age he had been fascinated by the properties of materials, how matter changed properties when combined with other elements, how reactions could be measured and predicted so that the entire world might be seen as a matter of measurements and reactions. (14)

He stands in stark contrast to Li An, who is emotional, idealistic, believing in the power of words and poetry, a stance that evokes Chester's (and Henry's) mockery:

This is too rich! I can't believe you are teaching this stuff here. Why, there's nothing here but English poetry and excerpts from British novels. What can your students learn from this? (41)

This exchange establishes the gender divide, apparent in the nation, as ubiquitous, global, cutting across cultures, establishing a bond between the Malay, Chinese and White-American males.

But the novel quietly vindicates Li An's beliefs by nimbly revealing, through the workings of its plot, that the characteristic problem of autonomy in the modern state is not, as western tradition often insists, to shield individuals from the collective, but that instead the task is to render autonomy compatible with the interdependence. Thus the world views of minorities, such as the Chinese in Malaysia and subordinated groups like women under patriarchy, and ways in which communities and individuals interact with the status quo and attempt to carve out a space for themselves, form important underlying themes. The text in fact ratifies the experience of embeddedness in relations, its inevitability and necessity, both at the individual and at the collective (national) level. In doing so, it asserts a belief-system that places the priorities of the marginalised resistance discourses at the centre.

In these ways *Joss and Gold*, although delightfully fictive, distinctly replicates the agendas of a resistance discourse emerging from Asia. However, it does not surrender to facile binaries nor does it attempt to gloss over the many problems that beset emerging Asian nations. It exposes and highlights the frictions and factions within Asian societies, in the process replaying some of the major themes that constitute the staple of feminist ethical debates, focusing on mothering and showing the rift between autonomy and relational ethics insisting upon the inevitability of relationships shaping the individual. What

seems to drive the narrative is a powerful ethical obligation to speak and to tell a tale from the Other side. What we see opened up aesthetically is the effort to overset stereotypes without creating others; to counter hegemonic cultural discourses without succumbing to binaristic stances. In effect *Joss and Gold* enacts the struggle to contain humanity properly into language. The narrative creates an ethical space where human nature can come into its own. The ethical triumph of the novel can be said to reside in the conviction that is brought to the story – its “narrative truth” which is gradually constructed page by page, episode by episode, with minute attention paid to the quirks and twists of events, political and personal, and to characters, both major and minor, while contesting, indeed, in many cases, reversing, typecast images.

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