Entangled Allegiances and Multiple Belongings in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands*

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Abstract

In *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands* (1996), Shirley Geok-lin Lim writes, "The dominant imprint I have carried with me since birth was of a Malaysian homeland" and "there are homelands of the memory and homelands of the future, and for many of us, they are not the same" (231, 191). Oscillating between her birthplace, Malaysia, and her adopted homeland, the United States, Lim embarks on a whirlwind journey to find a place called home both literally and metaphorically throughout her poetically crafted memoir. Lim's mixed personal and cultural heritages, and her geographical and emotional wanderings which cross multiple terrains problematise the static anchorage of the idea of home, nationhood, and personal and cultural identities. In her narratives of home and exile, Lim simultaneously captures the trauma of displaced identities, the nostalgic yearning for her native land, and the loneliness of an exile, but also celebrates the dynamic multiplicity of transnational identities and homelands.

Keywords

Exile, home, alienation, transnationalism, belonging, memory

The Politics of Belonging

Since the 1960s, an outpouring of literature by first-generation Chinese American immigrant writers has developed into what many literary scholars and critics in China have referred to as overseas Chinese literature. Chen Ruoxi, an overseas Chinese American writer from Taiwan, notes that the term "overseas Chinese literature" was first coined by Gao Xinjiang, Editor-in-Chief of *China News Supplement* (*Zhongguo Shibao Fukan*) in China in 1975. Due to a multitude of reasons, Gao himself, winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature, became an overseas Chinese writer in the late 1990s after he immigrated to France. Gao defines all writers of Chinese ancestry who live outside of mainland China and

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Taiwan, including at that time Hong Kong and Macau, as overseas Chinese writers and their literature as overseas Chinese literature. The return of Hong Kong and Macau to the Chinese mainland has significantly altered the definition of Chinese territories. Thus, Chen expands the definition of "overseas" to mean any area outside of the Chinese territories ("Prologue" 10). Her definition of an overseas Chinese writer includes one who is of Chinese ancestry and resides beyond the physical borders of the Chinese territories. Taking the cue from Chen, one could define a "Chinese American writer" as one who is of full or partial Chinese racial/cultural heritage, American or foreign born, who resides in the United States.

Chinese American literature has been traditionally excluded from mainstream canonical American literature. In an effort to reconstruct American literary history and to claim America as home, many Chinese American writers and critics, particularly those who are American-born, insist that a panoramic view of American literary history must include writings by Chinese Americans and other ethnic groups. The rewriting of American literary history has been a daring and arduous undertaking in contemporary critical discourse for several decades. Many Chinese American writers and critics, both American and foreign born, have joined forces with many other ethnic writers and critics to challenge the exclusion of their literature from American literary history. They have produced a large array of masterworks against the predominantly monological American culture. These marginal texts are voices of opposition against racial, cultural, sexual, social and economic domination and exclusions, and are attempts to claim America as home.

Since its inception in the 1960s as a distinctive literary and theoretical discourse to counter the hegemony of the mainstream American cultural and political institutions, Chinese American literature has undergone great changes. The Chinese American literary horizon has expanded significantly due to changing US immigration policies, the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and the United States, the end of the Cold War and the rapid pace of globalisation. Elaine Kim notes, "the lines between Asian and Asian American, so important in identity formation in earlier times, are increasingly being blurred" ("Foreword" xiii). Commenting on the changing dynamics in the field of Asian American literature, King-Kok Cheung observes:

> The shift has been from seeking to "claim America" to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centering on race and on masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality; from being concerned primarily with social history and communal responsibility to being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of postmodernism and multiculturalism. (*Interethnic* 1)

Lavina Shanker echoes Cheung's view and comments, "Asian American literature, in the last decade, is no longer charted only on American soil but on the landscapes of several postcolonial geographies" (285-86). These critics masterfully summarise the ever expanding and fluctuating arena of Asian American literature.

The literary works of first-generation Chinese American writers often capture the vicissitudes of identity crisis and psychological trauma resulting from the effects of geographical and cultural uprootedness, and the difficulties of reconciling native and host nation influences. The sense of home, physical as well as emotional, is often problematised by the writers' close cultural, emotional and familial ties to the native homeland and their disaporic experience. Simultaneously embracing their native cultures and histories and what Lisa Lowe refers to as "heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity" (24), these writers often draw freely from both their American and Asian traditions in their construction of home(s) and self, but refuse to be defined or confined by either. Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands* explores the complexities and fluidity of geographical and emotional home(s) and of personal and cultural identities.

The "homing" of first generation Chinese American writers such as Lim in Chinese American and mainstream American literature is often controversial. On the one hand, though their writings "overlap with literatures considered minority, cosmopolitan, or metropolitan, they are often seen as falling outside U.S. canonical work" by mainstream American culture (Lim, "Immigration" 290). On the other, because their works often explore the identity crisis or cultural and psychological conflicts and dislocations arising from voluntary or involuntary migration overseas, leading American-born Chinese American writers such as Frank Chin, Shawn Wong and Jeffery Paul Chan have vehemently refused to be put under the same category with foreign-born Chinese American writers such as Shirley Lim. Chin and other editors of *Aiiieeeee* have insisted that American-born and foreign-born Chinese Americans have totally different sensibilities. While it is true that there are ideological, political, cultural and thematic differences in the literary works by foreign-born and American-born Chinese American writers, the refusal to incorporate foreign-born Chinese American writers into the Chinese American literary arena will only lead to further marginalisation of both groups of writers by mainstream American culture.

The importance of place, as well as personal and national history in the construction of one's self and sense of home has long been recognised in literary and theoretical works. In "Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet" Adrienne Rich explains that she writes from a historical context, a time and place that is part and parcel of the making of her self and her poetry. Susan Roberson maintains that people's perceptions of who they are and how

they look at the world around them are to a large extent "fashioned by the world, by the time and space of [their] particular locations" (6). Helen Buss suggests that "in some very fundamental but inexpressible way, our own self-identity is inextricably bound up with knowledge of the spatial environment…. The sense of place is essential to any ordering of our lives" (9).

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's construction of her self and home in *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* is closely tied to the location and histories of her native land Malaysia and her new homeland, the United States. Owing to the complexities of Lim's racial, national and cultural heritages, Eddie Tay argues that Lim lacks the "luxury of being completely situated within a particular canon of literature. Whether Malaysian (though it is her birth country), British or American (though she writes in English), or Chinese (though she is Chinese)" (301). In a review of Lim's memoir, Jim Sullivan states that because of Malaysia's increasing antagonism towards English-language writers and literature since the 1960s, and America's inclusion of Lim's writing in a major American literary anthology only recently, "the agony of her frustrations and isolation both in Malaysia and the United States pervades the text and imbues it with a sense of melancholy and anger" (261). As a British subject who grew up in colonial Malaya, born to a Peranakan mother and a English-educated father of Chinese ancestry, and as a first-generation Asian American woman who travels between multiple physical and ideological terrains, Lim constructs her self and home(s) from multiple geographical, historical, political and cultural locations and traditions. As a border-dweller, she is constantly "involved in a fluctuating and dynamic reprocessing, reordering, and redefining of the self" and home(s) (Roberson 10).

Growing up as a Malaysian Chinese, Lim's sense of self and home(s) is intertwined with the tribulations of Malaysian history. Though her text is a personal memoir that occasionally crosses into Malaysian social and political history, Lim vividly recaptures the disaporic experience of the ethnic Chinese population in her narrative, such as the barbarity of the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II and the repressive history of British colonialism. Confronted by Japanese invasion and occupation, the "invincible" British Royal Navy, instead of fulfilling its pledge to safeguard Malaya, began "ferrying British administrators and families in ignominious retreat to Australia" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 37). Through the skilful interweaving of personal and national history, in which Lim draws freely from her multiple cultural, racial and linguistic backgrounds, she carefully constructs her personal identity and sense of home.

Born as Geok-lin Lim, Lim was soon given the American name "Shirley" by her Westernised father because she had a dimple on her face, like Shirley Temple. She attended a British convent school and became Agnes at baptism and Jennifer at confirmation. In Malaysia, the naming of a person or place in

different languages during different historical times reflects the shift in political and cultural power. From the beginning of the sixteenth century to 1957, Malaysia was under the colonial rule of first the Portuguese, then Dutch and, finally, British. From its colonial past to the present, Malaysia has experienced close cultural encounters with China, India and several Western colonial powers such as Portugal, Holland and England. During colonial rule, native languages gave way to the languages of the colonisers. By 1944, the year Lim was born and the year before Malaya was restored to British rule after a brief Japanese occupation, English had become not only the language of administration but also of power and status.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's studies on the impact of language on the colonised point out that "language carries culture" (141). Language and the culture it carries shape and reflect a person's as well as a nation's identity. The naming of Shirley after Shirley Temple, who was adored as an American culture icon by Shirley's father, not only reflects his "fancy for the West" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 4), but also the power and extent of Western cultural penetrations. Lim recollects that because of colonial history,

> The tragedy of naming was so much a part of everyday life [in Malaysia] that we could not see it. Names also stuck on us. Chinese names, Malay names, Tamil names, English names, Portuguese names, Dutch names, Hollywood names, Roman names, Catholic names, Hindu names…. Too many names, too many identities, too many languages. (4)

Lim shows that naming is not an innocent activity; it is a powerful tool of appropriation. The different names, identities and languages she inherited are reflective of Malaysia's "mélange of Chinese, Malay, Indian, Portuguese, British, and American" traditions and influences (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 4).

Lim charts her myriad identities within the context of British as well as Malaysian cultural imperialism at the beginning of her memoir. In *Writing S.E./Asia in English: Against the Grain, Focus on Asian English-Language Literature*, Lim observes: "in colonial and postcolonial societies, language policies took effect, whether to the empowerment or displacement of the English language, *de facto,* outside the area of democratic discussion and decision" (46). She argues that in colonial Malaya, the colonisers' languages were imposed on the Malayan people without their consent. Similarly, in postcolonial Malaysia, the dominant Malay government made Bahasa Malaysia – the language of the Malays – the national language without the consent of Malaysia's multi-lingual and multi-racial groups.

Calling into question the notion that a person's mother tongue is tied to one's racial origin, Lim examines the relationship between an individual's language and national history and culture. As a Malaysian Chinese growing up at

the margins of a colonial society, Lim claims that as a child she was afraid of Chinese speakers, "having being taught by the British that they were unpatriotic, brutal, and murderous" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 40). As a "despised female" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 24) in a male-dominated family, she rejected her father's language, Hokkien – a Southern Chinese dialect – and spoke her mother's language, Malay, the language of assimilated Chinese Malaysians, at home. Lim felt at a young age that "Hokkien had never been a language of familiarity, affection, and home." She writes, "[Hokkien] remains at a more powerful level a language of exclusion, the speech act which disowns me in my very place of birth" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 11). In British schools, she spoke chiefly English and, ironically, became most fluent in it. Resisting the notion that colonial culture corrupts an original pure culture, Lim came to think that "corruption is inherent in every culture, if we think of corruption as a will to break out, to rupture, to break down, to decay, and thus to change" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 65).

As a former colonial subject, Lim thinks that British colonialism has both "alienating and transformative" (Wong 151) aspects. Though she has embraced the positive aspects of both her native and British cultures, she remains critical of native patriarchal and colonialist-shaping influences. She writes:

> We are all mimic people, born to cultures that push us, shape us, and pummel us; and we are all agents, with the power of the subject, no matter how puny or inarticulate, to push back and to struggle against such shaping. So I have seen myself not so much sucking at the teat of British colonial culture as actively appropriating those aspects of it that I needed to escape that other familial/gender/native culture that violently hammered out only one shape for self. I actively sought corruption to break out of the pomegranate shell of being Chinese and girl. (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 65)

Through the colonial culture and language of the West and "all its manifestations in stories, songs, illustrations, films, school, and government" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 65), Lim examines her own culture as well as the colonial culture in the constructions of her self and home. She critiques the oppression in her native as well as colonial cultures, "subverting the binaric conclusions of nationalistic discourse which pits 'good,' indigenous traditionalism against 'bad' colonialism or, conversely, in the case of colonialist discourse 'bad' native communal laws against enlightened westernization" (Wong 155). Rejecting the colonial discourse that erases the agency of the colonised, Lim shuttles between Confucianism, Catholicism, feudalism and colonialism, negotiates her personal identity and sense of home, and her "points of escape" among them (Lim, "Gods Who Fail" 38).

Since its independence from Britain, Malaysia has adopted Malay or Bahasa Malaysia (Melayu) as the national language which, according to Quayum, has

> relegated English – as well as writers in the language – to a marginal position, often reducing their works to an inferior category of what has been dubbed as 'sectional literature,' as opposed to literature in Malay which is accorded the status of 'national literature.' (29)

Believing that Bahasa Malaysia is an instrument that empowers only the dominant racial group in Malaysia and disempowers other racial groups including Chinese Malaysians like herself, Lim writes in what she calls an "international language," English (*Writing S.E./Asian English* 47). Echoing Achebe's theory that a formerly colonised writer "should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience" (433), Lim writes in an English that is laced with Bahasa Malaysia, Hokkien and, occasionally, Mandarin words. She claims that she wants to "write a literature like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, but overflowing with native presence" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 120). Her choice of the English language as her writing medium "encodes and calls upon multiple cultural systems" (Lim, *Writing S.E./Asian English* 154). It not only reflects Malaysia's colonial past, but also counters the Malay-dominant monocultural policies that render Malaysian ethnic minorities homeless.

Although Lim was born and raised in Malaysia, ironically the government of Malaysia is unwilling to regard her book of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula*, which won the prestigious Commonwealth Poetry Award in 1980, as part of its "national literature" because it is not written in the Malay language. Feeling the pain and anger of exclusion, Lim laments, "how strange to be a poet without a country" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 187).

"Home is where our stories are told": Constructing Alternative Home Spaces

The word "exile" is traditionally associated with forced migration, displacement and estrangement. It refers to an involuntary geographical separation from one's home or homeland for economic or political reasons or a combination of both. Edward Said defines exile as the condition of being "prevented from returning home" and living "a miserable life" (*Reflections* 181). Kinga Olszewska defines it as "a psychical state of absence and loss" and "a sense of loss of identity and separation or even banishment from indigenous culture, community, language, tradition and history" (86). Paul Ilie believes that it is not only a forced "territorial break" but also "a state of mind" often associated with the feeling of uprootedness and displacement experienced by the "territorially

departed" (2). The large array of literary works by immigrant writers demonstrates that many immigrants experience these feelings whether their emigration is involuntary or voluntary. Exile is therefore either voluntary or involuntary separation from one's homeland and native culture, and the feeling of homesickness, the general sense of loss, physical, cultural and emotional displacement as a result of discrimination, marginality, alienation and the disadvantaged socio-economic and political position experienced by the exiles in the host countries.

To further investigate the multiple nuances of "exile" for the voluntary and involuntary émigrés, it is necessary to explore and redefine the meaning of home. The advent of globalisation has confounded the once clearly demarcated territorial borders of geography, national identity and belonging. Riemenschnitter and Madsen note that "It is no longer feasible to view the globe as divisible into discrete, territorial nation-states with homogeneous populations and political sovereignty more or less exclusively controlled by representative governments" (1). As a result of massive migrations across the globe, the concept of home is becoming increasingly complicated as economic globalisation challenges cultural and nation-state boundaries and as more and more people leave their native lands for foreign countries. For many émigrés, migration to a foreign land forces them to make their home elsewhere, to redefine the meaning of home. In *If Home is a Place*, K. Linda Kivi asks:

> If home is a place, how do we find it? Are there keys dangling, like an extra set of fingers, from your hand? Is there a car idling in a darkened lot waiting to careen down orange lit streets? Or is there a warm path beneath the pines that calls to the soles of your leathery feet, inviting you to hop over rocks and roots and raise the familiar dust? Can you see home before you get there or is it a surprise, hidden among the trees, only for those who know where to look?… We ask and hope for the answers. (7-9)

Instead of offering answers to the meaning of home, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, like Kivi, also poses a series of questions:

> What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community – my people? Who are 'my people'? Is home a geographical space, an historical space, an emotional, sensory space? (352)

Kivi and Mohanty highlight the complexities that constitute the meanings of home as a place and an emotional construct, and take into account many registers and boundaries and various forms of lived experiences including migration, immigration and exile. Shirley Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands* is a literary exploration and redefinition of

the multiple meanings of exile and home. The subtitle of her memoir suggests that there are several homelands for her. Throughout her memoir, Lim continuously probes the shifting nature of home and homelands and wonders, "How does one make oneself at home?" "How does one make a home?" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 155, 191).

Paul Ilie asserts that there are two types of exile, territorial and nonterritorial. The former is often experienced by those who territorially depart from their homeland while the latter is experienced by those who reside in their native lands. As a result of a segment of the population's nonconformist beliefs and/or behaviour, though they live in their homeland, with their cultural and communal roots intact, they still feel as though they have been exiled. Both territorial and nonterritorial exile is "a condition of 'otherness'" (Ilie 11). Shirley Lim's memoir captures her journey of nonterritorial and territorial exiles. Lim divides her text into four parts, between her native homeland Malaysia and her adopted homeland, the United States. In each part, the author travels physically and/or psychologically between borders – Malaysia and Singapore, or Malaysia, Singapore and the United States – living as she claims, through the title of one of her vignettes, "two lives." Through the constant positioning and repositioning of herself within Malaysian and American geo-political contexts, Lim attempts to redefine the meaning of home and construct her transnational identities.

Though Lim feels an unbreakable bond with her native land, she problematises the definition of home through an exploration of her alienated status as an ethnic Chinese, an impoverished child, a woman and a colonial subject. Growing up in Malaysia as a Chinese, Lim feels "othered" in various ways. As a Chinese Malayan in British Malaya, Lim feels alienated from the colonial, the Chinese and Malay cultures. She is "non-male, non-Malay, non-Catholic, non-British colonial," always of the "wrong gender and wrong race" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 38, 133). Her mixed heritage and the resultant political exclusion intensify her sense of alienation. The political marginalisation of the Chinese community in the country creates a lingering unease in Lim's sensibility which she captures vividly in her memoir. Bouncing in and out of different homes as a result of her father's bad business deals, and driven out of her grandfather's ancestral home, Lim lacks the security of a stable home, the warmth and love of an intact family, and she feels "destitute and homeless" and "temporary and unimportant" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 43, 17).

In her memoir, Lim writers, "A Malayan child, I understood Chinese identity as being synonymous with Chinese chauvinism" (40). She refuses to speak Chinese though she is of Chinese descent and is therefore perceived by Chinese Malaysians as "foreign, alien, and worse, decadent, an unspeakable because unspeaking, degenerate descendent of pathetic forebears" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 122). She is called "Kelangkia-kwei or a Malay devil" by her

Chinese family members (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 11), "an abject member" of the Chinese community in Malaysia (Tay 92). Because of her ethnic Chinese background, the Malays also perceive her as foreign. During the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, her race was hated and persecuted by the Japanese invaders because of the anti-Japanese nationalist oppositions in China. The competing and contemptuous racial superiority of the Chinese, the Japanese, the Malaysians and the British makes Lim feel as though she were an exile in her native land. In the face of competition for dominance among the races in her native land, Lim desperately sought to recoup her sense of home, self and community. Believing that Chinese Malaysians and their culture are hybrid, that resist monolithism, Lim writes,

> We were never pure. We spoke a little of this, a little of that, stole favorite foods from every group, paid for Taoist chants, and dressed from Western fashion magazines, copying manners we fancied…. They, we were neither one nor the other: true *Peranakan* copies, mixes, looking nothing else in the world than ourselves. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 4-5)

Through the stories of her mother, her aunts and herself, Lim shows how women had internalised the patriarchal mores and accepted their marginal status within the tight control of Chinese patriarchy. She feels displaced in her parental home, and attempts to subvert not only the racialised but also gendered otherness and sense of alienation. She writes:

> It was my brothers' enmity that made me refuse to be a girl. To be a girl as I saw through their mocking distance, was to be weak, useless, and worse. It was to stay in one place and gossip for hours the way my mother sat gossiping with my aunts and grandaunts. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 40)

Being the "despised female" in a house full of brothers who believe that women are weak and worthless, Lim feels homeless and suffers from what Ilie calls "nonterritorial exile" (11).

Lim's sense of homelessness and internal exile is captured from multiple angles: her relationships with men, her father's violent beatings of her (which were aimed at making her conform to Confucian female propriety), her brothers' demeaning remarks and behaviour, her mother's abandonment of her family when she was eight, and her general observations on women's lives in Malaysia. She observes:

> Married women were almost always home when I visited their daughters. I saw them cleaning the kitchen, reading magazines under the living room ceiling fan, or waking up from naps…. Their reality was a glue into which they were stuck. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 92)

To dispel the sense of homelessness and exile she experiences from within her own family and the Malaysian/Chinese culture, Lim acts like her brothers, screaming, climbing trees and running barefoot like crazed animals all over her neighbourhood. However, as a woman who grew up within the confines of the Confucian patriarchy which imposes severe punishment on female impropriety, Lim feels like a live-in maid whose position is "functional and without rights" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 130). Ilie's definition of an exile as someone who refuses to "partake in the prevailing values" is illuminating in assessing Lim's emotional displacement (2). Her refusal to follow the Confucian female code of conduct and her determination to construct her self outside the confines of the patriarchy place her at odds with the prevailing laws of the patriarchy, thus further heightening her sense of exile and homelessness within her natal family, native community and culture.

Lim's struggles to claim her home and sense of belonging are further complicated by dominant Western racial discourse. It is in the convent school where Lim experiences her first inkling of racial discrimination and preferences. She observes that the ranking of the Catholic sisters was "regulated by race" which was "obvious even to the youngest Malayan child" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 67). Students were also ranked by race. Lim recalls,

> In the convent classroom where silence and stillness were enforced as standard behavior, they [the white girls] giggled and joked, shifting beams of sunshine, and were never reprimanded. To every schoolgirl it was obvious that something about a white child made the good nuns benevolent. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 69)

Lim's skin colour set her apart from the privileged white boarders at the convent school. Her Chineseness was marked as evil because the British colonisers equated Chinese Malayans with the Communists from China, and with outlaws and bandits.

As a colonial subject, Lim felt "caged in British colonial culture," and "burdened with their images, assumptions, values, history, and ideology" (Lim, "Semiotics" 155-56). As a consequence of her colonial education, she became fluent in English, the language of the coloniser. She laments, "Not having mastery of [her] mother tongue (whether Mandarin, Tamil or Malay) signifies inadequacy, deprivation and deculturalization," and cautions her readers about the pitfalls of individuals losing "their traditional points of references… [to] who they are, where they belong, what their position and role in life are" (Lim, "The English Language" 116, 115).

Though the ethnic and gender exclusions she experienced dislodged her from her homeland, Lim's affinity and deep affection for her native land

permeate her text. Memories and stories of Malaysian national and family histories continuously draw her to her native land and culture even long after her immigration to the United States. Malaysia never leaves the memoir which reveals the tight emotional grip it has over Lim's psyche. Much of the memoir is set in Malaysia, indicating the un-severable ties the author has with her native land. Her dreams of her Malaysian home, though full of poverty, abandonment, and rejection, are endearing memories she cherishes. She recalls:

> Returning, I am filled with an ineffable sense of completion, a satiety of recognition. No matter how urgent my struggles to escape childhood poverty and the country's racial politics, I have continued to feel an abiding identity with Malaysia's soil, not only its shining waters, lush growth, and multiracial colors, but even its polluted streams, back lanes, and communal quarrels. (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 190)

After receiving her PhD from Brandies University, Lim longed to return home "as the native daughter made good and to teach in the English seminar room," but was told, "there will be no positions available for non-Malaysians" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 167). She soon realised that she had to "choose not only between countries but between two kinds of commitment: the commitment to a lonely celibate career of teaching English in a Malay-dominant university at home or to a shared life of literary studies, albeit in exile" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 167).

In spite of her lengthy separation from her native home, Lim occasionally returns to Malaysia for short visits only to realise that her emotional resources are still rooted in her native land. She continuously dreams of her grandfather's house where she was born and lived the first few years of her life. She claims that images of her childhood home "trigger a strong visceral sensation of identity" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 18). Recalling the feeling of belonging, family and community she felt during her Grandfather's funeral procession in her hometown Malacca, Lim writes:

> This moment imprinted on me the sense of Malacca as my home, a sense I have never been able to recover anywhere else in the world. To have felt the familiar once is always to feel its absence after…. It doesn't matter that the family is lost, and that the town has been changed long ago by politics and economics. Every other place is foreign after this moment. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 20)

To Lim, home is therefore associated with an unfulfilled longing for a lost past which is anchored in Malaysia. She uses "memory of place to construct imaginatively [her] new lived world" (Anderson 10-11), and to weave her dreams of home. But where is home for people who linger between their native

homeland and their newly adopted homeland? Brah asks: "When does a location become home?" What is the difference between "feeling at home" and "staking claim to a place as one's own?" (54)

Lim's immigration to the United States further complicated her sense of home and exile. When she first arrived in Boston, she was confronted by a sense of loneliness and estrangement and a surrounding that labelled her as alien. Though she was determined to fit in, she soon found out that "there are many ways in which America tells you you don't belong," and "the distinct charge of distance that marked one as alien and outsider, was directed chiefly to those who did not look white European" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 199). As a graduate student at Brandies University, she felt "sheltered yet homeless, solitary yet not absolutely alone" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 153). Physically displaced and emotionally dismembered, she felt that her Asian "bodily presence is a wraith, less than smoke among the 250 million in the nation" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 154). In "Two lives," one of the chapters of her memoir, Lim struggles to find her sense of home and community while emphasising the painful alienation of exile. She writes:

> The irony about a certain kind of immigrant is how little she can enjoy the very things she chases. Even as she runs away from her first life, this other life that begins to accrue around her remains oddly secondary, unrooted in the sensuality of infancy and the intensities of first memory." (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 9-10)

Feeling homeless and torn between two homelands, she mourns her "guest, stranger, outsider, misfit, beggar" status in America, and is "bedeviled by the super-fragmentations that attend alien status in the United States" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 160, 161).

Lim realises that her marriage to an American, her American citizenship, the birth of a son in America and her tenure in an American university cannot grant her full entry and acceptance into the American society. To find her sense of home in America, Lim, realising that one's self is "paltry, phantasmagoric" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 164), turns to her family and her community of women, politically and economically disadvantaged neighbours and students for emotional nourishment. She attempts to build a sense of home through the forging of familiar and communal ties. She laments, "Without family and community, I had no social presence; I was among the unloving" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 155). Lim embarks on a journey to find a "more welcoming America," and comes to believe that "home is the place where our stories are told" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 232). Although she still feels an abiding identity with her native land, family and community, Lim wants to "place Malaysia side by side with the United States, and to become also what [she] was

not born as, an Asian American." She wants to write "stories about America, as well as about Malaysia. Listening and telling my own stories, I am moving home" (Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* 227, 232).

The meaning of home, homelands and an individual's sense of belonging is shaped by personal and collective memories, real and imagined. Lim writes, "There are homelands of the memory and homelands of the future, and for many of us, they are not the same" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 191). Lim's memoir explores issues of home(s) and selves from a variety of positions – individual, socio-economic, cultural and national. It is what Lim refers to as an "identity-haunted" book (*Writing S.E./Asia in English* 154). Resisting ideological and nationalist appropriations, she simultaneously traverses multiple national, cultural and linguistic borders in her search for her self and home(s). Susan Roberson argues:

> Just as the mobile individual must reprocess maps of geographic wayfinding, sometimes on a daily basis, so she must reprocess maps that define, orient, and locate the self. As the map of geographic location becomes a dynamic, kinetic map of relocation, so too the map of the journeying self is involved in a fluctuating and dynamic reprocessing, reordering, and redefining of the self. (10)

Lim's memoir urges her readers to discover/define a sense of self and home(s) that is engaged in the process of a "creative sort of becoming" (Braidotti 5). As a globe trotter, Lim's construction of self is intrinsically linked to her life in her native land, Malaysia, her adopted home, the United States, and her transnational experience and imagination. Her composite heritage, multiple geographical, cultural and psychological "cross-fertilisation" (Quayum 38) enables her to embrace what Brah refers to as "multilocationality" across cultural, geographical, racial and psychological boundaries (4). Lim realises that she can overcome her sense of homelessness and exile through the "attainment of subjectivity and agency by adopting a syncretist and deterritorialised imagination" (Quayum 38), and by reconfiguring the notion of home and homelands from a single physical/emotional space to multiple locations.

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