“Not Monological but Multilogical”

Gender, Hybridity, and National Narratives in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Writing

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, like Derek Walcott, appears at first glance to be an exemplary transnational and cosmopolitan subject, both personally and professionally. Born in Malacca, Lim grew up and was educated in the former British colonies of Malaysia and Singapore, but she is better known in the United States as an Asian American writer and critic-scholar. In this chapter, however, I argue that Lim’s scholarly writing and fiction form a constellation out of her personal background as a Southeast Asian woman and immigrant and her rigorous reflections as an Asian American critic and feminist, and that these take issue with patriotic and patriarchal forms of postcolonial nationalism in Malaysia and Singapore. Lim’s focus on the somatic and sentimental aspects of women’s experiences negates the postcolonial state’s instrumentalization of women’s bodies and characters as celebrated icons of the new nation; it reimagines nationalism as a coordination of subjects and objects rather than as the control and domination of one group of subjects over others based on ethnic or racial, gender, linguistic, or religious identity. My conjunction of Lim’s somatic emphasis and feminist perspective with Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory and negative dialectics may initially appear counterintuitive, but I am drawing on both recent scholarship by feminist critics who have found Adorno’s thinking useful for their analyses of gender, sexuality, and corporeality, such as Lisa Yun Lee’s Dialectics
of the Body (2005), and two edited anthologies Adorno, Culture and Feminism (1999) and Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno (2006). As one anthology editor argues, “Adorno’s theorizing may have unintended (by him) consequences for feminism that can only be discerned through open-ended and experimental approaches to his work, which is open and experimental in its own right” (Heberle 3), and because “feminist theorizing has become increasingly attuned to its contingent, conditional status as a field of inquiry,” it is useful to consider how Adorno’s “insistence on the primacy of the object encourages this nonidentitarian approach to knowledge” (Heberle 6, 7). Adorno’s analysis of art tries “to say the ‘unsayable,’ the ‘outside of language,’ the mimetic, the sensual, the non-conceptual”; it “approach[es] a ‘politics’ which undercuts identity thinking, which refuses to engage in identitarian thinking […] and remains un-appropriated” (O’Neill 29), and creates “a platform for theoretical/experiential analysis regarding the sensuousness of our experience, of our being in the world—as women and as men” (O’Neill 38). Lim’s writing offers a bridge between feminist interpretations of the Frankfurt School’s social theories and feminist critiques of gendered discourses of postcolonial nationalism, and this epistemological bridging reconfigures nationalism as an objective social formation rather than as a subjective identitarian concept.

In her poetry collection Walking Backwards, Lim describes her relationship to China as a country and a symbolic “cultural China” (Tu 12) in powerfully somatic terms: “Although she/he has been a constant / Like mother, father in memory, / China was the milk that was too heavy, That made one gag. Vomit. Like the scent / Of stinky tofu […]” (“The Source” 2–6). Lim recognizes that China is a rising global power that thinks of itself as “center of the world,” but she qualifies this centrality by describing the presence of China in her childhood home of Malacca in Malaysia as “a misfit, dumb / Country; and I its misfit child / Bastard and deaf, handicapped and wild” (“The Source” 10, 12–14). One cannot mistake Lim’s vehement refusal of either filiative or affiliative identification with China and Chinese culture: the parental simile and geopolitical metaphor are undermined by Lim’s intense physical revulsion, and the repetition of the word “misfit” emphasizes the nonidentity between Lim’s objective sense of herself and the concept of China either as a nation-state or as an ethnic or cultural identity. This sentiment is expressed in more affirmative language in one of her earlier poems collected in Monsoon History, where she connects her father’s death with Malaysia—“I light the joss. A dead land. / On noon steepness smoke ascends / Briefly. Country is important, / Is important. This knowledge I know” (“Bukit China” 3–6)—and also in What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say
where she expresses her affinity to America through her son’s uncertainties: “because I have nursed my son at my breast / because he is a strong American boy / because I have seen his eyes redden when he is asked who he is / because he answers I don’t know” (13–16). These two poems suggest a different configuration of nationalism as a political consciousness and cultural critique instead of the visceral rejection of cultural nationalism and ethnic identity in “The Source,” because the country (Malaysia) is important as an object of “knowledge” and (like Lim’s deceased father) something to be mourned instead of celebrated as a concept that is already accomplished. Similarly, in “Learning to Love America” Lim’s son’s anxieties about “who he is” and his inability to supply a definite answer are part of Lim’s process of learning to love America, a painstaking love that does not spring from the assurance of some essential identity. Although Lim invokes filiative relationships in these two poems, she does not describe this filiation in terms of some primordial characteristic that binds a homogeneous community together in a national identity. Instead, her abiding connections with Malaysia and America derive from both an intellectually sincere and an intimately sensuous relationship to these nations. Her grief over her father’s death and her son’s distress over who he is recall Adorno’s discussion of the close connection between philosophy and pain, in which “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed” (Negative Dialectics 17–18). The suffering in these poems by Lim should be understood as the objectivity of lived experience and a critical national consciousness weighing upon the conceptual armature of the postcolonial nation. Lim suffers the nation-state but does not reject it, for she is aware that “countries are in our blood and we bleed them” (“Learning to Love America” 19), that nationalism, like blood, is constantly circulating and ought to be regarded as a sociopolitical movement rather than a consanguineous national identity.

Such an instrumental nationality, spearheaded by a patriarchal and paternalistic leadership, may be considered a culture industry that “intentionally integrates its consumers from above” (Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered” 98), and it “refers to the standardization” of an ideal of femininity as well as “the incorporation of industrial forms of organization” and rationalization into the domains of gender and sexuality (Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered” 100, 101). What turns women into a fetish and a symbol of the nation rather than its subject is not nationality per se, but rather the form of instrumentalized nationality. In contrast, Lim advances a critical nationality against such male-oriented nationalism through what Ketu Katrak calls a postcolonial feminist representation of “internalized exile” in which “the
body [of the female protagonist] feels disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency” (2). However, this sense of disconnection and exile is not absolute or determinate; Lim shows how her protagonist, Li An, becomes intimately connected with her all-female household and her half-Asian, half-American daughter, Suyin. Li An and Suyin move from being symbols of national culture and identity to pivotal members of an alternative community of women who claim the nation on their own terms rather than those set up by a male-centered postcolonial nationalist discourse.

The official national narratives of Malaysia and Singapore take up the symbolic and sociopolitical divisions created by British colonialism in order to determine their postcolonial national identities in terms of racial and linguistic purity.¹ From the intersection of three discursive fields—postcolonialism, Southeast Asian nationalism, and Asian American culture and literature—Lim’s writerly subjectivity demonstrates how this strategy of purification fetishizes identity. By working through these three discursive fields, Lim articulates a literary cosmopolitics by critiquing a determinate national identity driven by a need for racial and cultural purity through “coercive mimeticism” (Chow, Protestant Ethnic 107). This coercive reproduction of an untainted national body is part of a larger culture industry that generates both a symbolic and a somatic effect on those interpellated by it: “The result for the physiognomy of the culture industry is essentially a mixture of streamlining, photographic hardness and precision on the one hand, and individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism on the other” (Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered” 101). I argue that Shirley Geok-lin Lim seizes on these individualistic residues of sentimentality and inverts their association with a romantic, heroic masculine narrative of postcolonial nationalism. Lim foregrounds the sensuality of female desire and the materiality of women’s physical selves, as well as the reproduction of mixed-race children, as a challenge to this coercive mimeticism, “a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected […] to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imaginings of them as ethnics” (Chow, Protestant Ethnic 107). Lim’s writing foregrounds and interrogates the ways in which women are interpellated as gendered subjects who must adhere to a standard of racial and cultural purity within the rubric of a postcolonial nation that

¹. For a thorough analysis of the social, economic, and political divisions created by the British along racial lines between Malays and Chinese in colonial Malaya, see Alatas.
privileges male dominance and leadership in both politics and society. In her critical and personal essays as well as her first novel, *Joss and Gold*, Lim interweaves national consciousness and literary cosmopolitics: having migrated to the United States, Lim is keenly aware of the transnational cultural flows between Asia and America, but her appropriation of important Asian American women’s literary strategies is framed within a postcolonial Malaysian and Singaporean context. Such strategies include the claiming of a female authorial figure, the recasting of immigrant narratives into a mother-daughter romance, and the critique of Asian cultural nationalism often linked to masculine figures. In Lim’s novel *Joss and Gold*, Li An’s and her daughter Suyin’s consciousness of their desires and their sexuality are in tension with the dominant postcolonial and national narratives that focus on the foundational role of men in the process of Southeast Asian nation-building. Li An and Suyin are contrapuntal figures who claim their place within the national community and also challenge and critique the constraints and limitations of the masculine national imagination in Malaysia and Singapore, which is predicated on a concept of multiculturalism that considers different ethnic and cultural groups as equal but separate and pure.

**Women in Malaysian and Singaporean Official Multiculturalism**

The unequal distribution of cultural, economic, and political resources among different ethnic groups has been a problem for both Malaysian and Singaporean governments, and this problem is itself a legacy of British colonial policies that partitioned a heterogeneous population along lines that conflated ethnicity with economic status. After World War II and the gradual retreat of British colonial forces from Southeast Asia, the tensions between Malaysia’s ethnic Malay population, which claims *bumiputera*, or indigenous, status, and its minority Chinese and India (South Asian) communities began increasing. The “widespread perception” among the Malay majority “that the Chinese have dominated the economy and, through various means, have inhibited Malay participation” (Mauzy 107) does not completely take into account how this ethnic and economic disparity—along with the concept of special rights for Malays and indigenous peoples—is primarily the result of British colonialism. The “paternalistic” British colonial authorities “gave the Malays certain ‘special rights’ involving government employment, education and lands reserves” in order “to ‘protect’ the Malays from being swamped by the more aggressive immigrants,” and thus creating “a dual economy” consist-
ing of “a European and non-Malay (and sometimes Malay aristocracy) modern urban economic sector, and a traditional rural Malay economy centering around rice production and fishing” (Mauzy 108). The issues of Malay rights, Malay as the national language, and economic restructuring to encourage Malay participation and businesses came to a head in the May 1969 elections, which are a pivotal event in the first section of Lim’s novel. These riots ossified the communal tensions between Malays and non-Malays in the colonial and postcolonial period, and “the fiction of a government of nearly equal ethnic partners was no longer maintained. It could be clearly seen that the Malays were the hegemonic power, and intended to remain so at any cost for the foreseeable future” (Mauzy 111). In contrast to Malay hegemony in Malaysia, Singapore’s multiracial policy advocates an egalitarian approach, but there are strong overtones of “Chineseness” in this policy that “could be depicted as a central building block out of which the consensual national identity was being created” (Brown 93). Multiracialism, as it is known and implemented in Singapore, differs crucially from multiculturalism in the United States. Whereas the latter is seen as “a means for ‘empowering’ minority ethnic and other groups,” the former is “a means of disempowerment because it erases the grounds upon which a racial group may make claims on behalf of its own interests without ostensibly violating the idea of group equality that is the foundation of multiracialism itself” (Chua 36). Since its creation as a major trading port in 1819 by the East India Company, Singapore has attracted many immigrants from East Asia and South Asia. In 1963 it joined the Federation of Malaysia, but became independent in 1965 after racial and political conflicts arose. Singapore’s population is exceptional because Malay Muslims—who make up the dominant majority in neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia—are a minority in the city-state, along with an even smaller minority of ethnic Indians from South Asia. To administer the management of a racially diverse population, four component racial categories were introduced: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (Eurasians). This maneuver, intended by the Singapore government to depoliticize ethnicity, “pushes race out of the front-line of politics while according it high visibility in the cultural sphere” (Chua 36). The numerical and socioeconomic dominance of the Chinese in Singapore ensured that their culture—as shaped and promoted by the state—is first among equals in this new conception of Asian values and national identity.

This discourse of shared Asian values, however, has not only marginalized the role of women in Singaporean society and politics; it has also fetishized them as symbols of the nation whose meaning and value derive from a patriarchal regime. This symbolic identity, formed out of the cultural
and corporeal disciplinary formations of both Malaysian and Singaporean official nationalism, serves the postcolonial nationalist project in developing a national identity that can both maintain and reproduce the biological and cultural boundaries between the different ethnic groups. As such, “it is up to a particularly male-based polity to decide upon the quality of a woman’s life. The power women enjoy is but a shadow, a mirroring of power, that radiates from particular loci—coalesced under the label of a mostly male ‘government’ and ruling political party” (Purushotam 329). Even as women in Singapore joined the workforce in increasing numbers and attained higher levels of education after national independence in 1965, the state continually regarded women’s primary roles to be those of homemakers and childbearers, “to mind their familial responsibilities, and to make more babies” in order to “best serve ‘the nation’” (Purushotam 335). The Singaporean state’s positioning of women within its nation-building concepts of ethnic management for economic development can be read within a larger postcolonial context:

on the one hand, nationalist movements invite women to participate more fully in collective life by interpellating them as “national” actors: mothers, educators, workers and even fighters. On the other hand, they reaffirm the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by nationalist discourse. (Kandiyoti 380)

What is important here is how a masculine nationalist discourse works according to the logic of the culture industry because it subsumes women’s subjectivities under a larger subject position, namely that of a national actor who must adhere to a standardized, culturally acceptable feminine conduct. Because women are regarded as “the custodians of cultural particularisms by virtue of being less assimilated, both culturally and linguistically, into the wider society,” their responsibility is to “reproduce their culture through the continued use of their native language, the persistence of culinary and other habits and the socialisation of the young” (Kandiyoti 382). Following this instrumental logic, there are explicit as well as unspoken “regulations concerning who a woman can marry and the legal status of her offspring [that] aim at reproducing the boundaries of the symbolic identity of their group” (Kandiyoti 382).

In Lim’s novel Joss and Gold, Li An and the other female characters move from Malaysia to Singapore, where job opportunities seem better for a single unwed mother running an all-female household. However, even in Singapore, women are considered symbolic figures and boundary markers in a
national drama scripted by the country’s male leaders as a desperate struggle for survival. The nation-state’s independence from British colonial rule and its subsequent ejection from the Malaysian Federation in 1965 are indeed cast in terms of a triumphant narrative of overcoming adversity. In his autobiography, The Singapore Story, Singapore’s first prime minister, Kuan Yew Lee, depicts his leadership of Singapore as an heroic struggle to build an egalitarian and “truly multiracial” society, what he calls “a Malaysian Malaysia, not a Malay Malaysia” that would represent all the Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian constituencies in the country (17). Lee thinks of Singapore’s separation from Malaysia as a personal catastrophe and “moment of anguish” that “shattered” the “hopes of millions [he] had aroused” (650). Furthermore, this separation of “a Chinese island in a Malay sea” (23) from the Malaysian Federation is reckoned in terms of a failed marriage:

Under Malay-Muslim custom, a husband, but not the wife, can declare “Talak” (I divorce thee) and the woman is divorced. They can reconcile and he can remarry her, but not after he has said “Talak” three times. The three readings in the two chambers of parliament were the three talaks with which Malaysia divorced Singapore. The partners—predominantly Malay in Malaya, predominantly Chinese in Singapore—had not been compatible. Their union had been marred by increasing conjugal strife over whether the new Federation should be a truly multiracial society, or one dominated by the Malays. (14)

The gendered terms of this description are significant because they cast Chinese-dominant Singapore as a wife who suffers unfairly at the hands of a fickle husband—predominantly Malay Malaysia. Lee’s comparison of the Malaysia-Singapore separation to “a Malay-Muslim” divorce custom evokes stereotypes of Malay and Muslim culture as polygamous and misogynist (while sidestepping the possibilities that these qualities might also be present in traditional Chinese culture), thus implying that a Federation “dominated by the Malays” would regress into a state of cultural primitivism. Lee wants his reader to sympathize with a feminized Singapore spurned by a masculinized Malaysia who uses custom instead of reason to throw out his wife. By feminizing Singapore in this political separation, Lee narrates Singapore’s later economic success and social stability (relative to Malaysia) as both a matter of a collective, heroic masculinity overcoming a moment of anguished weakness and of his own personal triumph and moral integrity outwitting his unsavory Malaysian opponents. The leaders of Singapore’s People’s Action Party “were not like the politicians in Malaya. Singapore ministers were not
pleasure-loving, nor did they seek to enrich themselves” (656), and, at the end of his autobiography, Lee concludes that Singapore’s story is not only a social experience in nation-building but also the narrative of his own lifelong achievements: “I did not know I was to spend the rest of my life getting Singapore not just to work but to prosper and to flourish” (663).

**Adorno’s Negation of the Idealized Feminine and Lim’s Feminist Literary Critique**

Nirmala Purushotam’s and Deniz Kandiyoti’s critique of the fetishization of the feminine by male postcolonial nationalist leaders such as Kuan Yew Lee accords with Theodor Adorno’s examination of the instrumentalization of women in modern society. The patriarchal Lee implicitly regards the nation and its people as his most outstanding achievement and possession, and “once wholly a possession, the loved person is no longer really looked at” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 79). Women have their physical and cultural selves literally overwritten by a nation-building narrative that no longer looks at them as women but as “the feminine character, and the ideal of femininity on which it is modelled,” and this character and ideal “are products of masculine society. [. . .] Where it claims to be humane, masculine society imperiously breeds in woman its own corrective, and shows itself through this limitation implacably the master. The feminine character is a negative imprint of domination” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 95). Moreover, the coercive mimeticism involved in women’s self-fashioning to conform to the ideal feminine character is both an interpellation from without and a violent struggle from within, because “the femininity which appeals to instinct, is always exactly what every woman has to force herself by violence—masculine violence—to be: a she-man” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 96). This results in a female persona who not only is unlike a woman but who also becomes a hyphenated creature, a possession that is less than and must always be subsidiary to man. Adorno’s analysis of idealized femininity as she-man recalls Kandiyoti’s trenchant explication of how postcolonial nationalist movements regard women as both “‘national’ actors” who serve and fight alongside their male counterparts and as “custodians of cultural particularisms by virtue of being less assimilated, both culturally and linguistically, into the wider society” (380, 382). In their respective ways, both Kandiyoti and Adorno highlight how a masculine-centered project of national identity, despite its humane or humanist claims, actually turns away from a critical national consciousness and replicates European colonial rhetoric by “imperiously” determining what
women should be and how they ought to behave within the framework of an exclusive and homogeneous national identity.

While Adorno seems to conclude his observation on a pessimistic note that "glorification of the feminine character implies the humiliation of all who bear it" (Minima Moralia 96), his analysis nonetheless suggests certain weaknesses or inconsistencies in the masculine interpellation of women. Although Adorno does not elaborate on these weaknesses, Shirley Geok-lin Lim detects and uses them as a critical vantage point in her criticism and fiction. The idealized feminine is bred by “masculine society” as “its own corrective,” and this corrective construction is at once masculine society’s claim of being “the master” as well as a mark of its own “limitation.” The female character is thus a manifold signifier of, first, masculine society’s lack and inadequacy; second, its cultural and symbolic attempts to fill this lack; and third, and most important, the limits of masculine society’s cultural and symbolic power-knowledge despite its facade of completeness and mastery. Hence Adorno’s pithy summation that “the feminine character is a negative imprint of domination” by masculine society rather than its positive embodiment, because what underlies the suturing of the feminine character to masculine society is an imprint of that society’s lack and limits of its domination upon the people who make up that society. This formulation suggests that through a negating and an immanent critique of the idealized feminine, which follows and inverts the logic of masculine domination instead of rejecting it outright, a writer such as Shirley Geok-lin Lim may stage an unfeminine and de-idealized reading of women and imagine alternative social and cultural roles for and relationships between women that have not been subsumed within a determinate narrative of national Bildung.

The Singaporean story of nation-building is interrogated by Lim in her critical and personal essays as well as in her first novel, Joss and Gold, and she does so by engaging in a literary cosmopolitics that appropriates textual strategies employed by Asian American women authors for a Malaysian-Singaporean context. Patricia P. Chu discusses how Asian American writers reconfigure the Bildungsroman by “substituting authorship for marriage as a central trope for representing Asian American subject formation” (19). Male Asian American writers replace the Bildungsroman’s “well-married hero paradigm” with “the ‘immigrant romance,’ which recounts the protagonist’s search for a white partner to Americanize him or her; the abjection of the Asian mother; the construction of Asian Americans as artist-sons engaged in oedipal struggles; and the figuring of the Asian American women as sentimental heroes” (Chu 19). But the representation of “Asian women in [Asian American] men’s texts” poses an additional problem that Asian American
women writers must confront, for women “are used to represent aspects of the authors’ homeland or ancestral culture that are abjected from the male protagonists, the better to establish their Americanness,” hence “such texts implicitly construct Asian American subjectivity as masculine” (20). Chu’s discussion highlights the similarities between Asian American masculine subject formation through literary discourse and Singapore’s postcolonial narrative of heroic, patriarchal nation-building through state law, and political autobiography.

Challenging this masculine subjectivity, Chu focuses on Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey* to show how women writers represent Asian American subjectivity on their own terms. In Tan’s novel, the immigrant romance is cast in terms of a mother-daughter narrative, where the mother stands for “an inherited core of Chineseness, or of the Chinese feminine,” a core that the Chinese American daughter must integrate into “her American self” by containing this “radical difference” within a “narrative frame emphasizing the daughter’s psychological work and the sentimental story of the finding of the long-lost sisters” in China (Chu 168). Chu challenges the claim that Kingston’s novel misrepresents Chinese American history and culture by using surrealist techniques and postmodernist style, and argues that Kingston’s appropriation of the Chinese legend of the Monkey King (which her protagonist is using as source material for his own stage play) is a way of “affirming and exploring the power and resilience of the original [text] and reinscribing it into [Kingston’s] own American vision” (181). Kingston’s “vision of Asian American culture as dialogic, inclusive, adaptive, and alive” is more salutary than both Frank Chin’s idea of a masculine, Chinese heroic tradition and Amy Tan’s evocation of “a classical Chinese past as a guarantor of present-day ethnic authenticity” (Chu 187). In short, Chu asserts that Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston claim America for Asian Americans through literature by representing Asian American women’s subjectivities as dialogic and contrapuntal rather than contradictory to their male counterparts.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim appropriates Tan’s mother-daughter narratives and Kingston’s revisioning of East Asian legends and historical tales to claim Malaysia and Singapore by interrogating their state-sponsored national identities. Through a conjunction of Asian American literary strategies and postcolonial as well as feminist criticism, Lim stresses how she inhabits “cultural worlds” that are “not monological” or dialogical “but multilogical” (“Asians in Anglo-American Feminism” 38), and such a relational, multilogical constellation is evinced by her own experiences growing up as an ethnic Chinese woman in Malaysia:
But as an already multiply colonized subject, I do not see these oppressions as coming from a hegemonic center. Instead, I see a colonial subject as the cultural site for the contradictions inherent in the intersections of multiply conserving circles of authority. These authoritarian domains overlap each other but not sufficiently so as to preserve the illusion of totalization. Ironically, therefore, I experienced those liberatory movements precisely where Confucianism, Catholicism, feudalism, and colonialism intersected. [. . .] it is not these systems but their intersections that offered me points of escape. Situated as I was in Confucianist, Malay feudal, Roman Catholic, British colonial crossways, I was exposed not to systematic political oppression but to continual upheavals. (“Anglo-American Feminism” 35–36, 37, original emphasis)

Lim’s essays and her novel may be read as “cultural site[s]” where “the contradictions inherent in the intersections of multiply conserving circles of authority” are exposed and critiqued, thus offering “points of escape” through reinscriptions of women’s bodies and sexuality along the lines of literary tropes employed by Asian American women writers. The points of intersections and escape that Lim discusses, however, are not purely symbolic or semantic, because, as she argues in another essay, for the Asian woman writer, the act of writing is not only a political act but also a performance that engages her self somatically. Lim contends that the woman writer in Asia has traditionally been circumscribed within a male-dominated society, such that “her energies, which for writers are inscribed in writing, in the ‘graphic’ creations of self, must necessarily be dispersed or dispensed on material ‘creations’—childbirth and childcare, the planting of gardens, preparation of meals, weaving and sewing of clothing,” and because of this, “her ‘bio’ must largely remain on the ground floor of experience. The semiotic presses on life as experience, the daily unfolding of smells, bustle, sensations, endless movement, those pressures of personalities on the self as receiver” (“Semiotics, Experience and the Material Self” 11). While it may seem as if Lim is creating an opposition between quotidian experience and self-consciousness in which the self is a by-product of the basic, irreducible experience of daily life, Lim stresses that the realization of this slippage is the beginning of political consciousness and artistic representation rather than a normative condition. As she avers, “when the Asian woman writer becomes conscious of her own subjectivity, she becomes conscious first of the fracture between her desire for the sensual world in which her being is grounded and the isolated signifying self which grasps the social oppression of the female but cannot overcome its internalized meaning” (21). This
apparent fracture between sensual desire and signifying self, between political subjectivity and domestic selfhood, is a dichotomy resulting from male-oriented social norms that circumscribe women's consciousness. Hence, in order to negate this apparent division, Lim holds that “the future of self for the Asian woman writer must lie in this vision [. . .] in which the material world emerges from its possession by males to the grasp of the woman” (24). Surprisingly, Lim finds that her own writing style falls short of the standard of “political realism” (27) she thinks necessary for her espoused principles, even describing her writerly imagination as “a myopic vision, in which feeling is foregrounded” (24). Indeed, some critics and reviewers of Lim’s *Joss and Gold* express dissatisfaction with her overwhelming use of details and descriptions and the lack of plot and character development in the last section of her novel. While this may appear to confirm Lim’s own deprecation of her own prose, such a lack of readerly satisfaction should not automatically be construed as a failure. I contend that Lim’s style, far from being myopic, emphasizes and foregrounds affect, feeling, and somatic experience in ways that contest and invert the logic of the Malaysian and Singaporean states’ instrumentalization of women as symbols and reproductive bodies. While Li An, Suyin, and Ellen do not create a space that lies outside the hegemony of the patriarchal nation-state, they are able (to use Lim’s own terms) to break out of the isolated signifying self and form a community of women that survives and flourishes despite the strictures of a national identity centered on male privilege and power. It is not only the material world that is wrested from male possession and into women’s hands; it is also a critical national consciousness at the level of culture and politics reimagining the nation as a community in which women are subjects rather than symbols.

Lim’s sensuous and somatic treatment of her characters and the world of the novel suggests a mode of feminist critique that departs from what one critic calls the “ethnographic feminism” of Asian American women writers, in which “ethnographic myths” from East Asian folklore “are seamlessly transposed into a feminist, Westernized context” for “the American readership, whose appetite for exotic (hence ethnographic) and politically correct (hence feminist) readings is simultaneously satisfied” (Ma 12). Sheng-mei Ma highlights the ways in which Asian American writers such as Tan and Kingston use an “emplotment of immigrants’ heart-wrenching and almost always ‘exotic’ experiences” to authenticate their narrators and themselves as ethnic subjects, while the (first-generation) immigrants “remain largely a blank, an absence” (11). Compounding this inadvertent silencing of first-generation immigrants is the stylistic tendency “to smooth away the linguistic rup-
tures resultant from intertextual / intercultural transposition,” which Yunte Huang detects in Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (154). This smoothing out or glossing over of such “transpacific displacement” (3) both stems from and reinforces “the deeply rooted linguistic positivism of the Western literary tradition” that “suggests that there is an extralinguistic experience—American or not—that can be captured and represented by literature regardless of the particularity of the mediating language,” and this positivism has contributed to the popularity of personal narratives and autobiographies by ethnic subjects in the American education system (Huang 142). One can see the connections between Ma’s and Huang’s discussions of ethnographic feminism and stylistic smoothening with Rey Chow’s elucidation of coercive mimeticism because, while the need to authenticate one’s self-identity as an ethnic subject through these methods of “self-referentiality” appears to “finally redeem us from the fundamental and contentious binary structure of representation in which one is always (inevitably) speaking of/for something or someone else” (Protestant Ethnic 113), it is in effect “a socially endorsed, coercive mimeticism, which stipulates that the thing to imitate, resemble, and become is none other than the ethnic or sexual minority herself” (Protestant Ethnic 115). As a result, Chow argues, such well-intentioned attempts at a radical politics through the writing of self-formation and self-reference paradoxically cause ethnic and gendered subjects “to come across as inferior imitations, copies that are permanently out of focus” (Protestant Ethnic 127). But by imagining a female community instead of a female identity formed at the intersections of overlapping multilogical cultural worlds, Lim’s critical project steps away from ethnographic feminism driven by coercive mimeticism and resonates with recent feminist interpretations of Adorno’s discussions of gender in his social theory, because “while Adorno does interpret the feminine as the ‘other’ to the masculine, he does not suggest that the feminine is a binary or polar opposite of the masculine [. . .]. The feminine in Adorno’s reading is of an otherness that consistently disrupts the totalizing concept of masculinity” (Lee 129). Lim’s focus on her protagonists’ somatic and emotional sensations underscores how critical rationality, contrary to its name, requires a combination of feeling and cognition: “the assumption that thought profits from the decay of the emotions, or even that it remains unaffected, is itself an expression of the process of stupefaction. [. . .] Because even its remotest objectifications are nourished by impulses, thought destroys in the latter the condition of its own existence” (Adorno, Minima Moralia 122). The point here is that somatic impulses and gut feelings respond to the multifaceted object that is inevitably reduced to thought-concepts of the knowing subject, such that a different language of experience and expression is required to invert “the
process of stupefaction” that separates and maintains the boundaries between subject-concept and object. Hence Shirley Geok-lin Lim often represents her protagonists in terms that focus on “the mimetic, the sensual, the non-conceptual” so as to “approach a ‘politics’ which undercuts identity thinking, which refuses to engage in identitarian thinking—but rather crisscrosses binary thinking/territories—and remains un-appropriated” (O’Neill 29); Lim goes one step further than Adorno in showing us that these impulses, which are thought’s conditions of possibility rather than its opposite, have not been utterly destroyed.

Through Li An’s and Suyin’s claiming of their physical and emotional selves that are not instrumentalized by masculine society’s nationalist discourse of multiculturalism, Lim’s novel works through and goes beyond representations of the ideal feminine as a symbol demarcating the cultural boundaries between Asians and Westerners as well as Chinese, Indians, and Malays. Lim imagines a community within the sociopolitical framework of the Singaporean nation where women can affirm themselves on their own terms instead of those already mapped out by the patriotic symbolism of postcolonial cultural nationalism. She configures a negative dialectic between America and Asia, male and female, nation and culture, such that the first term in each pair neither subsumes nor subordinates the second, in the same way that a literary cosmopolitics articulates with rather than cancels out a critical nationality within the context of Lim’s novel that spans both sides of the Pacific.

“A Psychic Hinterland”:

Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Joss and Gold

Shirley Lim’s Joss and Gold spans two time periods and three countries. Starting in Malaysia in the late 1960s, the novel follows Li An, a young Chinese Malaysian woman who studies and teaches British literature at the national university in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Although Li An aspires to be a writer in America, she marries Henry Yeh, a Chinese Malaysian biochemist who asks her to stay in Malaysia with him. However, during the political and racial riots between ethnic Malays and Chinese in May 1969, Li An shares a night of passion with Chester Brookfield, an American Peace Corps volunteer whose brashness and idealistic enthusiasm seem initially attractive. A disillusioned Chester returns to America after the riots, but Li An bears his child, a girl with green eyes and red hair whom she names Suyin. Henry divorces Li An upon discovering that Suyin is Chester’s child, and Li An moves with her daughter to Singapore, living with her close friend Ellen and with Henry’s
stepmother, Mrs Yeh. The novel jumps to the 1980s, where Chester, now an anthropology professor in upstate New York, gets a vasectomy at the behest of his career-oriented American wife, Meryl. Chester finds out from an old Malaysian friend that he has a daughter by Li An, and goes to Singapore to look for her on the pretext of anthropological research. Li An is now the editor of a newsletter for an important biogenetics firm in Singapore, and grudgingly agrees to let Chester meet the twelve-year-old Suyin. Mrs Yeh's sudden death leaves a substantial inheritance for Suyin, and Henry, as her executor, comes back into the picture, treating Suyin as his daughter. The narration begins to focus on Suyin's impressions of her life in an all-female household and the puzzling predicament of having two fathers from two different cultures and countries. Li An, who realizes that her daughter must find her own answers to this complicated situation, finally agrees to let Suyin visit Chester in America. The novel concludes with Li An listening to her daughter's breathing as she sleeps, evoking in her memory Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo.”

Most reviewers of Joss and Gold adopt an ethnographic perspective, focusing on the effects of American imperialism on postcolonial societies and the problems of gender and race in Malaysia and Singapore. The book is read as a “coming-of-age novel” that is “dominated by strong, independent, and goal-oriented women wrestling with individual development issues within the larger framework of a society also in transition” (Haggas 2087). Publishers Weekly praises Lim for her “keen eye for the effects of American imperialism” and her “acute, realistic detail” but also faults her for providing so much detail that the narrative becomes “burdensome” and requires “judicious editing” (52). Another reviewer remarks how “the plot wears thin toward the end and touches little on the relationship between Chester and Li An after their reunion. Instead, Lim brings Suyin to the forefront, keeping the story open for a possible sequel” (Quan 162). These reviewers’ dissatisfaction with certain plot and stylistic issues of Lim’s novel stems from a reading of the novel as a realist Bildungsroman, but we must understand that Joss and Gold is, instead, a cosmopolitical and (to use Lim’s own word) multilogical narrative. Certainly, it begins as a conventional coming-of-age narrative centered on Li An and offers incisive commentary about race, gender, and politics in Malaysia and Singapore—these two elements are never absent from the text. But Lim’s novel is also in conversation with Asian American women’s writing, for it uses the mother–daughter relationship and the rewriting of cultural nationalism in order to critically confront the heroic masculinity of Malaysian and Singaporean nationalism. As Peter Nazareth astutely points out, there is a symbolic connection between Lim’s novel and the memoirs of Singapore's
first prime minister, Kuan Yew Lee: “The country has no hinterland, Lee reiterates—and the [Singaporean] writers know it consequently has no psychic hinterland, which they must create” (Nazareth 139). The “psychic hinterland,” for Lim, turns out to be both Malaysian-Singaporean and Asian-American, for her novel, like Singapore itself, “reshapes the resources of a multinational world” (Nazareth 139). Lim’s novel stages a multinational, transpacific dialogue: if, in a novel by Amy Tan, the mother’s essential Chineseness must be abjected in order for the daughter to fully claim her Americanness, then in Lim’s novel, it is not abjection but reproduction and miscegenation that are foregrounded through Li An’s affair with Chester Brookfield and through Suyin, her daughter who has both white American and Chinese Singaporean blood. Through Li An and her hybrid daughter Suyin, Joss and Gold presents the reader with the negative imprint of masculine society’s domination of women by turning an idealized feminine character and her daughter into boundary-transgressing figures of impurity who undermine the strict racial and cultural boundaries of instrumental nationality. Moving between Malaysia and Singapore and the United States, Lim stages a literary cosmopolitical encounter between national consciousness on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.

Li An, as the protagonist of the novel, challenges the Chinese ideal of a mellow woman and dutiful wife both in her profession and in her personality. When Li An is a student and tutor of English literature at the university in Kuala Lumpur, her relationship to language is embodied in the somatic sensations of her being rather than as intellectual capital or cultural Bildung. At the novel’s beginning, Li An prepares a prose passage from D. H. Lawrence for her seminar on practical criticism, where “she read it aloud, relishing the overflow of sibilants like spiced chickpeas in her mouth” (Joss and Gold 4). She spends her time sitting in the library “reading old copies of Scrutiny and copying fine phrases by F. R. Leavis, occasionally tearing off her sweater and running outside in the blazing sun to the back of the faculty lounge, where she bought sizzling flaky curry puffs and smoked two cigarettes in a row” (4). Certainly, Li An’s emphasis on practical criticism and her choice of D. H. Lawrence for her students carry strong overtones of Leavis’s own literary tastes, including his proposal that the study of English contributes “towards remedying those disorders of civilized society” (“‘English,’ Unrest, and Continuity” 105) by creating a “collaborative community” within the classroom that serves as “the model or paradigm of the ideal [. . .] educated public that (ideally) makes possible at any time a performance of the function of criticism” (“‘English,’ Unrest, and Continuity” 109). This “collaborative community” formed through literary study
is why, in Li An’s own words, English literature matters for postcolonial, postindependence Malaysia: “What literature does is connect things, even the most unlikely things. [. . .] That’s what we have to do with our lives, connect with others” (Joss and Gold 9). What Li An does not realize, however, is that Leavis’s humanistic conceptualization of English literature cannot be appropriated to the Malaysian and Singaporean postcolonial context without extensive modification.

In fact, Li An’s own reactions to Leavis’s philosophy belies the ideal of community and collaboration she explicitly avows, as if she embodies the sensuousness she reads in Lawrence’s prose against Leavis’s moral principles. Lim’s prose emphasizes the physical, sensuous aspect of Li An’s literary learning, unlike the moral edification which Leavis argues is the reward for studying literature. Li An’s body language is bold and unfettered: she is “a swaggering teddy boy” who rides “her bike bent over the handlebars” (Joss and Gold 5); she likes “roaming on her motorbike like a boy,” and “her tight jeans showed her thighs and calves, and her smoking made her conspicuous among a crowd” (10). Despite Li An’s own avowal of literature’s mission to connect and create a microcosm of an ideal educated public or social body, her own body and behavior make her stand out rather than blend in: “She was like a Western girl—bold, loud, and unconcerned about her reputation” (10). Lim’s novel suggests that the Leavisian idea of a literary, collaborative community, which Li An espouses, cannot be formed within dominant structures of Malaysian or Singaporean nationalism and society because Li An (the foremost proponent of this idea) stands in contrast to rather than in connection with the Malaysians around her. Her very attachment to literary language and a community of readers causes her physical carriage and body language to appear as an exceptional deviation rather than a normative aspiration. Furthermore, this Leavisian ideal cannot be realized because of the racialization of the Malay and English languages. Li An’s university classmate and friend Samad is a Malay nationalist who argues that Malay is the “national language” of Malaysia, whereas English is “a bastard language” that only one percent of Malaysians who will have contact with the rest of the world really need to learn (Joss and Gold 56). Lim undercuts the corporeal notion of literature shaping a national Bildung and the Leavisian idea of a moral community formed through shared literary learning because in postcolonial societies such as Malaysia and Singapore, these ideas enforce a sense of cultural purity and separatism among the ethnic Malay and Chinese communities that also carries with it an interpellation of women and their bodies as idealized feminine characters.
“Better that like stay with like”:
HENRY’S CHINESE WAY AND ABDULLAH’S MALAY RIGHTS

Li An’s marriage to Henry Yeh, a Chinese Malaysian biochemist who is the son of a rich businessman, marks her interpellation by this discourse of cultural purity and idealized femininity, or what Shirley Geok-lin Lim calls the overlapping authoritarian domains of Confucianism, Malay feudalism, and (resistance toward) British colonialism. When Li An expresses her desire to go to America and become a writer, Henry’s reaction reveals his commitment to a heroic, patriarchal nationalism. Henry argues that Malaysia “has just become a nation” and “is like an experiment,” an experiment that a scientist such as Henry is conducting in order to “discover that truth which no one else has ever found” (Joss and Gold 11). Despite Henry’s assurance that he and Li An are on par with each other as “the important people in the country because we are the people with brains” (11), his vision of Malaysia as a scientific experiment corresponds to his own scientific vocation—Henry sees himself as the one who can search for and discover the truth that will make Malaysia work as a nation. Li An is keenly aware of her own marginalization as a Chinese Malaysian woman, but seems unable to do anything about it at this point in the novel, for she laments that she wishes she “were a man and a scientist. Then there would be a place for [her] here” (13). Furthermore, Henry’s physical movements as he proposes to Li An and asks her not to leave reveal how he idealizes her as a feminine and maternal figure rather than as a woman with her own ambition and sense of self: “he put his arms around her and put his head on her hair. He was like a little boy silently demanding her attention” (13). Simultaneously, Henry thinks of his and Suyin’s roles in their marriage as that of male breadwinner and dependent woman:

Marry me, and stay with me. You won’t have to teach. I’ll pay off your government bond, and you won’t be forced to go back to your town. You don’t have to work if you don’t want to. […] You could write, Li An. I’ll let you write. You say it’s time for Malaysians to write about themselves. You can’t write about Malaysia in America. (Joss and Gold 13)

For Henry, Li An’s position in the marriage is defined by what she will not do: she “won’t have to teach,” “won’t be forced to go back to [her] town,” and “won’t have to work.” Li An’s writerly ambitions will be indulged by Henry at his sufferance, and his idea of good writing is tied to a nativist identity
because for him Malaysians can only “write about themselves” in Malaysia, not in America. Although Henry castigates Li An’s desire to go to America as “a selfish way of acting” (*Joss and Gold* 11), his marriage proposal is framed by his own self-interest and the interest of a Malaysian national identity.

However, Li An’s interrogation of this national identity reveals the fault lines of race and gender within this collective representation. Soon after her marriage, Li An interrupts a discussion about race and language between her Chinese husband and their two Malay friends Abdullah and Samad. After his friends leave, Henry chastises Li An for contradicting Abdullah: “You have become too Westernized. First, you must accept what people say. If you cannot agree, you must still be quiet. Men get upset when women contradict them” (*Joss and Gold* 57). Henry insists that Li An use her “intelligence for agreement, not for arguing. That’s the Chinese way. Even the men follow the rule” (57). Li An’s feminine character is defined as a nurturing participant in the national collective (a mother succoring her childlike husband Henry); she also must “articulate [her] gender interests within the terms of reference set by nationalist discourse” (Kandiyoti 380). Li An’s final rejoinder to Henry’s admonishment that she must learn her place as a Chinese woman—“But I’m not Chinese! I’m Malaysian!” (*Joss and Gold* 57)—is especially important. Li An’s direct, emphatic statement reveals the limits of the liberatory national narrative constructed by both Chinese and Malay Malaysian leaders in their idealization of a feminine character, because this narrative positions Malaysian women (of any ethnicity or culture) in the ambivalent position of being both standard-bearers of cultural purity (in Li An’s case, being Chinese) and standards of national progress (being intelligent and writing about Malaysia for Malaysians).

Furthermore, if Henry represents “the Chinese way” of social conventions and decorum, then his friend Abdullah represents the dominant Malay view of what Malaysia should be—namely a multiculturalism in which Malay culture is the dominant standard to which all other ethnic groups should adhere. Abdullah’s views express the terms of reference set by a Malay nationalist discourse, for he is a journalist working for a newspaper that “published daily editorials demanding special rights for Malays” (*Joss and Gold* 44–45); Li An finds this disturbing, because “reading it made her feel she was in danger of attack in an alien country” even though she was born, has grown up, and lived in Malaysia all her life (45). Even though Abdullah is, in person, a courteous and charming intellectual whom Li An finds persuasive, the novel’s description of their intellectual conversations expresses the ambivalence of his argument:
His position was quite clear, but he argued with her subtly, like a good partner observing the patterns and courtesies of an elaborate dance. She didn’t feel threatened when he explained the need for Malay special rights intelligently and elegantly; he made it seem fair and just, a readjustment to the fundamental design of the dance. She liked the idea of the Malaysian future as this gentle weaving readjustment and had asked Abdullah why his paper did not present its position in that light. He answered that it did, she was simply not reading it correctly. (Joss and Gold 45)

At first glance this passage suggests that Li An finds Abdullah’s argument for Malay special rights, as the bumiputera, or indigenous people who make up Malaysia’s demographic majority, reasonable. Although Abdullah presents Malays and Chinese as being “good partner[s]” in “an elaborate dance” of Malaysian nationalism, Lim raises the question about the exact significance of the dance metaphor. Is the dance referring to (according to Abdullah) the dominant Malay culture that is the “fundamental design” that Malay special rights will make “fair and just,” or is it (according to Li An) “the idea of the Malaysian future” that will be readjusted through this “gentle weaving,” that will create a nation of Malaysian citizens and not just Malays and Chinese? Pushing this metaphor of a courtly dance even further, we must ask: who is leading this dance, and is “a good partner” someone who is on par with the dance leader, or someone who merely follows the leader well? Li An seems to believe in the former, whereas Abdullah’s stance is the latter, whereby Malays are the leaders in multicultural Malaysia. In this light, we can see that Abdullah’s idea of a good partner is not too different from Henry’s idea of a good partner: a wife who does not have to do anything and who uses her intelligence for agreeing rather than arguing. Abdullah’s comment that Li An “was simply not reading [his newspaper’s views] correctly” on the subject of race relations is similar to Henry’s comment that Li An ought to follow the unspoken “Chinese way” of decorum. Henry assumes that Li An is too Westernized and needs to be more Chinese, while Abdullah implies that Li An is too Chinese and cannot correctly comprehend the Malay perspective. Lim places Li An in this quandary in order to highlight how these gendered and purist demands made by national identities create an impasse in a postcolonial society that is trying to be simultaneously modernized or Westernized and traditional or native.

These identities premised on ideas of racial and cultural purity hierarchize different groups in Malaysia, as we see in Abdullah’s assessment of the tragic fate of Paroo and Gina. Paroo is an Indian (South Asian) Malaysian
who is dating Gina, a Chinese Malaysian woman, against the wishes of both their families, who frown on interracial relationships. They attempt a joint suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills; Gina dies, but Paroo survives. Abdullah gives his analysis of the tragic situation to Li An:

Better that like stay with like. Indian and Chinese cannot mix, too many differences—food, custom, language. To be husband and wife must share same religion, same race, same history. Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water. Malay have many adat, Islam also have shariat. All teach good action. Chinese have no adat, they eat pork, they like gamble, make money. [...] Of course, Chinese also have their own religion. But they must become like Malay if they want to marry Malay. (Joss and Gold 46)

Abdullah translates what would be normally be considered ethnic differences—differences in “food, custom, language”—into indelible and incommensurable disparities such that the Malays, Indians, and Chinese in Malaysia cannot share the “same religion, same race, same history,” hence people from these various groups cannot intermarry and become “husband and wife.” What is more striking is Abdullah’s use of Paroo and Gina’s failure at becoming “husband and wife” as an analogy for the incompatibility of “Indian and Chinese” and “Malay and Chinese.” In each case, “Chinese” is the secondary term, just as “wife” is the secondary term in the first pairing of “husband and wife.” Abdullah’s word choice reveals his unspoken assumption of Malay superiority: he begins by discussing Paroo and Gina, an Indian–Chinese pairing, but his analysis quickly turns into a comparison of how Malays are superior to Chinese and how Malay culture is the standard that must be adhered to. For Abdullah, Malays have “adat,” or traditional prohibitions, whereas the Chinese have none, hence the Chinese are inferior. While it is possible for a Chinese woman to marry a Malay man, the insurmountability of ethnic difference that underwrites the idea of “better that like stay with like” suggests it is impossible for any Chinese to truly become Malay. In either case, Abdullah (like Henry when he proposes to Li An) assumes that the Chinese woman and wife plays a secondary, subservient role to the Indian, Malay, or Chinese man and husband. Unlike Henry and Abdullah, Li An was optimistic that Paroo and Gina’s mixed marriage gestured toward a Malaysian future, because “as [school]teachers, Gina and Paroo would serve as models of a new kind of Malaysian” and Gina “would have light-brown children who would look both and neither Indian and/or Chinese, the new Malaysians” (Joss and Gold 41). The union of Paroo and Gina fails tragically in the first part of the novel, but Shirley Geok-lin Lim uses Li An’s attach-
ment to the English language as a way of foreshadowing her future role as the mother of a mixed or hybrid Eurasian girl, because Abdullah remarks that English is “a bastard language,” and that only Malay is the truly “national language” of Malaysia (56). Li An’s emphatic rebuttal of Henry’s demand that she adhere to a traditional Chinese way of behavior, and her instinctive uneasiness about the slippage between Abdullah’s reasonable explanation of Malay indigenous rights and his newspaper’s fiery denunciation of other ethnic communities, suggests a critique of masculine society’s cultural and purist national identities advanced from a feminist perspective that combines rational interrogation and emotional introspection centered on a female assertion of selfhood. Furthermore, because Li An is an English-speaking, English-teaching Malaysian Chinese woman, her affair with the white American Peace Corps worker Chester Brookfield challenges these tightly policed racial and cultural boundaries by claiming that both her language and her child are legitimate rather than bastard offspring of the nation.

The Burden of the White American Man: Chester Brookfield

Chester Brookfield, when he first appears, seems to be a refreshing change from the authoritarian realms of Chinese tradition and Malay nationalism that Henry and Abdullah represent. However, Chester’s actions toward Li An suggest that both he and a Malay nationalist such as Abdullah expect Malaysians to hold fast to a purified native identity tied to a specific culture and language. An American Peace Corps volunteer who majored in anthropology at Princeton, Chester prefers anthropology to literature because he does not “think [he] can learn as much about people from books as from the things they make and use every day” (Joss and Gold 33). As such, he tries to spend “as much time as he could with Malaysians” (30) by teaching woodworking at a vocational school in Kuala Lumpur, living with Malay roommates (Abdullah and Samad), and taking Malay lessons in his spare time (29). Chester also tries to become as native as possible, eating “spicy food in huge gulps without any complaints,” joking that “perhaps [he] was a Malay in another life” (31), and echoing Abdullah’s idea that “Malay is the only real culture in this country” (33). But Chester soon discovers that Malaysians are not as naïve or as native as he would like them to be. “Only three students” take his woodworking class because “no one wanted to be an artisan-carpenter in Malaysia” (29), and these students persistently ask him questions about America (30). Chester soon finds himself grudgingly teach-
ing English-language classes at the school, because the headmaster “says what he really needs now is another English teacher, not a carpenter” (36). Lim’s novel points out, however obliquely, that the students themselves—the next generation of Malaysians—are more interested in learning a language that gives access to and symbolizes modernization and development. They thus thwart or frustrate the ambitions of both the Western anthropologist and the local nationalist to create an immutable, uncontaminated identity based on an unchanging language or culture.

As racial and political tensions rise in Malaysia, Chester finds the local charm fading quickly, for “the longer he stayed with Abdullah and Samad [. . .] the more he realized how different he was from them. He was tired of drinking rose syrup and of having chilies in his food” (Joss and Gold 64). Instead, he uses his friendship with Li An to expound on the virtues of American culture and literature, virtues he regards as inherently and universally democratic. On the one hand, Chester vehemently espouses anticolonial and anti-British views; he scoffs at Li An’s love of English literature, arguing that the Americans “had a revolution and threw them out with the tea bags” and that Li An should be teaching her “own culture” (33), which, for Chester, can only be Malay culture. But while Chester exhorts Li An to be more culturally authentic, he also takes her to the “United States Information Service Library” and insists that Li An read American literature for inspiration, because American writers are “modern writers” who speak “for a democratic American vista,” namely the ideal of the United States as “a melting pot” where “everyone melted into the American middle class” (64). Therefore, Chester concludes, “English has left with the British,” and Li An “should really emigrate to the States” (64), since Li An’s own vision of an egalitarian, truly multicultural Malaysia makes her “almost sound like an American” (35). Ironically, Chester does not realize he is substituting one form of Western hegemony for another: the British colonizers may have left, but Chester represents an American imperialism trying to incorporate various postcolonial nations into its own post–World War II ambit. Chester assimilates Li An’s vision for Malaysia—a vision that tries to ameliorate the conflicts between essential cultural or racial identities—as a characteristically American “democratic vista” or “melting pot,” rather than considering Li An’s vision on its own terms as a critical form of postcolonial national consciousness trying to undo the effects of British colonialism. Chester’s paradoxical insistence that Li An be traditionally authentic and teach her own (i.e., Malay) culture and at the same time read modern American writers to keep up with the times also echoes the demands of postcolonial nationalists who want women to be both symbols of cultural essence and emblems of national progress. Chester’s
exhortation that Li An “should really emigrate” to America since her personality already seems American is therefore similar to the two forms of interpellation we have seen from Henry and Abdullah: the concept of a “Chinese way” that all ethnic Chinese Malaysians should automatically and naturally obey, and the separate-but-equal idea of “better that like stay with like.”

Despite the similarities between Chester’s American thinking and Henry’s and Abdullah’s attitudes, Li An is deeply attracted to Chester. After sleeping with him on the night of the racial riots of May 13, 1969, Li An “knew he was planning something for them, something wonderful,” because she felt “no man could touch a woman as he had her without love, and love had inevitable consequences” (Joss and Gold 86). However, contrary to his confident and breezy manner, Chester turns out, like Henry, to be uncertain, childlike, and reluctant to take responsibility for his involvement in local affairs. Dashing Li An’s hopes, Chester reveals that he will be going home with the rest of the Peace Corps, because, as he says, “our parents were after the embassy people to make sure we were safe, and we were warned not to get involved with the local trouble” (87). Chester further emphasizes that “the Peace Corps is concerned about its volunteers in Malaysia, and is urging us to consider our options. It isn’t good for Americans to get in the middle of foreign national politics” (87–88). Chester distances himself from and absolves himself of responsibility for Li An and Malaysia, and his flight from Malaysia reveals the limits of the apparently attractive American alternative to Chinese traditional behavior and Malay cultural nationalism. Li An, despite sounding “almost like an American” with her democratic ideals, cannot be incorporated into American society despite Chester’s insistence that she would fit in perfectly there. Chester’s attitude and involvement (despite his avowal of detachment) in Malaysian affairs is characteristic of an Orientalist approach toward other cultures. Asia, and more specifically, Malaysia, becomes a commodity that enriches the knowledge and life experience of Chester, who is an anthropologist at heart and by training. After his own marital disappointments eleven years later, Chester begins yearning for Malaysia, Li An, and the daughter he has never met. After the events of 1969, Lim’s novel jumps to 1980 and the location changes to upstate New York, where we find that Chester has obtained a Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University. But Chester is assigned to teach sociology at a small liberal arts college for women, where his students “showed almost no curiosity about actual foreign countries” and “thought of Asia and Africa as primitive and unbearably savage” (115). He undergoes a vasectomy at the behest of his American wife, Meryl, who argues that “there’s no way [they] can have a baby and be fair to everyone” since she is rushing to finish a thesis for her master’s degree and is applying to be
“the first woman commissioner in the history” of the New York City Parks Department (102). Confronted with an unsatisfying career, the loss of his biological ability to father a child, and the determined ambitions of his wife, Chester begins to remember his time in Malaysia with a mixture of fear and fascination:

It was a kind of panic, like the panic he felt when he saw the black smoke the night of the riots of Kuala Lumpur, a sensation of falling through space not knowing that there would be a landing. The same panic he felt when he read Paroo’s letter about Li An’s baby, and counted the dates and found that they matched. He had suppressed the panic each time and come through. After all, neither the riots nor Li An’s baby had been his business. He could leave and he did. (Joss and Gold 110–11)

Despite the overtones of turmoil and discord in the word “panic,” Chester seems to relish this panic as a surmountable emotional obstacle, something that he can suppress “each time and come through” because, as an anthropologist, he sees himself personally and professionally as an observer rather than a participant, hence “the riots and Li An’s baby” were not “his business” at all. The privilege he enjoys as a white, male, American anthropologist to come and go freely is predicated on his anthropological training: “to be white, to know one was white, to find anything else peculiar and uncomfortable, was no sin—it became, in fact, the basis for curiosity and inquiry, one’s fate” (Joss and Gold 153, original emphasis). Chester, in the end, is fascinated more by differences than similarities, and commits himself “to study difference, not overcome it,” and to do so “guiltlessly” (154). Furthermore, Chester’s desire to travel to Singapore to see Li An and his daughter Suyin is driven by “curiosity” to “see what the child’s like” (159) rather than a sense of responsibility toward Li An. This suggests that Chester’s professional acumen is premised on an essential racial identity of being “white” that parallels Henry’s Chinese traditions and Abdullah’s Malay nationalism, and it undermines the idea of the “melting pot” and “a democratic American vista” that Chester extolled earlier. Chester’s professional and personal curiosity and inquiry is, in post-colonial terms, a “vantage point outside the actuality of relationships among cultures” that confers “the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting the world free from the encumbering interests and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves” (Said, Culture and Imperialism 55). Joss and Gold critiques this American Orientalist epistemological privilege and the essentialist discourses of race and culture that underwrite official Malaysian multiculturalism. Lim’s novel presents Henry,
Abdullah, and Chester as representatives of their similar discourses of race, language, and cultural identity; the novel offers a “multilogical” critique of these “authoritarian domains [that] overlap each other but not sufficiently so as to preserve the illusion of totalization” (“Anglo-American Feminism” 35).

“She would never again be unburdened or alone”:

**Li An, Suyin, and an Alternative Community of Women in Singapore**

_Joss and Gold_, however, is more than an exposition of masculine society’s cultural nationalist and Orientalist domination of women, for Lim does not think of these interpellating systems as absolutely dominating. The illusion of totalization is broken when the systems coincide and overlap, and “it is not these systems but their intersections that offered [. . .] points of escape” (“Anglo-American Feminism” 37), allowing Li An and her daughter Suyin a way out of the instrumental rationality of masculine postcolonial nationalism in Malaysia and Singapore. In the last part of _Joss and Gold_, Lim’s narration focuses on Li An and her surrogate family made up of her close friend Ellen (now the principal of a high school in Singapore) and her mother-in-law, Second Mrs Yeh (Henry’s father’s second wife, whom he acknowledges as a mother), and her half-Chinese, half-American daughter, Suyin. By increasingly focusing on Li An’s relationship to her daughter Suyin to the point where Suyin overshadows her mother as the protagonist of the novel’s latter half, Lim engages in a cosmopolitics of the female body, extending what Ketu Katrak calls “the politics of the female body” in her study of postcolonial women’s writing that “includes the constructions and controls of female sexuality, its acceptable and censored expressions, its location socioculturally, even materially, in postcolonial regions” (8). Lim’s writing is cosmopolitical because in this last section she foregrounds the literary connections with Asian American women’s writing, especially through the tropes of mother-daughter narratives and revisions of East Asian myths and folktales discussed by Patricia P. Chu. The symbolic instrumentalization of women in the culture industry of a heroic masculine postcolonial nationalism is interrupted and negated by these transpacific connections between one feminist literary context and another. These connections “are undertaken with self-consciousness and remarkable creativity that decides to take risks and confront domination selectively and strategically in the interest of self-preservation,” as “women resist bodily oppressions by using strategies and tactics that are often part of women’s ways of knowing and acting” (Katrak 3, 8). Invoking
Asian American women writers’ literary strategies within a Malaysian-Singaporean context, Lim employs the mother-daughter narrative and reworking of East Asian myths to challenge the nationalist exhortations that (on one hand) women should “mind their familial responsibilities” and “make more babies” in order to “best serve the ‘nation’” (Purushotam 335), and that (on the other hand) women have a duty to “reproduce their culture through the continued use of their native language, the persistence of culinary and other habits and the socialisation of the young” (Kandiyoti 382). In the final section of *Joss and Gold*, Lim takes up the logic of pure biological and cultural reproduction and challenges them on their own grounds through Li An’s creation of an all-female surrogate family, her profoundly physical connections to both her daughter and literary language, and finally through Suyin herself and the mythical figure of Madam White Snake, a female snake spirit in Chinese mythology who enters a forbidden romance with a human scholar and is punished for eternity because of this transgression. Furthermore, Lim’s cosmopolitical critique of both Malaysia and Singapore focuses on the technocratic and instrumental use of language and race in these societies driven by the pursuit of global capital. This final section reveals how all the characters we saw in 1969 in Malaysia end up as successful entrepreneurs and professionals in Singapore twelve years later. It seems, on the surface, as if race, language, gender, and culture are not as important once everyone migrates to Singapore. But Lim also points out how a dominant Chinese identity—and with it, a male-dominant concept of race and identity similar to the ones espoused by Henry and Abdullah back in Malaysia—nonetheless underscores Singapore’s economic progress and social fabric.

Singapore’s economic progress is apparent in the last section of the novel, and all the characters who in 1969 held immutable views on race, culture, and identity seem to have changed their tune in 1981. Abdullah and Samad, the two Malay nationalists, are “now living in Singapore” and have become “VIP CEOs” (*Joss and Gold* 165) there, and because of their success they “also have big houses in Malaysia” (166). Abdullah was also part of the leading Malay political party in Malaysia, UMNO, “before joining OKM—Overseas Koranic Majulis—[a] big-time travel company [to] bring Muslims to hajj in Mecca” (166). Abdullah, despite his earlier emphasis on special Malay rights and Malay indigeneity, studied journalism in the United States, and his “English had become New England; two years at Harvard had done what almost twenty years of British education had failed to do” (188). Furthermore, in 1981 Abdullah is about to fly back to Kuala Lumpur to open a new mosque, a symbolic act to “show the fundamentalists that we can make money and also be good Muslims at the same time” (189). Abdullah even
concedes that “Li An was right” and that “the national language [Malay] is the soul of our country, but English is the language of money for Malaysia and Singapore. The goal of Malaysia is to make money. So English is the destiny of our country” (249). Abdullah’s emphasis on “money” and on “mak[ing] money” suggests that underlying the seemingly color- or race-blind economic ethos of Singapore there is an aspect of ethnic Chinese culture that Abdullah himself castigated in 1969: “Chinese have no adat, they eat pork, they like gamble, make money” (46). Beneath Abdullah’s comment that he is opening a mosque in Malaysia to prove that money-making Malays can also be good Muslims is an anxiety that making money is an inherently Chinese trait, and that his Malay identity and language—“the national language [that] is the soul of our country” (249)—is slowly being eroded by English—“the language of money”—as well.

Furthermore, the newsletter Li An edits for her company, BioSynergy, holds an important place in Singapore’s economic climate, for “it was a hot document studied by investors, shareholders, and the Monetary Authority of Singapore for clues to the company’s health and future” (Joss and Gold 176). Li An’s choice of the newsletter’s logo suggests a strong Chinese cultural symbolism: it consists of “two Ss” that “suggest the shapes of the dragon and the phoenix” (259), implying “the dragon’s harmonic meanings and the phoenix’s regenerative energies,” and even though it resembles “something European and medieval, yet it was clearly Chinese in origin” (260). Chester, upon his arrival in Singapore in 1981, is also astounded by how, on the one hand, “The Chinese were everywhere, but they had English names” and “Anglo-Chinese was the norm,” yet on the other hand both the Singaporean state and its people are pushing for a “Chinese-Chinese [identity] to be the norm” (200). Li An’s logo design for her company’s newsletter emphasizes this conjunction of Anglo-Chinese normativity couched in Chinese-Chinese cultural terms. Henry’s idea of the “Chinese way,” which, in the Malaysia of 1969, suggests propriety and knowing one’s place, has become, in the Singapore of 1981, an instrumentalized ethnic and cultural identity that allows the state to compete actively in global business. However, the beneficiaries of this new conjunction of identity and globalization are clearly male. Li An’s boss, Ang Swee, who is the chief executive officer of BioSynergy, is ethnically Chinese but holds an Australian citizenship simply because it has “more cachet” (224), and “he never worried about being superior” but “simply enjoyed the condition” (224) of being both Chinese and Westernized. Similarly, Abdullah and Samad are “VIP CEOs” (165) owning large properties in Malaysia but have chosen to settle and work in Singapore; they move frequently between the two countries while their wives and children remain in Singapore. In
contrast, Li An’s move to Singapore is not of her own volition; it is necessi-
tated by her abandonment by her husband, Henry, after Suyin’s birth.

Even in this climate of cultural Chineseness and economic success, Lim’s novel shows us how Li An creates a family composed completely of women who can nurture her half-Chinese, half-American daughter Suyin, who in Chinese-Chinese Singapore becomes the brunt of racist remarks such as “chap cheng kwei—mixed breed devil” (*Joss and Gold* 255). Ellen, Li An’s close friend from college, becomes an older-sister figure who “swore at” Li An for “crying” over Henry’s abandonment; she instead urges Li An to put “all [her] strength into nursing the baby” (205). Lim’s novel emphasizes that Ellen, who remains single and dedicated to her career as a schoolteacher and later headmistress of a high school, does not exhibit romantic or erotic feel-
ings for Li An; her love for Li An is expressed in terms of friendship and guilt for not preventing Li An’s romantic liaison with Chester: “I only do this for old friend’s sake. Otherwise I will feel too guilty for words” (181). Ellen is not a surrogate lover but rather an older sister for Li An and “a second parent” for Suyin. Ellen serves as the role model of a strong-willed, independent woman for Li An; from the latter’s point of view, Ellen is “like a minor goddess” busy “rearranging their lives,” helping Li An and Suyin look for an apartment in Singapore and then finding “Li An the job as a part-time copy editor in the communications department in BioSynergy,” which eventually leads to Li An’s high-ranking executive position in the present (181). Once they move to Singapore, “Auntie Ellen” becomes a “second mother” (205) who “picked Suyin up from school, supervised her homework, and then went home, many evenings only after Li An got home from work” late at night (196). Ellen becomes a second maternal figure who maintains her own independent voca-
tion outside of the family unit, thereby reconfiguring the conventional norms of the nuclear family in which a child must be cared for by two parents of dif-
ferent sexes. Ellen, in her role as a minor goddess, offers an assertive female role model that differs from the heroic masculine narratives put forward by fathers of the nation such as Singapore’s Kwan Yew Lee.

If Ellen is a role model, an older sister, and a second parent, then Sec-
ond Mrs Yeh serves as the matriarch of this reconstituted family of women. Second Mrs Yeh, the second wife of Henry’s father, gives Li An’s daughter legitimacy under the Yeh family name by adamantly claiming Suyin as her granddaughter. Second Mrs Yeh is the one who “picked the name [for Li An’s child] months before she was born” and urges Li An to keep Henry’s family name (Yeh) to make life “more safe” for Suyin in the future (*Joss and Gold* 169). Second Mrs Yeh, or Grandma Yeh, shares a physical bond with the infant Suyin that is comparable to Li An’s own bond with her daughter:
“She’s Henry’s baby,” Second Mrs. Yeh crooned to the infant, her visits unchecked by Henry’s absence. Humming her song, she rubbed olive oil onto the carapace where the skull bones had not closed, the light brown hair twisting over the tender spot where only skin protected the brain. “Ah Pah’s [Henry’s father’s] granddaughter,” she breathed over the membrane, fingers stroking the green oil into the scalp. [. . .] Invisible, unerasable. Second Mrs. Yeh’s granddaughter. (Joss and Gold 170)

Despite Suyin’s obvious physical appearance, Grandma Yeh insists that Suyin is her own granddaughter. This insistence flies in the face of conventional genealogy, and might be read as stubborn self-denial or sheer naïveté. But we may understand Grandma Yeh’s actions as her way of exercising her power as secondary matriarch within the Yeh family to protect Suyin. Mr Yeh himself was killed during the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur (Joss and Gold 83–84), and the novel does not reveal the whereabouts of his first wife and her family. It is clear that Henry, born of Mr Yeh’s first wife and heir to the Yeh family name, is the new male authority figure in the Yeh family, and Grandma Yeh urges Li An to keep Suyin’s last name as Yeh, thus acknowledging that power of patrilineal descent. However, we can also read Grandma Yeh’s use of the Yeh family name as a female appropriation of Henry’s patriarchal power. This masculine discourse presupposes that women will maintain racial and cultural purity by reproducing legitimate offspring, but Grandma Yeh subverts it by claiming legitimacy through the letter or the logic of conjugal relations rather than through blood or biological relations. Grandma Yeh reasons that if Suyin (however racially mixed) is Li An’s daughter, and Li An is her own daughter-in-law and Henry’s wife (despite their divorce), then Suyin is therefore the granddaughter of herself and her deceased husband, Mr Yeh. Grandma Yeh asserts Suyin’s place within the Yeh family through her own position as second wife, which, though secondary, is nonetheless symbolically and financially powerful. She turns the Yeh family name into a signifier that she shrewdly deploys for her own purposes to safeguard Li An and Suyin’s future within a society that values patrimony and racial purity.

Symbolically speaking, Grandma Yeh’s rubbing of olive oil on the infant Suyin signifies her grand-maternal blessing of the child, making Suyin not just “Henry’s baby”—a biological product—but, more importantly, the legitimate “granddaughter” of “Ah Pah” (Mr Yeh), a status which is “invisible” but also “unerasable” through Grandma Yeh’s matriarchal invocation. The passage quoted above emphasizes the physical details of Suyin’s infant body, especially “the carapace where the skull bones had not closed” and “where only skin protected the brain.” While Suyin’s body may not yet be completely
formed, with Grandma Yeh’s blessing, her identity as a member of the Yeh family is formed completely, and she is thus protected and made “more safe” for the future. This blessing becomes financially significant toward the end of the novel, when Grandma Yeh dies and leaves all the money she inherited from her husband, Mr Yeh, to Suyin (Joss and Gold 254). Henry has to honor Grandma Yeh’s will and become the executor of her legacy. In doing so, he finally has to acknowledge that he is Suyin’s father, something that Grandma Yeh “had wanted him to say all these years, and with her death, he could finally say it” (262). Grandma Yeh’s foresight in keeping Suyin’s last name as Yeh, and her insistence (against common sense and convention) over the years to “everyone” that Suyin is her granddaughter and therefore Henry’s daughter, finally proves effective, because even though “Suyin was a backward family bond,” Henry, “being now a good Chinese father [himself], would not refuse that bond” (262–63). Suyin can now claim a father, even if belatedly, and Henry’s presence protects Suyin from her schoolmates’ bullying and name-calling.

Despite her ostracization by her classmates as a mixed-blood demon, Suyin is also an object of desire by both Asian and Western characters. Suyin embodies the cross-cultural, cross-racial nightmare of cultural purists in Malaysia, Singapore, and America, but at the same time she also represents the logical outcome of the multicultural and melting-pot ideals these same purists uphold as an important part of their respective national consciousness. When Chester sees Suyin for the first time he notices the physical features of her mixed heritage, “red-gold hairs shining” on her arms, and “her dark hair [that] gleamed with russet streaks” (Joss and Gold 222). Chester is then overcome by “shame that was like a different kind of love—the first time he had loved so shamefully—as he watched his daughter walk away” (222). Chester’s ambivalence—fierce love paired with intense shame—comes from his conflicted desires as an American Orientalist anthropologist: although he has chosen “the bland clean shampooed middle-class reality that bright energetic Meryl promised” (222), that same reality has also taken away his reproductive power thanks to Meryl’s insistence on his vasectomy. Chester’s only offspring, therefore, is this half-Chinese, half-American girl who disrupts the comfortable life he had constructed for himself in upstate New York. Abdul- lah also discusses Suyin’s hybridity in similarly ambivalent terms when he talks to Chester about his experience as a refugee-camp officer in the 1970s when Vietnamese boat people landed in Malaysia: “[Suyin] is beautiful. That is the way with Eurasians. Allah is merciful. These children will always have problems, so beauty is the gift to sweeten their path. [. . .] There I met some of the bui doi, children of the dust. Beautiful children! Golden skin, golden
hair, face like orang puteh [white person], soul like Asian. But no one wants then” (189). From Abdullah’s point of view, the beautiful “golden skin” and “golden hair” of Eurasians or mixed-blood children such as Suyin is compensation for their illegitimacy and bastard status, because “no one wants them” as part of their family, society, or nation. Abdullah presents this as a fait accompli, simply “the way with Eurasians,” much like Henry’s insistence on a conventional “Chinese way” (57) or his own earlier admonishment, “better that like stay with like” (46). But mixed in with Abdullah’s rejection of these hybrid children as legitimate members of a national community is a fascination with their existence, with their “face like orang puteh” and “soul like Asian”—a realization that these children are products of physical and cultural contact between Asia and the West that cultural nationalists such as Abdullah want to disavow. Henry, after Grandma Yeh’s death, and as executor of her legacy to Suyin, also wants “her, Suyin, Grandma’s beloved granddaughter, his own daughter, to understand what he was doing and why” (254), despite having earlier abandoned Suyin and Li An. Grandma Yeh’s matriarchal influence forces Henry to come to terms with this multicultural, multiracial child as his own daughter, thereby challenging the masculine society’s essentialist belief that one’s legitimate offspring must be of the same race, ethnicity, or culture.

But Lim’s novel also challenges this masculine discourse of cultural purity through Suyin’s role as the mythical Madam White Snake in her school’s Chinese drama performance. Lim’s inclusion of this myth and Suyin’s participation in it echoes Maxine Hong Kingston’s revision of the Chinese folktale Journey to the West and the adventures of the Monkey King that is part of a “vision of Asian American culture as dialogic, inclusive, adaptive, and alive” (Chu 187). Lim puts the myth of Madam White Snake to similar use, claiming it as a narrative of transgression and the liberating power of female sexuality that challenges the circumscription of women’s bodies and sexuality within official nationalist discourses. Suyin’s “Mandarin was bad,” but “with her green-brown eyes, reddish hair, and dramatic height, the Chinese language teacher had insisted on putting her on stage for Chinese drama night” (Joss and Gold 207). Suyin has the most important but absolutely speechless part, that of Madam White Snake herself. Despite the Chinese teacher’s assurance to Li An that the role was about how “Madam White Snake was breaking the laws of propriety and of ascribed position by changing into a human” and that “Suyin’s slinky silence was supposed to represent a divine spirit, not her failed Mandarin” (207–8), Li An is fearful and anxious that her daughter will have to be “dressed in white tights and tee, sequined and spangled” and “wriggle on stage” as a “female, snaky,
hissing, nonhuman, non-Chinese-speaking freak of Cho Kang Secondary School” (207). The experience reminds Li An that “in Singapore Suyin would never be Chinese. She would never be the lead actress, and she would learn to enjoy the eyes of the boys as her body moved, sinuously exaggerated” (229–30). Here, Suyin’s sinuous performance and incompetent Mandarin signify her inability to meet Singaporean standards of racial and cultural purity; she will be placed on stage as an exotic spectacle, as a “nonhuman, non-Chinese-speaking freak” who serves as an implicit warning to any who dare think of “breaking the laws of propriety and of ascribed position.” This reading of the Madam White Snake performance as a humiliation of Suyin is certainly correct, but Lim also suggests that Suyin’s “slinky silence” and her nascent sexuality that “got her attention from the boys” (229) may have a more positive, transgressive aspect in the future. As Auntie Ellen reminds Suyin toward the end of the novel, “she could decide whatever she wanted to once she was eighteen” and that “very soon, she would be eighteen and a woman like [Ellen and Li An]” (257). For Li An, Suyin’s sexuality can only be exploited by men as a fetish. Suyin’s consciousness, her sexuality, and the fetishization of her body are distinct in Li An’s thinking, such that Suyin “enjoys” the “eyes of the boys” as “her body moved”—her body becomes dis- located from her own sense of self. But from Suyin’s point of view, she is the actor and subject of her performance who can employ her physical self to her benefit, hence “she had quickly discovered that wriggling her body got her attention from the boys” (229). To claim that Suyin grasps a form of female agency would be an overstatement, but if we consider the radical aspects of the Madam White Snake legend—“a divine spirit” who breaks the “laws of propriety and of ascribed position”—then Suyin’s growing awareness of the power of her hybrid body represents a move away from “the identification of women as privileged bearers of corporate identities and boundary markers of their communities” toward “a language of identity which allows for difference and diversity without making women its hostages” (Kandiyoti 388). We should remember that the “attention” Suyin receives in the last section of the novel is not just the erotic gaze of high school boys, for she is also the recipient of two forms of paternal attention: Chester’s intense (albeit ashamed) love, and Henry’s meticulous (albeit belated) affection as the executor of her estate. While Suyin is not fluent in Mandarin, the officially designated mother tongue of Chinese Singaporeans, and thus cannot be considered Chinese enough to be a Singaporean on linguistic grounds, Lim’s novel suggests a different kind of language, one that is not deployed by instrumental nationality to construct a carefully policed gendered and cultural national identity. It allows Suyin to be a Singaporean through the legitimation of her hybridity
through both her American and Chinese fathers. Postcolonial nationalism’s male-centered cultural purity through a separate-but-equal multiculturalism is negated through the figure of Suyin. Even while Suyin is ensconced and framed by the male gaze, her hybridity transgresses the laws of propriety that govern the boundaries of racial and cultural purity.

Language and literature also become important for Li An in the last part of the novel, where her previously held ideals about literature’s relationship to life and community undergo a dramatic change because of her job and her daughter. Despite Li An’s emphasis on the scientific and community-building power of literature, Lim’s novel stresses how she responds to literary language at a deeply physical level that cannot be reduced to “the real science of life” (Joss and Gold 8). When Chester reads a poem by A. E. Housman, clearly “making fun of the poem, declaiming the words _spires_ and _farms_ with mock relish,” Li An “couldn’t help appreciating the music of the English words” as “the killing air came out of the words and echoed in her body even as Chester and Henry were smiling at the absurdity of the ideas” (32). Li An’s body resonates with Housman’s poem even though Chester is mocking it, because for her English is more than an instrumental language to be used for scientific analysis (according to Henry) or for making money (according to Abdullah): “the English ingested through years of reading and talking now formed the delicate web of tissues in her brain. Giving up her language would be like undergoing a crippling operation on her brain” (56). The English language and English literature become an avenue through which Li An asserts her sense of self as both a woman and a Malaysian. Li An, using her analytical skills, rebuts Abdullah and Samad’s arguments that “Malay is good enough for this country” since only one percent of Malaysians need to learn English (56). Li An silences them by asking “who will choose the one percent” and “what about Malaysians who may want to strive to join that one percent” (57). After this heated conversation, Li An further rejects Henry’s insistence that she should be less Westernized and adhere to Chinese feminine decorum by arguing that she is “not Chinese” but “Malaysian” (57). On the night of the 1969 riots, when she sleeps with Chester, Li An’s body is resonating with the political, racial, and sexual tension, such that “her body was vibrating quietly. The vibrations, she recognized, were a natural motion of her body. Every body was constantly vibrating. The breath, pulse, heartbeat, set up a ceaseless motion, a tension of desire that was life” (80). Lim emphasizes here that Li An’s desire for Chester is not simply erotic; it is an extension of her body’s resonance with the turbulent political and racial climate in Malaysia, just as the “killing air” of Housman’s poem “echoed in her body.” Li An’s body resonates somatically with the problems of the Malaysian and Singaporean commu-
nities in ways that exceed the framework of wifely and maternal responsibilities ascribed by official nationalist discourse. Language and literature do not allow her to connect with Henry, Abdullah, or Samad, but they play an important part in Li An's consciousness and assertion of herself as a woman rather than an idealized feminine character.

In Singapore, faced with brutal economic necessity, Li An appears to change her attitude to language and literature when she becomes the editor for BioSynergy's newsletter. Li An seems to give up her idealistic view of literature and settles for producing commercialized, neatly packaged informational writing: "immaculate layout, letter-perfect editing, careful content control. A company organ, a mouthpiece, slick, glib, superficial, glossy" (Joss and Gold 179–80). But even Li An's rejection of the empowering value of literature is couched in literary terms. She switches from a humanist view of language to a modernist one, such that she "no longer read significance, merely the acts. No ideas but in things, the poet William Carlos Williams had said. That had been the hardest poem for her to learn, to embrace the empty depth in the glittering surface of things" (179). This approach to literature, however, is more in accordance with her own somatic resonance with language that belies her earlier humanist mind-set, for her body is not an "empty surface" beneath "the glittering surface of things," but rather a thing in itself that is full of "ideas," brimming with "a ceaseless motion, a tension of desire that was life" (80). Far from abandoning literature for slick superficialities, as an editor Li An gains a new grasp of the immanent connection between content and form not only in literature but also in her intimate and somatic connection with her daughter, Suyin. Nursing her infant daughter, Li An finds that

sensations flowed and filled the cavities in [her] body: her infant's mass, the baby hair texture, fine as cocoon threads, the odor of baby—a milky powdered sweetness, perfume of the newly born, her blessed existence. Li An was surfeited by those moments, which shaped that compact space encompassing Suyin and herself, and which sufficed, she felt, forever. (Joss and Gold 208–9)

Just as reading Lawrence's prose gives Li An physical relish and hearing Housman's poetry makes her body resonate with language's musicality earlier in the novel, Suyin becomes a work of art that fills Li An's senses with "milky powdered sweetness" and the "perfume of the newly born" rather than the spicy sibilance of chickpeas or the killing air of England. The "blessed existence" that Li An celebrates with Suyin recalls Grandma Yeh's blessing of
Suyin as she bathed the infant in olive oil, paying attention to the baby’s head and her light brown hair. Through Suyin, Li An creates “a compact space” of maternal love that is not anchored to wifely responsibility, and surrounding this compact space of mother and daughter is the close-knit and alternative family structure including Ellen and Grandma Yeh.

Reading Suyin as a work of art does not dehumanize her, because it allows us to answer the question that Liew Geok Leong raises in her afterword to the novel: why does Li An insist on having Suyin rather than getting rid of the baby before or after her birth? Just like Grandma Yeh’s legitimation of Suyin as a member of the Yeh family, Li An’s decision to keep Chester’s child seems to defy common sense. Leong suggests that Li An keeps the baby because her own emotional yearning for a child matters more than a consideration about the baby’s troubled future as a racially mixed child (271). While this may be so, the conclusion of Joss and Gold takes this maternal yearning one step further: it emphasizes the crystallization of literary reading together with the experience of being a woman and a mother in a postcolonial, male-centered society where language is seen as a tool of instrumental nationality, and women are constantly hailed as cultural paragons and boundary markers.

Li An, after a heated conversation with Ellen about allowing Suyin to visit Chester in America, realizes that it is Suyin herself who must “answer these questions” (Joss and Gold 264) about the sudden presence of not one but two fathers from different countries and cultures. As Li An stands, “imagining the slow regularity of her daughter’s breathing,” she retraces the important events of her life that have led up to this moment: “marriage, love, whatever she shared with Henry or Chester, might have ended, but the traces had not disappeared. Nothing she lived through was ever finally over” (264). She then picks up a copy of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, “the only book she had kept with her from her student days” (264–65), and settled down to read the poems again, pulled in by a music of feelings that had remained set in print, even as the pages had yellowed and turned brittle. A muse of feelings she thought she had forgotten, more than words, more than poetry, returning to the spaces inside her body its silent and eloquent touch. For the moment, standing again before Suyin’s bedroom door and listening to the golden echoes in her daughter’s breathing, she did not ask for more. (Joss and Gold 265)

At one level, the conclusion of Joss and Gold signals a departure from the mother-daughter narratives in Asian American women’s writing where (in the case of Amy Tan’s Joy Luck Club) the Chinese mother stands for a “radical
difference,” or “an inherited core of Chineseness” that the Chinese American daughter must in some way abject or reconcile with her American subjectivity so that the daughter can “share with other Americans an enriching access to a matrilineal heritage of protofeminist individualism and enterprise” (Chu 168). But instead of having the mother (Li An) contained or abjected by the daughter (Suyin), Lim’s novel creates a sentimental coordination of maternal and feminine affection that is also critical of masculine politics of cultural nationalism. The relationship between Li An and Suyin embodies a kind of sentimental longing and fulfillment that Rey Chow observes in East Asian films and that Theodor Adorno points out in his discussion of artworks, figurative language, and historical conditions. The sentimental, for Rey Chow, is

an inclination or a disposition toward making compromises and toward making-do with even—and especially—that which is oppressive and unbearable. [. . .] the sentimental is rather about what keeps and preserves, what holds things together. For this reason, the sentimental is perhaps best described as a mood of endurance, a mode whose contours tend to remain fuzzy rather than sharply delineated and whose effects may more easily be apprehended as (a prevailing) tone. (Sentimental Fabulations 18, original emphasis)

This mood or mode of endurance is a double-edged sword, however, because on the one hand “as wenqing or accommodation, the sentimental is ultimately about being accommodating and being accommodated, about the delineation and elaboration of a comfortable/homely interiority” (Chow, Sentimental Fabulations 19), but on the other hand “at the heart of Chinese sentimentalism lies the idealization of filiality,” which “is not simply a matter of respecting one’s biological or cultural elders but an age-old cultural apparatus for interpelling individuals into the hierarchy-conscious conduct of identifying with—and submitting to—whatever preexists them” (22, original emphasis). Joss and Gold stages an encounter between sentimentalism as the idealization of filiality and sentimentality as a mode of accommodation and perseverance through Li An’s endurance of cultural nationalism’s patriarchal expectations. Certainly, Grandma Yeh’s concern with Suyin’s retention of the Yeh family name and the reemergence of Chester and Henry into Suyin’s life suggests that filial piety is an important part of the novel’s positioning of its female characters within the larger Singaporean social order. But at no point does this accommodation between Li An’s sentimental and domestic circle of Suyin, Ellen, and Grandma Yeh with the dominant social order create the worst-case situation where “the gravest problems arise [. . .] when the homely—what is inside—too, is revealed to be oppressive and unbear-
able—indeed, uninhabitable” (Chow, Sentimental Fabulations 19). Chester’s unexpected visit to Singapore, Grandma Yeh’s death, and Henry’s return into Suyin’s life do not cause the life Li An, Suyin, and Ellen have built for themselves to become unbearable or uninhabitable. Of course, Li An realizes that even if, “for the moment” (Joss and Gold 265), there is a close connection between her and her daughter symbolized by the “golden echoes” of Suyin’s breathing, that may change depending on how Suyin answers the questions regarding her dual patrimony from Chester and Henry. But the novel’s conclusion registers this concern while making it recede into the background; instead, what is foregrounded is a sentimental retracing of Li An’s life, her “marriage, love, whatever she shared with Henry or Chester [. . .] Nothing she lived through was ever finally over.” This in turn triggers a literary turn to Li An’s sentimental musings as she reads The Oxford Book of Modern Verse. This sequence of memories and sensations—Suyin’s breathing, Li An’s memories of her love and life with Chester and Henry, and finally the buried-but-unforgotten sensations of literary reading—can be read as the artistic process of longing, neediness, fulfillment, and change that emerges out of an artwork’s engagement with the historical conditions of its creation. As Adorno argues, “there is no valid artwork without longing,” but artworks can “transcend longing” through “the neediness inscribed as a figure in the historically existing. By retracing this figure, they are not only more than what simply exists but participate in objective truth to the extent that what is in need summons its fulfillment and change” (Aesthetic Theory 132). Suyin, born of the historically existing encounter between Li An and Chester, a Chinese Malaysian woman and a white American anthropologist, is a figure who inscribes the neediness and the necessity of racial and cultural mixing in the postcolonial world, an objective truth that is vehemently denied or rejected by masculine authority and cultural nationalism.

Through Li An and Suyin, Lim performs a chiasmatic maneuver that first takes up the social and cultural interpellations of women as the idealized feminine in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore and subsequently inverts them in order to show the limitations of this masculine discourse and other possible, alternative relationships. The chiasmus is a characteristic move in Adorno’s critical thinking, an example of which is his paradoxical pronouncement that “masculine society imperiously breeds in woman its own corrective, and shows itself through this limitation implacably the master. The feminine character is a negative imprint of domination” (Minima Moralia 95). But such chiasmatic thought is also appropriated by gender theorists and, as Judith Butler argues, it is crucial to reformulating the terms of raced and sexed subject positions called into being by regimes of power:
the temporal structure of such a subject is chiasmatic in this sense: in the place of a substantial or self-determining “subject,” this juncture of discursive demands is something like a “crossroads” [. . .] . There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the nonspace of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms that constitute the “we” cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. (383)

As a woman who bears a hybrid child, Li An functions as a nexus of cultural collision, fulfilling her role as woman and mother by inverting the strictures regarding the phenotypical and cultural purity of women and their offspring in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore. That Li An does so without asking for assistance from either Henry or Chester or migrating to another country where life as a single mother might be less strenuous suggests that Lim is staking a claim on the national consciousness of both countries by asserting a female right to social and familial agency against prevailing cultural norms regarding female gender roles. Masculine society’s interpellation and repetition of the ideal feminine upon a woman such as Li An cannot, to use Butler’s terms, be summarily refused, but at the same time the very terms of this interpellation preclude or prevent the strict obedience of those who are hailed by it, hence women’s position as the negative imprint of male domination. Suyin, Li An’s daughter, represents the potential for reworking the discourse of cultural authenticity and idealized femininity when she takes on the role of Madam White Snake, which gradually makes her self-conscious of her difference from mainstream Chinese Singaporean society but simultaneously awakens her nascent physical and sexual sensibilities. The way in which Lim’s novel emphasizes Suyin’s physical growth and maturation and Li An’s rediscovery of her sensual love of literary language may certainly be read as part of a female Bildungsroman, but, more importantly, it evinces the sentimental endurance expressed in Li An’s struggle against a patriarchal society that becomes more than a personal triumph over an authoritarian and chauvinistic national formation. It is also an exposition of how an alternative and equally legitimate community of women can exist within the national framework without acceding to the demands of racial, cultural, and linguistic purity as grounds for inclusion within the nation. By revealing the roles and positions that can be claimed by women, Lim performs an immanent critique of nationalism as an identitarian narrative that determines and objectifies women as cultural symbols and reproductive bodies. This mode of criticism is immanent because even as she interrogates women’s symbolic
and corporeal objectification, there is within the cosmopolitical frame of her thinking an abiding attachment to Malaysia and Singapore as nations negotiated through political consciousness and cultural politics. It is an attachment that discloses and rethinks, rather than identifies with or rejects outright, the raced and gendered terms of coercive mimeticism that fetishize a postcolonial national consciousness into a patriotic and patriarchal national identity.