

The Author As The Novel Self: Shirley Lim's *Sister Swing*

By Denise B. Dillon

A biographer always knows less about his [sic] characters than a novelist, for a novelist can claim omniscience, which a biographer cannot do. (Edel, 1978, 3)

The unmovable self situated in the quicksand of memory, like those primeval creatures fixed in tar pits, that childhood twelve thousand miles and four decades away, is a fugitive presence which has not yet fossilized. (Lim, *Moonfaces*, 1996, 25)

For any reader who has examined Lim's autobiographical work, *Among the White Moon Faces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*, it is challenging to avoid the potential for biographical fallacy in reading and commenting on Lim's second novel, *Sister Swing*. The locations in *Sister Swing* to a large extent parallel the geographical shifts described in Lim's autobiography, from her birth in Malacca, to upstate New York, thence to California and back to New York, this time to Brooklyn. In each location, whether 'real world' or fictional, the protagonist is a minority subject and thus, perhaps most importantly, each of the works reflects a response to ideological struggles, associated with a reaction against either politically-driven or patriarchal censorship and control in postcolonial Malaysia, paired with reaching towards a liberal ideology of freedom (Chin, 2006). The reader has therefore several external "objects" on which to draw. As a counterpoint to the biographical fallacy, I argue here that Lim opportunistically employs authorial omniscience in *Sister Swing* as an instrument to explore environmental, social and cultural influences on the development of a very important internal object, that of self-identity. That is, the author knows the characters intimately because each forms a part of herself.

Foucault poses the question as to what is an author and removes the focus from author to text: "the author does not precede the works" (1969, 12). Indeed, he goes further in reducing the author to a product of interpretation: "The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (12). While Foucault questions what difference it makes who is speaking, for Barthes this difference matters in the sense that the voice comes from the reader rather than the author because in any text "at all its levels the author

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is absent" (1977, 3) and, thus, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (4). The views of Foucault and Barthes thus deny a true authorial voice, which is problematic in cases of authors who are already subjected to marginalization or prohibitions of censorship and particularly so to women authors, for whom the "anxiety of authorship" phenomenon describes a psychological conflict (Gilbert and Gubar 1997, 3) concerning isolation and self-destruction through acts of writing. Far from accepting authorial irrelevance or absence, Bakhtin allows that prose writers "enter into the unitary plane of the novel, which can unite in itself parodic stylizations of generic languages, various forms of stylizations and illustrations of professional and period-bound languages, the languages of particular generations, of social dialects..." (1981, 292). Within the novel's heteroglossia an author is thus able to express a variety of world views that in juxtaposition can "mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" (292). Given the multiple voices expressed in Lim's novel together with her Malaysian background of being a Chinese, bilingual writer in the "alien" language of English and the translation of this background to that of the United States, Bakhtin's notion of the historical reality of language is directly relevant:

Language is something that is historically real, a process of heteroglot development, a process teeming with future and former languages, with prim but moribund aristocrat-languages, with parvenu-languages and with countless pretenders to the status of language which are all more or less successful, depending on their degree of social scope and on the ideological area in which they are employed. (356-357)

For the purposes of this essay, I employ Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical imagination and his ideas about the dynamic development of language as both shaping and being shaped by culture. Complementary to a focus on linguistic idiosyncrasies amongst *Sister Swing's* three narrators, I also apply a Freudian psychoanalytical reading to the novel, and argue that such a perspective provides insights into Lim's authorial voice (with an omniscient point of view) and the crucial themes of identity and freedom in this novel. While there was some earlier resistance to psychoanalytic approaches in Asian American literary studies, Lim, Gamber, Sohn and Valentino (2006, 8) reflect on a later "metacritical phase after 1995" when critics embraced many theoretical approaches including psychoanalysis. Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief* (2000) is an influential example of this latter phase whereby psychoanalytic theory forms the basis for studies of Asian American identity and I use here

the case of Lim in particular as an unfolding of her identity as a tripartite integration of unconscious and conscious influences.

In Lim's novel, the three narrators—sisters Yen, Swee and Peik—convey their collective, family and cultural identity through unique points of view in distinctly different speech types, forming a polyglossia of related but unique characters. Just as Bakhtin argues that characters in a novel offer “their own unique ideological discourse, their own language” (1981, 332), each of the three sisters articulates self-identifying values and world views that indicate separateness as much as sameness. It is through each of the sister's narratives including descriptions of and insights about one or other of their sisters that we come to learn about them in ways that conflict with their own self-reported ‘I’ positions. I employ Freud's (1923) theory of personality development to explore the three sisters as collectively representative of the tripartite self, consisting of the id, ego and superego. In doing so, I draw on these fictional narrative voices in combination with Lim's autobiographical reminiscences as representational background for ideological shifts between notions of determinism and freedom.

Of the 26 chapters, only the first three (and the beginning of chapter 5) are set in Malacca (Malaysia)—the rest have an American focus interspersed with some reminiscences of Malacca as home. The early chapters indicate the nature of the relationships between the sisters, particularly the closeness between the central protagonist Swee and her older sister Yen, and the relative distance between the two of them and their younger sister, Peik, later known as Pearl. Swee's is the predominant voice as narrator of 14 chapters, interspersed with Yen's narration of nine chapters. The more reserved Peik narrates just three chapters but her point of view is awarded equal measure with her sisters in the first three (Swee, Yen, Peik) and final three (Peik, Yen, Swee) chapters. The novel's opening sentence directs our gaze onto the three key figures and draws our curiosity as to how the pivotal event (killing their father) came to occur: “It was Yen who began calling me ‘Sister Swing’. Yen, my oldest sister, who grew up to become younger than me and who shared the secret of how we came to kill our father” (7). Having thus introduced the crucial liberating event, Lim takes her readers into the back story that is necessary to describe each of the sisters' identities, which are further revealed as they in turn narrate their shared and individual experiences.

Drawing on Freud's topographical model of the tripartite self, some parallels can be readily drawn between the id, ego and superego and the three sisters. The id, which develops first and is governed by instinct, is exemplified in the first-born, Yen, by name as by nature. Yen is characterized as impulsive and uncontrollable; she “looked exactly like an unhealthy, voracious appetite” (134). Desirous to be satisfied and bereft of any sense of delayed gratification, Yen “glugs” sodas (232) and “devours”

snacks (247), eating strawberries “straight off the baskets before they could be brought home” (91). A description of Yen “moaning without shame, mucus trickling down her nose like thick tears” (35) affirms her animal nature; “with her wet eyes and damp nose she reminded me of a puppy...” (35). Linguistically, Yen’s vocalizations are in Manglish which, as a creole, reflects her childlike absence of sophistication: “It wasn’t that her words weren’t right. They were right for her...speech came carelessly out of her like hot sputtering oil” (11). This particular variation of the English language, which combines elements of Malay and Hokkien, is a symbolic anchor to the family’s country of origin, Malaysia. However, we have also Lim’s own past on which to draw.

In her autobiographical work Lim recounts affection for her mother’s speech: “Her baba Malay—the Malay spoken by assimilated Chinese—the idiomatic turns of her ethnic identity, was a waterfall whose drops showered me with sensuous music. She was funny, knowing, elegantly obscene” (*Moonfaces* 29). This reflection on Lim’s own childhood memories further sets Yen (and Malaysia) as the basis for the author’s self-identity, and indeed it appears that this identity has roots in Lim’s mother. “My mother lived through her senses” (*Moonfaces* 32), says Lim; “I do not believe she was capable of thinking abstractly. Her actions even late in her life were driven by needs—for food, shelter, security, affection” (*Moonfaces* 32). The desire to fulfill these basic needs mirrors Lim’s own childhood experiences of hunger (e.g., 73, 90-91), loss of home (e.g., 72-73) and motherly abandonment (e.g., 78-81), all recounted in her autobiography. Yen’s voracious appetite and apparent need for security and affection from Swee and Wayne (Yen’s American lover) can be read as referential of these childhood recollections of the often-hungry child whose formative experiences with her assimilated Chinese family in Malaysia translate to the novel form as the part of Lim’s identity that remains strongly Asian and yet finally assimilates to the American dream.

Peik, the lastborn sister, is characterized as the conscientious, moral voice amongst the sisters. In Freud’s model, the superego, or conscience, develops last, and Peik affirms for us of Yen and Swee that “their time together before I was born was like preset concrete, fused into a foundation” (134). This contrast between the firm bond between the two firstborn sisters and their relatively loose connection with their younger sibling is a source of tension for Peik:

My grievance from as long ago as I could remember lay in Yen. Swee could choose to look ahead or behind, be with Yen or with me...She went with Yen wherever trouble was to be found, Yen whom Ah Kong disliked because she couldn't control herself, whose mouth outraged modesty and virtue. (135)

Characterized as the quiet, good-natured foil to the troublesome disobedience and moodiness of her sisters, Peik articulates her moral ideologies in Puritan expressions that frame her in linguistic contrast to her sisters, particularly to Yen's Manglish. Both characterizations are not far from those of Lim's reminiscence of formative influences, for in Peik we find Lim's "Aunt Amy [who] was tamed for pleasure; whatever entered her mouth turned sweet if insipid" (*Moonfaces* 52). Yen, in contrast, echoes her mother and her mother's "youngest sister, [Auntie Lei, who] was ruled by passions. Intense, brooding, her eyes tugged inwards, she was blind to self-interest and to safety" (*Moonfaces* 52). In a further association to Yen, Lei was "like an animal that could not be housebroken" (52). These memories of family members who influenced Lim's formative childhood years are echoed to some extent in portrayals of elements of the sisters, which I read as interdependent elements of the author's self in the novel.

It is from Yen that we learn about Peik's choice to change her name to Pearl, as part of her Christian baptism. This change of name further sets Pearl apart from her sisters, not only due to embracing her "new heavenly life", but also because of indeterminacy of reference (Quine, 1968). "Peik cannot be translated into English", explains Pearl, "because 'White' is not a Christian name. Pearl is better. It means 'precious in the eyes of God.' Pastor Fung chose the name because in Chinese philosophy, 'pearl' also means 'great knowledge'" (60). Adopting "the beautiful language of the Church that I thought would persuade Swee to join me" (32), Pearl finds "a certain unclean association" (136) in the term "mate" and prefers instead the term "helpmeet", as used in church teachings (136). The Puritan doctrine of predestination also resonates in Pearl's belief that her mother's "life was sealed, fated, by her union with Ah Kong" (30), a shared folly which led to Yen being conceived in "mortal sin" (31). This fatalistic acceptance also prevails in Lim's own recognition of her origins in a country and to parents that were not of her choice (*Moonfaces* 26).

To further advance a psychoanalytic reading, examples of the sublimation of the libidinal drive through piety extend to Pearl's puritan attitudes to sex. She veils expressions referring to the natural intimacies of marriage in prudish terms, such as "big with child" (143), and notes that she "took the temperature of my aperture to discover when we should be as man and wife" (143), discussing any such matters with her husband "in the softest whispers" (143). Contrast this against Yen, who with her lover Wayne "made as much noise as I liked" (124), and "was like steam engine train, I went hoo-hooo-hoooo when I wasn't thinking anymore" (124). Contrastive also is Swee, the titular 'Sister Swing', whose ambivalence reflects her tendency to sway between good and bad. With Manuel, a married college professor and her first lover, Swee let this "strange man do

such terrible, wonderful things to my body" (48). As for Sandy, the neo-Nazi Adolphus Weinberger, Swee "refused him for months when he pressed his body against me" (91), because initially he was "in between a brother to us and a lover to me. One step either way and I might be caught in something uncomfortable or even dangerous" (81). Swee eventually accepts him as her second lover. With both Manuel and Sandy she feels "safe in their sex" (92), secure against images of her dead father for whose death she feels responsible. As for Lim's own life connection, she puzzles about these ambivalent feelings towards one's father: "In a Chinese family, perhaps in every family, daughters must be wary of their love for their fathers. ...I wonder if all daughters suffer a revulsion about their fathers' bodies, instinctively reacting to save themselves from unacknowledged dangers" (*Moonfaces* 57-58).

Swee's father is another pivot for her oscillation; her feelings for him reflected in her displacement of this father figure into a bird, which can also be read as a condensation of her own desires for freedom and fears of failure. Swee recounts images of her father's "scary beak that grew pinched when he was angry" (13), the "last images of his furious face, white eyebrows contorted with passion" (16), and "the nightmares of Ah Kong's furious beak" (16), all of which reference a repressive figure that yet models personal freedom and flight. In psychoanalytic terms, displacement of Ah Kong as a rapacious bird figure who haunts Swee's dreams reduces the danger of expressing a desire for physical closeness with him; her libidinal desires are invested in the bird figure as repressor of her own freedom. Lim recounts that as a child "I adored my father's body" (31); a stark contrast with this fictional father figure with "white hairs sticking out of his nose holes" (11) and his "liver-spotty face" (28). It is telling that these negative physical descriptions are narrated by Yen, whose attitude of sexual freedom nonetheless sees her developing a relationship with Wayne, the older man who fills the role of father figure for her.

The polarized characterization of Swee is a suitable fit to the final element in Freud's tripartite model of self, the ego, which operates on the reality principle and mediates between the pleasure-seeking id and the censorial superego. In this case we have Swee as mediator between the impulsive Yen and the moralistic Pearl. "Addicted to flying and afraid of falling" (9), Swee deviates between the thrills of being with Yen (who taught her how to swing and with whom she associates the thrill) and the fear of moral descent, which she staves off to some extent through association with Pearl. Represented as the more academically inclined sibling, Swee also swings between confidence in choices that advance her desires for further education, and to set herself apart from her family, and fear in those same choices. Lim recounts, similarly, that "my badness, evident at every turn, seemed to be produced by my intelligence, which I also believed would

have to save me from myself" (*Moonfaces* 116). This stereotypical angel/monster polarity reflects the "anxiety of authorship" phenomenon that Gilbert and Gubar (1997) describe. Male literary precursors, say Gilbert and Gubar, "incarnate patriarchal authority..., they attempt to enclose her [the female author] in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity" (3).

For Swee, the influence of natural inclinations (even to the extent of identification through language) appears to be the stronger for her; she remains closer to Yen to the dismay of Pearl: "I was relieved when Swee took Yen away to America, but I had suffered–again!–because she had chosen Yen before me" (134). Ironically, it is Pearl's prudish language that prompts some of Swee's alignment with the free-speaking Yen.

No hanky-panky. I didn't know where she'd learned this word. She [Pearl] used it all the time in place of the three-letter word, sex. But I found her choice of words much more obscene. Hanky-panky. What people did behind cover of a handkerchief, hands panking away. I laughed when I thought how horrified my little sister would be if she knew the lascivious images her prim language roused in me. 167

Here we find another alliance with Lim's memoirs, where the imposed language of English stimulates queries about meaning and translation: "As a child I thought [being a Romeo] meant the kind of thing men did to women; not so much in the dark that no one could see it, but sufficiently outside the pale that it was marked with an English word" (*Moonfaces* 15). In Swee's narrations we find language that has neither the parodic stylizations of Yen's Manglish nor the period-bound stylizations of Pearl's Puritanism, and Swee questions Pearl's religious ideology as much as her language in wondering if Pearl "believed her own language" (169) in her description of the weekly Mission feasts as a "communion". The superego as conceptualized by Freud deputizes as censor for the culture in which one exists, and Swee can thus be seen as a compass needle drawn by the opposing "demands of nature [id/Yen] and denials of culture [superego/Pearl]" (Rieff, 1987 56), which for Lim includes the primal language of her childhood (Malay) and her chosen language of expression (English).

The difference in language use amongst the sisters offers analogies to the environmental influences of identity development from the childhood idioms of Lim's Malacca childhood, through to her years of education in English and American literature, and further to the latter years of her

mother's life as a born-again Christian, all of which are recounted in Lim's autobiography. These verbal configurations are significant to a psychoanalytic reading as described in Erikson's commentary (1987 27) of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. As in Bakhtin's notions of polyphonic enhancement through the use of multiple points of view, Erikson proposes that we "profit from insight into the importance of colloquial and linguistic configurations" (27). In *Sister Swing*, the association of the English language with "the liberal ideology of freedom" (Chin, 2006 1) is reworked within the postcolonial and post-independence context of Malacca, Lim's own city of birth, and in the foreign context of America where Lim (and each of the three Wing sisters) experienced life as an unrooted alien. The act of claiming English as one's language of expression under conditions of "linguistic exile" (Chin 9) for a Malaysian writer is in some ways a renegade act, and indeed Lim considers herself still a renegade (*Moonfaces* 25).

In the characterizations of the three sisters as separate but related elements of a tripartite self, it is possible that Lim has opportunistically employed authorial omniscience through these contradictory yet supplementary perspectives to further explore the developmental influences of her own self-identity. In such a reading the three sisters thus all represent elements of Lim's personality as an Asian-American author whose "female heroic of autonomy and resistance" (*Moonfaces* 20) is articulated. In the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition, the id, ego and superego are integral and interconnected components of the personality that allow interpretation of unconscious processes and their influence on behavior. Of course the topographic model offers only partial insight into the self, because it rests on an assumption of the primacy of the unconscious. Thus any feelings, thoughts or memories that are unconscious to us might indeed influence the development of self but we must remain blind to those influences. The fugitive, unfossilized presence of Lim's childhood self can be scrutinized in her rendering of Yen, the eldest sister whose nature and actions are impelled by a primal force. Lim's emotional and physical distance from her mother is in novel form rendered as Swee's distance from Pearl. In autobiographical form we learn about Lim and her then-elderly mother that "we never touched" (*Moonfaces* 310), while in novel form we learn from Swee that "even after all these years I could not hug Pearl" (199). Numerous and various childhood influences infuse the novel to the extent that a biographical fallacy argument diminishes in the face of a complimentary acknowledgement that the novel remains a creative work—a fiction.

The infusion of the authorial voice into a fictional work allows authorial omniscience in characteristic stylizations that tolerate self-analysis and exploration of unconscious drivers that are denied to a biographer who must remain in the realm of the concrete. The world that

the fictional characters inhabit is constructed on the foundations of a childhood past and adult present, upon the language habits experienced across a range of years, identities and cultural pressures, all of which create a historical reality that gives credence to invention. Just as most of the self remains hidden in the unconscious realms, there are many facets of the novel that deserve closer and more comprehensive attention. This psychoanalytic reading of the novel therefore does not provide an end point for interpretation but rather an opening through which to further explore the depths of meaning within the narrative. Some of the deeper meanings to be derived through a psychoanalytic approach emerge through an understanding of the significance of the totemic symbolism of the beaked bird as both father figure and lost potential, for example. The fierce-beaked haunter of dreams becomes the “poor bird father” as a New-York-city pigeon in Swee’s progressive working through the melancholia that ensued after Ah Kong’s death, and the withdrawal of libidinal attraction from this object of both fear and desire. In terms of identity there is scope to understand how one’s past remains a “fugitive presence” that denies a single, unified reading.

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