

Identity, Culture and the National
Narrative: Shirley Geok-lin Lim's
Joss and Gold

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Shirley Lim's first novel continues many of the chief concerns that characterise her body of writings, which to-date comprises several collections of poetry, short fiction and academic articles, as well as a book of memoirs. The perplexities of constructing identity across cultures and continents, the dislocations wrought by history, issues of gender and race and the complexities of interpersonal relationships all return here, as extended meditations, and provide the rich complex of ideas out of which Lim structures her first novel.

Joss and Gold is a novel whose three parts are separated, but only tenuously, by "geography and the distance of cultures". The novel's cultural and temporal locations span the Malaysian federal capital of Kuala Lumpur in the late 1960s, leading up to the turbulent political events of 1969, New York State a little over a decade later, in 1980, and Singapore in 1981. This narrative cartography of crosscutting movements and affiliations itself recalls the instability of ground that features prominently in the author's life story. Born in Malacca, in British-colonial Malaya, educated in Kuala Lumpur and the United States, the latter of which has been academic base and one of several spaces she has claimed as her home (the others being Malaysia and Singapore) for the last thirty years or so, and currently a Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Lim knows too well the particular tensions and pains, but also perhaps the gains, attendant on a life given to erecting home on the broken continuity of locations.

Not surprisingly, then, the novel's three sections - "Crossing", "Circling" and "Landing"— call attention to the processes of movement and transit, the blurring of boundaries. Indeed, throughout the novel, Lim appears to privilege the dynamics of cultural change, adjustment and negotiation over those of stasis and determinacy. But perhaps more

importantly *Joss and Gold* is simply about the connections that bind human beings, to themselves and to others, within and across different times and different spaces.

The novel opens in Kuala Lumpur in the year 1968. The governing consciousness of this part of the narrative belongs to Li An, Lim's protagonist, a headstrong and independent-minded Malaysian woman of Chinese ancestry. A fresh graduate of the University of Malaya, she tutors in the English department of the same university, a teacher of English literature at a particularly critical period in the fledgling life of her nation. She is married to the dull but dependable scientist, Henry Yeh, with whom Li An, still fleeing the demons of her deprived childhood, shares a life of secure, if not always fulfilling, domesticity. Li An's best friends, from her university days, are Gina and Ellen, graduates in Economics and History respectively, and, like her, young Malaysian women of Chinese descent. Li An's interaction with these characters and their lives traces the political, social, intellectual and emotional parameters of an urbanised, English-speaking, middle-class Malaysian subjectivity, a subjectivity formed, in part, by the legacy of migrant displacements engendered by colonial policies as well as by values inherited from the nation's colonialist history.

The tenuous equilibrium Li An constructs around her life is disturbed when she meets Chester Brookfield, the Princeton-educated Peace Corps volunteer who comes to serve a two-year term in Malaysia. A stark contrast to her staid and conservative husband, the adventurous Chester epitomizes to the restless Li An all the romance and possibilities of America, "where everything is happening". More significantly, he is the foreigner in her midst through whose reactions to the incendiary politics of race and identity in Malaysia Li An is forced to confront and examine her own sense of cultural otherness.

To the American's not-wholly playful gibe that the teaching of British literature has no part in politically independent Malaysia, Li An, although outwardly defensive of her position, is called upon to reassess the relevance of Shakespearean sonnets, part of the colonial legacy that the English-educated like her have inherited, to the concerns of the young Malaysian nation still grappling with the vexed dynamics of national and cultural-identity construction. Further told by Chester that language is a carrier of culture and that in teaching British literature she is in fact imparting British values, images and ideological assumptions to her students, Li An, reeling from the devastating effects of such a discourse

on her young consciousness, begins to feel a gradual and growing estrangement from the poetry she loves and teaches.

Also significant, Li An's contact with Chester, and through him, her acquaintance with Abdullah, the soft-spoken journalist turned fire-brand nationalist, and the broadcaster Samad, exposes her to views and perspectives outside that of her immediate circle of friends. Ahmad and Samad, representatives, in the novel, of the politically-hegemonic Malay community, are desirous of eradicating every sign of their nation's colonial past and constructing a new and autonomous national identity. Topping this task of national reconstruction is the renunciation of English. As Abdullah tells Li An, English is a "bastard language", unrooted to the soil, a colonial imposition that should have been thrown out with the colonizers after Independence in 1957. Concomitant to its explicit renunciation of the colonizer's language and culture is the desire by the dominant community to construct a national imaginary on its own terms. As Abdullah pens it in his editorials, "There was only one kind of people that counted ... [and] anyone who disagreed should be imprisoned or sent back to China or India". To indigenous Malay insistence that her migrant history is incompatible with the national idea of Malaysia, Li An finds herself asking, "Are the Chinese not true Malaysians?". Indeed it is the haunting overtones of the protagonist's impassioned assertion that she is "not Chinese but Malaysian", that "[e]verything in Malaysia is champor-champor, mixed, rojak", fashioned as a response to hegemonic and homogenizing national formations, that sustain the narrative of the novel's first part. Already unable to reconcile her love of Wordsworth and Keats, Herbert and Donne with the nature of events overtaking her country, Li An is now, on the basis of her different cultural history, relegated to the status of an outsider in her own land. "You cannot be born and live in a place all your life without that place belonging to you", she avers. "How could you not grow roots, invisible filaments of attachment that tied you down to a ground, a source of water?". Rootlessness and dislocation, home and psychic alienation. Ever the chronicler of precarious belonging, Lim, calling upon the complexities of a personal predicament, reveals, with insight and compassion, the instabilities lying at the heart of diaspora.

Into this psychological maelstrom, Lim weaves the events of May 13 1969, the stark emblem of the fissured unities of Malaysian nationhood. On that day, racial clashes broke out in the capital following Malay insecurity over the massive victory by the mostly Chinese-led opposition

in the General Elections. The politically dominant Malay community, already insecure about its weak economic standing, felt threatened by the political inroads made by the economically-superior Chinese. Ethnic tensions culminated in the riots, an orgy of killing that lasted a few days. May 13 1969 proved to be the most significant event in the history of the Malaysian nation for it provoked radical modifications to the political, economic and social life of the nation, underscoring, in blood, the particular implications of race, rights and privileges to the peoples of Malaysia.

Lim utilizes the cataclysm of the riots not only to echo the internal contradictions that make her protagonist waver between her loyalty to Henry and her feral longings for Chester. More importantly, in casting the riots as a pivotal episode in the text, Lim is pointing towards a recognition of the reality of the fractious internal space of the nation, with its contending multiplicity of voices, histories, cultures, interests and perspectives, a sense of which the text had already sought to convey through its dialogic construction of events leading up to the riots. Central, therefore, to the novel's thematic is that it is on the night of the May 13 riots in Kuala Lumpur, with "race, religion, language, the whole divisiveness of the country going off like strings of firecrackers" around them, that Li An and Chester are thrown together. This one shared night results in Li An becoming pregnant. Due to the mayhem in the aftermath of the riots, Li An, the vortex of her life fast spinning out of control, is unable to communicate news of her pregnancy to Chester, who leaves behind the confusions of his Malaysian experience for America ahead of the completion of his contract.

But while the novel suggests that the story of the "national" life of Malaysia cannot really be told without taking into account the events of May 13 1969, the emphasis throughout is on the intertwining of public and private narratives, the political and the personal. To this end, the larger narrative of national history is inextricably interwoven with the biography of the characters which is being told. The messy violence of the streets, for instance, is not just something happening "out there". When a riotous Malay mob breaks into the home of Li An's father-in-law, a successful businessman, and kills him brutally, Li An is forced to confront the cost, in personal terms, of the internecine politics of racial hatred and prejudice being played out in the public arena. Gina's doomed relationship with Paroo, a Punjabi-Hindu, is another strand that contributes to the larger narrative of race in Malaysia. Fearful that Paroo's family will disapprove

of his choice of wife and that her own conservative Chinese family will find out about their affair, Gina commits suicide; Paroo survives the attempt but is forever haunted by the memory of his first, true, love. Again, in the text, the sites of personal and national trauma coalesce.

The novel's second section opens in 1981, a little over a decade later, in Westchester County, New York. Chester Brookfield is now Professor of Anthropology at a private American college and this part of the novel charts his domestic life with Meryl, his ambitious Columbia-educated wife, and his socializing with friends and fellow academics. Meryl's insistence that her husband has a vasectomy propels Chester into a reluctant journey back to his past, to thoughts about the child he had fathered in his Peace Corps days (it is through his Malaysian friend, Paroo, that Chester had learnt that Li An's child is his). The newly-vasectomized Chester, for whom the prospect of fathering any children in the future is now impossible, decides to return to Malaysia, that dark, messy area of his unacknowledged past. Chester's readiness to return to Southeast Asia and assume responsibility for his past actions, though at this stage he appears to be motivated more by curiosity and self-interest rather than responsibility, paves the way for his entry into Singapore and the novel's third part.

The third section, "Landing", sees Li An as a successful career woman who has moved to Singapore for "big city tolerance and anonymity" after the scandal of her failed marriage to Henry, who had left her immediately after discovering that the baby his wife had just delivered is clearly not a child he has fathered. Having cut herself off from her Malaysian past, and all its vicissitudes, Li An, now editor-in-chief of a successful news bulletin, has built a life of routine and unruffled contentment for herself and her daughter, Suyin, with the help of Henry's step-mother, Mrs Yeh, and her best friend, Ellen, also Suyin's godmother.

The arrival in Singapore of Chester, however, forces Li An to come out of the cocoon of cultivated silences she has spun around her past, particularly on the matter of Suyin's paternity. Chester's presence, in implicitly forcing her to face up to Suyin's heretofore unvoiced need to seek clarification about her history, compels Li An to return to her past, to the night of Suyin's conception, "that past ... [that] had remained invisible to everyone who knew her now, shut down by the news blackout of twelve years ago, by censorship still unlifted despite the young and old historians". Just as May 13, 1969 has been censored from official history because the contending ethnic differences which sparked the riots serve to undermine nationalist historiography's hegemonic narrative of a

unitary national identity, Li An has excised the night of the riots, and its troubling, hybrid, consequences, from her memory. Like the deliberately imposed silence after the riots, the facts about Suyin's paternity are also shrouded in silence. Unvoiced and unrepresented, May 13 1969 has become, in both private and public archives, "an unmemorable memory".

Thus, by making the protagonist go back to her silenced past, by making her give it voice and compelling her to acknowledge the reality of the contentious circumstances surrounding her daughter's conception, Lim's text recuperates the multiple histories of individuals and their nations. In the narrative, Li An's daughter, the green-eyed, brown-haired Suyin, is the hybrid heir, through her mixed parentage, to her nation's heterogeneous — colonial, migrant and inter-national — histories. Her role in the text is thus clearly a symbolic one. The text suggests that postcolonial Malaysian identity is a matter of rich and complex negotiation, that it cannot simply follow the linear and unitary trajectory of nationalist definitions.

Crucially, then, *Joss and Gold* rejects the move to suppress the nation's multiple histories by suggesting the impossibility of transcending one's cultural past, of rising above history, as the protagonist had once thought it possible. Our last image of her in the novel, which is fittingly also the concluding scene in Lim's narrative, is of Li An reading from a long stowed-away copy of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, its pages "yellowed and turned brittle" with age. The book, the only one Li An had kept behind from her university days, is, in the text, a symbol of Li An's past, a past which metaphorically represents her migrant history, construed by official discourse as being in conflict with national constructions. It is this troubling past that a confused Li An had sought to efface through the burning of her English literature books and by the act of uprooting from Malaysia. But finally now, reading aloud from Hopkins, revelling in the long-ago rhythms of her past and making her different experiences connect with each other, Li An comes to realize that "nothing she lived through was ever finally over". Indeed, the novel suggests that the recovery of the past is the first, and a necessary, step towards personal, and national, recovery.

Lim's novel, however, is not without its flaws. The American section is overdrawn; there is unnecessary and undue emphasis on the specificities of American domestic and intellectual life. Although it is undeniably Lim's intention to evoke the particular ambience of American national and cultural life through this wide assortment of characters and their

interconnecting narratives, so that the texture of the American section is distinct from the Malaysian narrative and the Sinified Singapore context, it must be said that there are far too many secondary characters in this section whose presence does not contribute much, if anything at all, to the central narrative of events. It must also be said that despite her deft evocation of the Malaysian context, her rendition of the English spoken by some of her Malaysian characters is somewhat unfaithful to its context. While Lim's intention here is to convey distinctly Malay(sian) cultural patterns and thought processes, in contrast to the Americanised idiom and prose of the second part, it is inconceivable that University-educated Malays like Abdullah and Samad, and Indians like Paroo, children of the 1950s, would have spoken ungrammatical English of the kind they are portrayed as speaking in the novel.

That said, Joss *and Gold* is a welcome and, given its themes, a necessary and significant addition to the steadily expanding body of Malaysian and Singaporean literatures in English. It is fitting that Lim's narrative of home, written over twenty years and imbued with the dynamics of flux and flows commensurate with the multivalent locations inhabited by the author during that period, should constantly call attention to the crossing of boundaries. Perhaps this is the most significant of the novel's ways of acknowledging that the presence of *other* cultures, histories and realities is always already a part of the national story.

