

Exploring the Issues of Gender and Ethnicity in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Sister Swing*

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Abstract

This essay will provide an analysis of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Sister Swing* (2006), a coming-of-age novel centred on the three daughters of a traditionalist family in Malacca, Malaysia. After examining the character of the patriarch, Ah Kong, and the hierarchical relationship he strove to establish and maintain with the victimised women of his family (both his wife and daughters), this article will, first of all, explore the strategies employed by the three sisters to emancipate themselves from his tyranny, and their different degrees of success. As it will be shown, the revolt against the patriarch is closely connected with the discovery of one's body and sexuality, as well as with the notion of movement and travelling, signifying freedom from the shackles of tradition, and a quest for a *home* which is not merely a physical place. Secondly, given Lim's overcoming of the binary opposition between the immigrant's country of origin and the US (and her subsequent adoption of a transnational perspective), this article will delve into the distinct way the author deals with the issue of ethnicity, namely by focusing on the problematic interaction between different ethnic communities in the American context, and their lack of understanding and communication with one another.

Keywords

Patriarchy, gender, emancipation, travelling, transnationality, ethnicity

As Shirley Geok-lin Lim emphasised in a 2006 interview,² *Sister Swing*, her second novel following *Joss and Gold* (2001), grew out of a much anthologised short story entitled "Mr Tang's Girls,"³ which was awarded the *Asiaweek* Short Story Competition second prize in 1982 (Quayum, "Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An

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² <http://thebookaholic.blogspot.it/2006/03/shirley-shines.html>.

³ This short story is featured in the collection entitled *Two Dreams, New and Selected Stories* (1997) alongside with "Sisters" which, after minor changes, would become a chapter of *Sister Swing*. The story was later anthologised in Mukherjee, Singh and Quayum, eds. *The Merlion and the Hibiscus: Contemporary Short Stories from Singapore and Malaysia* (156-70).

Interview” 1). The short story, set in Malaysia and focusing on the conflictual relationship between Ah Kong, a stern, conservative old man, and his eldest daughter Kim Li (whose growing sexuality he seems unable to grapple with), ends with the physical and symbolic murder of the patriarch on the part of the girl. In *Sister Swing*, the death of the dictatorial father figure (this time due to a heart attack, and therefore only indirectly caused by his daughters’ rebellious behaviour) constitutes the incident which prompts the development of the plot, centred on three young sisters (Yen, Su Swee and Peik) and their quest for an identity in both the land of their ancestors and America, where most of the story unravels. As Nicoleta Alexoae Zagni has elucidated, this novel “marks, as the Malacca-born writer put it in a recent interview, the ‘injection into her imagination’ of this other national territory” (261) (i.e. the US), which is a rather surprising fact, considering Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s status of acclaimed Asian American writer held for over forty years. In *Sister Swing*, however, America is not portrayed as the *Promised Land*, the customary *Land of Opportunities* envisioned by Asian immigrants. Being the heiresses to their father’s wealth, the three sisters do not need to search for better financial prospects in the unfamiliar territory, nor do they experience the typical nostalgia of the exiled, since mobility is one of their prerogatives. Conversely, as Swee discloses at the end of the volume, the *promise* offered by the US is the possibility to look for oneself (Lim 223), which also translates into the thorough liberty to settle down, to move back to one’s motherland, or to always set new destinations, thus turning into a voluntary migrant, a figure in transit, “perpetually swinging between countries, states and notions of self” (paragraph 9), in the words of Kao Jong-Ee.

The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, after analysing the character of Ah Kong and the hierarchical relationship he strove to establish and maintain with the victimised women of his family (both his wife and daughters), I will explore the strategies employed by the three sisters to emancipate themselves from his tyranny, and their different degrees of success. As it will be shown, the revolt against the patriarch (whose domineering influence seems to defy his own death and loom over the girls’ future) is closely connected with the discovery of one’s body and sexuality, as well as with the notion of movement and travelling, signifying freedom from the shackles of tradition, and a quest for a *home* which is not merely a physical place, but “a set of conditions conducive to living comfortably within one’s skin and with others,” as Kao Jong-Ee emphasises (paragraph 6). Second, given Lim’s overcoming of the binary opposition between the immigrants’ country of origin and the US (and her subsequent adoption of a transnational perspective), this article will delve into the distinct way the author deals with the issue of ethnicity, namely by focusing on the problematic interaction between different ethnic communities in the

American context, and their lack of understanding and communication with one another, despite their shared past of oppression, sufferings and discrimination.

Learning to Use One's Wings, Learning to be a Woman

As Iping Liang has pointed out, the concept of *swinging* highlighted in the novel's title is connected with multiple factors, which include the author's childhood memories in Malaysia, a dynamic women's jazz trio from Sacramento (the Sister Swing), mood swings and, most of all, the idea of flying and travelling (4)⁴: "by making associations with personal experience, trio women singers, and transitional metaphors, Lim connotes the title 'sister swing' with a feminist strategy of oscillation and border crossing" (Liang 4-5). "Sister Swing" is also the nickname given by Yen to her middle sister Swee, the main narrator of the story, alternately told from Yen's, Swee's and Peik's points of view. Pumping her beloved swing higher and higher, as a child little Swee used to feel content, like a "bird rushing up through the warm air" (2), a bird whose ability to lift itself into the sky (thus emblematically breaking away from constraints and limitations) is also evoked through the auspicious surname the writer chose for her three protagonists: "Wing," which is also included in the word *swing*. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the narrative, their father "Ah Kong was the only person... free to use his wings" (Lim 8) and, as Swee noticed, there was a huge gap between the girls' family name and their actual, secluded lives: "what was the good of being a Wing if you couldn't fly?" (7). In fact, Ah Kong, "the eagle with its hawk nose and white hair feathers" (8), kept his subjugated spouse (who was half his age) and his three "fledglings" (8) inextricably tied to him, while he could enjoy the liberty of having "two nests" (6), since he also had another family – the first and most important one – in Singapore, where he spent his weekdays. His overpowering attitude as well as his intention to clip his offsprings' wings and keep his daughters close prisoners are suggested by the numerous glass cases on the walls of his Singapore house (a "glass cemetery" [7], as Swee remarked), exhibiting a wide array of taxidermied exotic pigeons spreading their wings, frozen in their paradoxical simulation of an impossible flight. Moreover, the very name *Ah Kong* perfectly suits the character of an awe-inspiring patriarch: it is "the Chinese for king, highness, the grand vizier in *A Thousand and One Nights*" (4), besides meaning "grandfather," two generations removed from his children, and therefore worthy of even greater honours and respect.

The seemingly solid foundations of the patriarchal order are definitely shaken when, one night, Yen and Swee are caught by Ah Kong examining their own genitals with the help of a mirror, an act prompted by guiltless curiosity

⁴ The page numbers refer to the file the scholar kindly sent me, due to the difficulty in finding a hard copy of his essay. Here I would like to express my gratitude and indebtedness to him.

which, nevertheless, subtly implies the girls' claim over their own bodies, their development into self-aware women and individuals, and a powerful bond of sisterhood from which fathers are forever excluded. "Sisters sluts perverts no shame no fear" (14) is the elderly man's harsh comment, the last words he utters in fury before his fatal heart attack. What is noteworthy, however, is the daughters' reaction to his intrusive presence in their bedroom, a reaction that, as it will be shown, can be regarded as paradigmatic of the young ladies' different levels of acceptance of themselves, and ease with their own femininity in the future. Yen boldly asserts her independence and the urge to have *a room of her own* by saying "What right he has to walk into our bedroom every night?" (15), whereas, for no rational reason, Swee feels restless and deeply ashamed of herself, eager to go down on her knees and beg her father's forgiveness. Peik (the youngest of the three, docile and obedient to Ah Kong) is not even mentioned in the episode: her real *awakening* (quoting the title of Kate Chopin's groundbreaking novel, in which the imagery of birds and flying plays an important role) will never happen in the time-span of the narrative, which covers the three-year mourning period for the death of the patriarch, from 1980 to 1983.

Swee is the first to reach America, in order to escape the recurring nightmare of her father, in the shape of a giant, sharply beaked bird with "horny claw-hands pecking at her shoulder and chest" (16). Flying away on board of a big Boeing 707 is a true relief to her, and her life at Peps College (New York) runs smoothly until the moment she falls for the Puerto Rican Professor Manuel Lopez. Her secret liaison with him (a much older and married man) closely reproduces the asymmetrical relationship the girl used to have with Ah Kong, whose gloomy shadow continues to be cast over her life. Swee is the passive object of the professor's sexual attentions: she lies "silently under his weight" (40), she views him as "a black God" (35), "a brown sun radiating above [her]" (41), and she is jealous of his wife, a passionate and self-confident woman, who has a career in politics and holds the professor in her grip. For the sake of pleasing him and adjusting herself to his linguistic habits, Wing Su Swee becomes Swee Wing, dropping part of her name (and identity) and following the Western order of given name and surname. Furthermore, like her father, turned into a rapacious bird in her imagination, Manuel Lopez is also meaningfully associated with a beast of prey to which she mildly surrenders: "Manuel Lopez. Manuel Lopez', I said his name over and over again, silently and aloud at night in my room. 'Man, Man, Man, Man'. Was Lopez related to Lupus, to wolf? Man wolf man wolf man wolf" (36).

In *Sister Swing*, however, flight, mobility and the ability to swing backward and forward become the most effective strategies devised by women to work their way out of the patriarchal trap; consequently, Swee decides to leave New York and go back to Malacca, only to return to the US (Long Beach, California)

a few months later, this time accompanied by Yen, with whom she enrolls at Buenavista College. Once more, Swee experiences the utmost exhilaration at the prospect of eventually being “a free Wing, released from staying indoors every Saturday and Sunday, bound to the duty of gratitude” (49); but yet again, she ends up in another unbalanced relationship with a military veteran, a biker called Sandy (whose real name is Adolphus Weinberger), who conceals from her his dangerous connection with a white supremacist militant group: the Western Militia of Patriots (WMP). Before falling in love with him, Swee considers Sandy as a protective male figure and greets him “like the brother [Yen and she] never had, who cast[s] his masculine eye, like a praetorian guard, on [them]” (63). Even prior to the first date, however, Sandy seems to engage himself in a project of reforming Swee’s Asian identity, in order to fit her into his Aryan ideal. Hence, her name is further shortened and Americanised as “Sue”: “You’d better change your name to Sue. Just add an e. Makes a lot of difference!” (59). Moreover, when they become a couple, Sandy encourages her to buy black motorbike outfits, besides persuading her to cut her hair and dye it red. Looking at “Sue’s image in the mirror (this time not for self-discovery, but to contemplate her own weird metamorphosis), Swee sees “hair bright with bottled color, clothes the color of deep mourning. Black as in mourning for Ah Kong, but this time black for Sandy, because that’s the color he chose for [her]” (144). The young woman, therefore, seems incapable of ridding herself from the ghost of the patriarch (who keeps haunting her) and, later on in the novel, she confesses that every time she put her leather jacket on, thus becoming “a chick in black... as American as everyone else there” (145), “it was to hide [herself] from Ah Kong” (160). Even her sexuality was profoundly affected by the dead patriarch: the pleasure that filled her body while abandoning herself to Manuel’s or Sandy’s embraces was even more relished since it “seemed to dislodge Ah Kong’s image from [her] mind” (72).

Sandy breaks up with Swee when he discovers that she has become a columnist for an ethnic community paper *Asian Time*, an activity he cannot justify to his WMP friends who believe “Sue” is Aryan, just like them:

‘I had to explain you’re not like those yellows coming in to California. You’re a college girl, good, smart. And now, it’s not going to work. I can’t swing it!’... Sandy was shaking [Swee], his hands on her shoulders, shake, shake, and her head flopping back, flopping front, flopping back again. (158)

In this passage, Sandy seems to usurp the very act of *swinging* (turning it into a violent *shaking*) which had previously enabled Swee to adopt different perspectives and change point-of-view, thus avoiding being caught in stillness. The end of their relationship, however, marks an important turning point in Swee’s life: in fact, after giving “Sue’s clothes away, she goes back to her original

name, to her real self. What is more, she learns how to drive, which allows her to reach Trinity Cove, the location on the US-Canada border where Sandy (eventually chased by the police for his brutal anti-immigrant actions) had most likely died in a fire. The journey to the burned-down house where her former lover had vanished becomes highly symbolic: up until that moment, Swee had always relied on protective/overbearing male figures; even in her numerous flights, she had never developed her own wings, being dependent on planes, buses, or Sandy's motorbike, always led and never leading. "But with the coupe" – as she remarks – "my life was now in my hands, in my grip of the steering wheel, my pressure on the gas pedal, the quick turn of my foot to the brakes" (202). Even the image of the burned-down house (that Swee contemplates so intently) may be regarded in itself as emblematic, signifying her intention to finally release herself from the urge to follow the decrees of her father, that his daughters grow into domestic wives and dutiful mothers.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the final chapter of the novel, when Swee settles in New York to further her education (studying journalism, and maybe psychology in the future), the recurring nightmare of Ah Kong as a huge and vicious bird of prey is replaced by the dream of a harmless and piteous pigeon in the snow, "so small and cold and alone" (230). In an interesting role reversal, the fowl is now afraid of her, while she tenderly tries to get the creature into her shelter. "Poor bird father!... Ah Kong was no falcon peregrine in New York City. He'd shrunk into a common ghost bird all his past colors leached out" (229-30). Once gained her independence and her freedom from the spectre of the patriarch, Swee can peacefully continue to swing and "loo[k] for [her]self in America" (223).

Even before arriving in the US, Yen seems to have articulated a powerful strategy to resist dominant male authority by means of caricature and satire (Quayum, "English in Malaysia and Singapore," paragraph 7). As a matter of fact, apart from rebelling instinctively against her father's intrusion into her bedroom, Yen used to amusingly deflate Ah Kong's importance and forcefully ridicule him by calling the elderly man "King-Kong" (Lim 4). When she was fifteen, she once complained of his peculiar hairs, sticking out of his nostrils and making her cheeks itchy when he leaned close to her face: "Aiyoh! Don't come so close, Kong-Kong!... Your hair is so itchy! Itchified!" (5), a comment which deeply offended the patriarch.

Yen is the only one among the three Wing sisters to keep her name, without wishing to alter it in order to please boyfriends, friends, acquaintances, or simply some external observers. Besides, once settled in America, she continues to feel perfectly comfortable with herself and her own way of speaking (she uses *Manglish*, an English-based creole language spoken in Malaysia): in fact, despite her passion for burgers and junk food, she does not believe she has the duty to blend in. Hence, the liaison she develops with

Wayne (another military veteran, like Sandy) is unquestionably healthier and more balanced, if compared with Swee's and Peik's relationships with men. This is the way the couple (who will eventually marry and presumably live happily ever after) is depicted by Swee:

I could explain Yen and Wayne. They were like each other, although one was Malaysian and woman and the other American and man. They were proof some people are the same, underneath different skins, different bodies, different languages. Like twins, separated at birth, born seventeen years apart, thousands of miles from each other. The different families and countries simply an accident, superficial, a temporary bump in reality. When they found each other, they rushed into each other's arms, filling the vacuum, completing the human. (160)

Conversely, describing herself as “quiet and good-natured like Mama” (21), Peik (whose name means “white[,] pure” [164]) is the perfect, compliant daughter every overbearing father would like to have. As Swee elucidates, her younger sister had “never grown those wings [she] wanted so badly to use” (23); the only bird she is ever assimilated to is a “parrot” (6), due to her annoying way of repeating whatever the patriarch expected her to say. Moreover, Peik's corporeality (and therefore her gender identity) seems to be denied to such an extent that her sisters are actually incapable of hugging her, or even establishing any form of physical contact with her: “she had always been too transcendental, a spirit sister whose body defied physical affection” (165).

Accordingly, after her father passes away, Peik decides to join the Congregational Evangelical Church, thus becoming “a bride for Christ” (44) after her baptism. Like Swee, she changes her name, in her case to Pearl, “precious in the eyes of God” (45), following the suggestions of Pastor Fung, whose son she marries in order to tighten her bond with the charismatic elderly man. As Andrew Hock Soon Ng has emphasised (182), Pearl's devotion to the idea of the “Father” (both God and Pastor Fung) is both the mirror image and the replacement for the strong affection (tainted with submission, helplessness and self-abnegation) she used to feel for Ah Kong. Consequently, when she eventually goes to Los Angeles, following her father-in law in his evangelical mission, she decides to invest the huge sum bequeathed to her by her late parent in building a giant cross, glowing with “three thousand 100 watt bulbs burning as one everlasting light” (123): “This is what Ah Kong's money was intended for – a Christian memorial to him... Ah Kong would some day be risen with Christ in Los Angeles” (123).

When the cross is bombed and destroyed by the Western Militia of Patriots (a disaster involving the death of two unknown Mexican immigrants), all the blame is unfairly cast on Pearl's shoulders. Instead of resisting this kind of blatant discrimination against a woman like herself, who had slowly managed

to turn into a real leader for the community, she willingly accepts the role of scapegoat, by submitting to the decision of the elders (all males) to relocate her back to Malacca: "Submit. Digest. Disgust," as she underlines, "the joyfulness went out of my body" (215).

Inter-ethnic Relations in *Sister Swing*

As Iping Liang has highlighted, "by incorporating ethnic groups as diverse as Malaysians, Mexicans, Cubans, American Indians, Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and Euro-Americans, Lim... has written a transethnic Asian American fiction" (10). Nonetheless, a peaceful coexistence is not always easy, nor possible. The customary stereotypes, fraught with negative and racist connotations, are certainly present in the novel; just to quote a few of the most striking examples, Sandy disdainfully defines Swee as "inscrutable" (98), and states that "Asian women are suckers for punishment" (62). Her driving instructor criticises Swee for being excessively prudent: "the worst drivers... you Asians are too timid – going slowly causes more accidents than going too fast" (162). Derogatory ethnic labels, however, are not just used by WASPs and white supremacists in America. Surprisingly enough, a patronising attitude, open contempt or even fierce antagonism characterise the encounters between the various communities composing a cultural and linguistic mosaic that still struggles to become a unified picture. The Puerto Rican Manuel Lopez, for instance, laments the passive attitude prevailing among Asian women; comparing Swee to his wife, he says: "She's fiery, like all Puerto Ricans. That's how I like women. You are different, quiet, timid. So Asian" (40). Mrs Butler's university course entitled "Race in America" is solely focused on "the history of black relationships with whites" (59). Affected by a strange and dangerous form of colourblindness, the African American professor thoroughly ignores all the other ethnic groups in her lessons, besides overlooking their courageous fights for civil and human rights. Furthermore, she is heavily biased against Swee, who always receives B grades in spite of the high quality of her assignments. In Mrs Butler's opinion, the girl is not really interested in her course, but "only in [her]self, in getting all [she] can out of this country" (62). As the instructor harshly remarks, showing a grudge against her *foreign* student,

I know you fresh immigrants – you are pushy. You never want to wait in line. I've had to wait in line all my life. You think you can just write some college papers and get to be somebody in America. Well, that isn't so. It's people like Sojourner Truth, Du Bois, Ida Wells, Martin Luther King Junior, and Malcom X who've got you your rights, black people you know nothing about. (61-62)

Even the concept of multiculturalism seems to be somehow questioned by the writer, who wittily underlines the clash between the ideal and its practical

realisation. Pastor Fung's fervent sermons on how "there [i]s no color in Heaven" (114), and "how the different colors m[e]et as equals in church" (118) are followed with difficulty by the inattentive and drowsy congregation: first of all, its members lack proficiency in English (most of them speak only their native language); secondly, the words the minister chooses are too sophisticated, and his Malaysian accent too strong to be understood. What is more, the communion meals (ritual commemorations of the Last Supper) often seem to turn into cheap, all-you-can-eat feasts, where people exhibit a "frantic gluttony" (139) that is regarded as "pretty sinful" (139) by Swee:

'Yes, they come for the food,' Pearl said. 'The dishes are very good. Where for five dollars can you eat your fill around the world? Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, Mexican, Honduran, Italian, some Greek, Malaysia and Singaporean, and of course all-American hot dogs and burgers and French fries and Belgian waffles and mom's apple pies....' (138-39)

Conclusions

As this essay tried to demonstrate, *Sister Swing* is a narrative in which the questions of gender (above all women's emancipation from a patriarchal society) and ethnicity are pivotal. This coming-of-age novel (reminiscent, in the words of Stella Bolaki, of another American masterpiece, namely Louise May Alcott's *Little Women* [240]) ends with the hope for a brighter future, i.e. the prospect of a baby, Yen and Wayne's child. As Swee reveals in her final statement, the new kid will surely be a girl, "a Wing second-hand" (230), who will eventually untie some of the remaining knots in the three sisters' stories: "she will have to be the promise of America for all of us, the littlest one, bearing the dreams we have left standing" (230).

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