

# An Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim

KIRPAL SINGH

IN 1980, SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM won the prestigious “Commonwealth Poetry Prize” for her first book of poems, *Crossing the Peninsula*. Since then, the name of this gifted and talented Malaysian-turned-American writer has become more and more prominent in the international literary community. She is the author of three volumes of short stories. Her cross-cultural memoirs, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (1996), won the American Book Award. *What The Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (1998), her fifth and latest book of poetry, is enthusiastically praised, on its back cover, by writers such as Alicia Ostriker, Meena Alexander, and Mitsuye Yamada. Shirley Lim is also a prolific critic, writer, and editor, whose publications include *Nationalism and Literature* (1993), *Writing South/East Asia in English* (1994), and innumerable journal articles. Her *Asian-American Literature: An Anthology* appeared in 1999. She has co-edited two collections to be published in 2000: *Transnational Asia Pacific*, in the University of Illinois Series, “Gender, Culture, and the Public Sphere”; and *Tilting the Continent: Southwest Asian American Writing* (New Rivers Press).

The following interview had its beginnings in a little cafe in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, just beneath the world's tallest tower, the Petronias Tower. The time was December 1998; the occasion was the 11th Triennial Meeting of ACLALS (the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies), in which Shirley Lim has long been a key figure. The interview was completed, by way of correspondence and e-mail, in June 1999.

I have known Shirley Lim for many, many years and have followed her career with excitement; as a result, this interview suggests something of my own recent thinking as a writer and critic from South East Asia. Shirley Lim is currently Professor at the

University of Hong Kong, on leave from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and it will not surprise me if her next work crystallizes that very fine balance she is struggling to achieve between her Asian- and her American-ness.

*More and more your poems appear to adopt a very strong “women’s” voice. Do you think that there is a need still for women to “band” together? Has there not been, in your opinion, a real change so that poets like yourself can now put behind you women’s issues and write for and about everyone?*

I am not certain how to respond to this question, as I reject almost all its premises. First, I do not see that women “band” together. Some women are activists and organize politically to achieve social justice. Many others live individual, separate lives, identifying with their husbands and families or communities. Also, I do not write poems in order to express women’s issues, nor poems directed only to women. I write about what is important to me emotionally, and about what I find beautiful or mysterious. The notion that I can now put something behind me because of “real” social change in women’s positions in the world is nonsense. I don’t write polemical or political tracts. Should a man stop writing about his feelings for his father once his father is dead or about how trees are mysterious once the United Nations passes a world ban against illegal timber clearing?

*When Crossing The Peninsula won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize [1980], did you feel that you had arrived? What does “arrival” mean to you as a writer? Would being put in an anthology which is then widely used in schools, colleges, and universities signal a sense of arrival with which you are comfortable?*

As I wrote in my memoir, I was surprised when *Crossing the Peninsula* won the Commonwealth Prize. And no, I did not feel then that I had “arrived,” perhaps because the prize appeared so illusory to me. I did not go to London to accept the Prize and did no publicity for it. I was nursing my newborn infant, and literary awards were very far from my mind then. I am not sure what “arrival” means, as this is not a word that I use. If being in a popular college anthology signals arrival, then I had arrived a while ago. The strange thing is that it never occurs to me that I

have or have not arrived. What presses on my consciousness is all those poems, those stories, those books I have not yet written.

*Obviously your subjects have changed, though I suspect your themes have remained the same. Do you think that more than 25 years of living in the US have made it hard for you to write powerfully about subjects Malaysian-Singaporean still? Does your childhood, for instance, still return with the same intensity as that felt in your first volume of poems?*

My subjects have changed. I have moved on psychologically and geographically. I don't write from contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian settings. In my first novel, still unpublished, large parts are set in the Kuala Lumpur of 1969 and the Singapore of 1982 or so — historical periods when I was resident in those two places. Very few readers question V. S. Naipaul's or Paul Theroux's claim to write of places and people that they are little acquainted with except through very brief visits; and often, reviewers praise such writers for the power of their portrayals. But my residence in the US seems to lead to questions as to my ability to write from an Asian location or with Asian settings. Yet I return frequently to Asia, to Malaysia and Singapore, and I have a very large family still in both states. In July 1999, I will be taking up a two-year appointment as Chair and Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong. I do not think that my writing identity is so clearly restricted to prescribed national boundaries.

*When you deal with the theme of sexuality, I detect there are two broad categories: woman-to-man, and woman-to-woman — would you agree? And would you agree that your woman-to-woman poems are somehow more personal, more intense, more painful?*

I am not sure what your question is asking. It may be that some of my poems appear to address men and others women. But I would not therefore conclude that these poems are equally "about sexuality," whatever that means. Some are love poems, with their own tinctures of passion, confusion, memory, and so forth. Some are sister poems, offering shared experiences of life. I had thought that my earlier "love" poems, if such emotions could be easily identified as "love," were, to use your terms again, personal, intense, and painful.

*You have spoken about your education and the way this instilled in you a love for English Literature. When did you begin to value non-British literature written in English? Who influenced you to stress the crucial importance of postcolonial, non-canonical writings in English?*

My reading of American literature, much of which is, of course, canonical in the United States, opened my eyes radically to a different cultural production of “great writing.” I remember reading Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, h.d., Edna St. Vincent Millay, Henry James, and so forth, and finding this an utterly different and distinctive literature. Then, when Lloyd Fernando taught the “Commonwealth Literature” course at the University of Malaya in 1966, we read Chinua Achebe, George Lamming, Ee Tiang Hong, and others, and suddenly I glimpsed what it was to write out of — both in the sense of grounded in but also at a place away from — the British tradition. Much later, in my thirties and forties, I read works in translation. The Latin American writers — Borges, Marquez, and especially Neruda — were such wonderful original visionaries.

*As a scholar-critic who is also a vibrant writer, do you feel that sometimes scholars/critics tend to over-value the “surface” of creative works while somehow missing the essential “artistic” qualities? Do you enjoy detailed analyses of your poems in terms of their stylistic experiments, or do you prefer to have your works read in terms of their larger social/political/cultural content and voice?*

I do not see how scholar-critics ever over-value the surface of creative works. That is a failure I find in my undergraduate students whose theoretical apparatus is weak. You may mean something else by that word than I do. I do not separate the qualities of a work into “surface” and “artistic,” as surface is art polished, and art is manifested through surface as well. I seldom read critical works on my writing, although recently I have been receiving quite a few articles, chapters of dissertations and books that treat my writing. I cannot say I “enjoy” such reading. It makes me happy when a reader finds something valuable about my work, but after reading the chapter or article, I move on and do not re-read it.

*Why have you not written more fiction? Are you more comfortable writing poetry? Or are the kinds of experiences you wish to share and express more readily voiced through poetry rather than through prose?*

Oddly enough, I believe that it is factually correct to say that I have written much more prose than I have poetry. I am working on a second novel. If all goes well, the first novel may yet be published. I have written probably too many critical articles and books. My memoir has brought me more critical and popular attention than any of my books of poetry. I agree that I have not written that many short stories. I have all kinds of stories in my head, but unfortunately I have only one life and 24 hours in a day. Most of that life is spent as an academic, a critic, scholar, and housekeeper. Poems are much more difficult to voice than fiction or other prose genres. It takes a lot of time and space for a poem to emerge, if at all, which explains why I have not written that much poetry.

*By the standard of recent autobiographies, yours is considered by many to be “tame,” “safe.” Would you apply these labels yourself? There are so many hints at more urgent matters that crave expression in your memoir. Were you overly “self-conscious” and therefore unnecessarily censorious? Looking back at it now, do you think there were things you could/ would have stated differently?*

I am not sure who these “many” are who consider my memoir to be tame and safe. A critically astute scholar said to me that he considered the portrayal of the daughter-father relationship risqué. Others have talked about my courage and so forth. Perhaps among academic women, the frankness of my discussion of emergent sexuality may be considered not so safe. What are you comparing my memoir to? To Sybil Kathigasu’s *No Dram of Mercy* or Janet Lim’s *Sold for Silver* or Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*? I did not write the memoir to shock but to inscribe a history of a community and a particular experience of gender and colonial education, as well as to produce a work that would “stand” on its use of language, a contribution to the long line of other literary productions recognized as memoirs, but with its insistent inflection on the Malaysian gendered, colonial, and immigrant subject.

*With age comes mellowness in some cases. In your case your poems and stories reveal a maturity in excess of your age when you wrote them. Is this because of the suffering you yourself endured from a very early age? Did your relationships with your parents emphasize a stance which you have since found wanting in terms of what your writing demands?*

I assume that you are complimenting me on early maturity in my writing. I do not think that “literary” maturity has anything to do with “suffering.” One is in language, the other in life experience. If suffering resulted in literary maturity, then our greatest writers should come from the poor, dispossessed, diseased, and so forth. As to the second part of your question, you seem to express criticism of what you call “a stance” in my writing. Do you mean that the relationship to father and mother that my writing sometimes constructs has resulted in a “stance” that leads to an inadequacy in my writing? I am not certain what kinds of dynamics are being suggested here. Of course, as my first novel shows, I am capable of imagining other forms of these relationships. But I am careful not to confuse what you may see as “real” or autobiographical relationships with relationships imagined in texts, be they poems or stories. I could, if I wanted to, valorize mothers and fathers — and I have read very loving poems that do exactly this. But this is not what I wish to say or explore. I wish to explore the fierce complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences at the heart of all relationships — not to celebrate but to intimate that fearful intimacy.

*What do you think of women (or men for that matter) telling all? Would you say even when there are big battles to be fought there are good reasons why a writer must not go beyond certain time-honored boundaries of telling, of revealing?*

Is it ever possible to tell all? One person’s all may very well be another’s nothing or trifle. The boundaries that concern me are not the trivialities of whether we use the “f” word or describe degrees of wet or dry, but boundaries of how stories work, how language and form work, how cultural and deeply psychic understandings halt and how we can break out of such haltings.

*What are you working on now? Are you going to follow up with another memoir?*

I am working on a second novel. At the same time, I am preparing three edited and co-edited scholarly and literary volumes for publication this year, another two for publication in the year 2000, and a critical book. All this leaves me no time for poetry.

*As the world shrinks and we move away from issues of national/cultural identities to larger questions of technological imperatives, do you think it behooves writers to enter more the world of science, the world of technology?*

Of course it behooves us all, writers and non-writers, to enter the world of science and technology. My son is in the school of engineering, studying Computer Science. He is fully in this world. Yet he reads postmodern authors such as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, adores dramatists such as Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard, and writes deliciously witty postmodern plays himself, one of which was performed by the Drama Department of the University of California (Santa Barbara) when he was sixteen years old. He is at home in both the Arts and the Sciences; his creativity is impressive. In comparison, I find myself limited, still struggling with ancient questions of identity, subjectivity, and the literary.

*Would you say that in the final count being recognized as a truly international writer, while being very, very good, is still smaller than that wonderful recognition given us by those we love and who say, "You are a good human being"?*

I love it that you say I am a good human being. That is important to me, for it validates my struggle to be a decent person, to be sensitive to those poorer, weaker, and less able. As a colonized child, I was also poor, weak, and powerless, and my identification with that condition is primary. But I do not see this desire for validation as a good human being as on the same plane as recognition for one's writing. The good thing about recognition is that it may bring you readers and perhaps improved conditions for more writing. But whether one is recognized as a good person or recognized as a good writer — these are very different domains.