WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

A Scholar, Poet and Critic: An Interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1994)

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Professor Emeritus Shirley Lim (2020)

This interview was conducted during Shirley Geok-lin Lim's visit to Flinders University in September 1994 and first published in the CRNLE (Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English) *Reviews Journal* in 1995. We are republishing it with Professor Lim's permission, and with a postscript from Dr Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf to bring it up to date.

1995 Introduction

I first started reading Professor Lim's work in her role as a well-known critic of Malaysia and Singapore Anglophone writings, although she was better known as a poet. My brief encounter with Professor Lim during her visit to the CRNLE in conjunction with CRNLE's International Conference in September 1994, was both delightful and inspirational. To me, Professor Lim represents the many invisible tough and strong women in Asia particularly in Malaysia. She has gone through many conflicts and contradictions in her search for identity as a woman.

NF: Professor Lim, welcome to Flinders.

SL: Thank you.

NF: You began writing poetry as a young girl. In a 1988 interview with Grady Timmons, you said it was because you loved the sound of words. You were fascinated by form and craft, and poetry became something of an obsession to you. Do you still hold such views on why you write poetry today?

SL: Well, I'm older now. At a certain point, the relationship between a writer and language becomes almost naturalised. My attitudes towards language and form, I'm sure, have remained basically the same. But there's an over-layer of difference-more contradictory ideas and forces. Recently, I have been undertaking this kind of over-layering of a childhood naturalisation of the relationship towards language. My thinking on form has become much more problematic. At one point I thought of form as conventional form – the sonnet, the trochaic, the iambic pentameter. The satisfaction when I wrote came from constructing a kind of form, an interlocking of a way in which the language was formalised and in emotions substructured in that formalisation. But now, I find myself troubled by that interlocking. I don't like the idea of a poem being interlocked. I have come to a point where I want to push the interlocking boundaries. Not that I am saying a poem should be chaotic or anarchic. I want to see what kinds of new things can be poems rather than the old things.

NF: What have you been working on most recently?

SL: I've been working on a new collection of poems. I've already got a collection ready and I'm looking for a publisher. Hopefully, the new volume has mixed 'forms'. But more and more I am leaving behind the kind of 'locked in' forms and pushing for the more open form, the loose and slack forms.

NF: For whom do you write?

SL: That's a very good question. The question of audience is very troubling to me. First of all, I write in English and many of my poems – not all of them – but many of them have been about my Malaysian experience. In Malaysia, English is not the major language, either of instruction, communication or expression. I don't have a ready-made audience for the experiences that I write from. Also I've been in the United States for so long. I left Malaysia in 1969 and although I go back quite frequently, my major home is the United States: I am at the point where I recognise that my audience is not just Malaysian. For the longest time I had felt that I was writing for a Malaysian audience, no matter how limited, fragmented and illusory. Now, I am recognising that my audience is also American.

NF: In your book of poems *No Man's Grove* (1985), there were numerous observations of the 'female experience' – you spoke of adolescent females and love, marriage, childbirth and motherhood, career women and ageing women. What did you hope to achieve by such portrayals? Were they nostalgic recallings of personal experiences or were they much more than that?

SL: The condition of being a woman rather than the experience of being a woman has always been a very strong motif in my writings, and in many ways autobiographical in base. I have eight brothers. My mother abandoned us when I was eight years old, so I grew up motherless. I had a stepmother with whom I had a very difficult relationship. For me it was very important to figure out what being a woman meant. Of course, like other women, I had

problems with my sexuality and identity. I had problems trying to work out my professional identity together with my identity as mother and wife and as a woman in a community where a woman is supposed to be a certain kind of human being. I don't know that my poems are nostalgic. The poems were an expression of my working out, inviting imagination, on what it is like to grow old, to be in competitive relationship with a woman, for example. What it is like to be in a sexual relationship. The poems are working out these kinds of deeply personal issues.

NF: Do you find writing out these issues to be therapeutic?

SL: A number of people have suggested that. my poems are psychological. As a critic – which I also am – I can see that ideologically many of my poems are subjective, interior and personalized ... As a critic, that doesn't make me happy because I believe writing should be communal, social and political. There is a discrepancy between my theoretical position and my practice as a poet.

I am one of the first to see it. However, when I write, it's not therapeutic. I write for occasions which are based on emotions. In that way, I write in a particular genre of poetry. I don't think of emotion as particularly psychological. All humans possess feelings, that's part of being human. An unhealthy human does not have feelings. One does not have to subscribe to any Freudian theory or believe in a school of psychology to say all humans feel. My poems come from feelings, and that's their limitation as well as their strength.

NF: In an earlier, prize-winning book, *Crossing the Peninsula* (1980), you were much more involved with nature than you were in the later book *No Man's Grove*, with its emphasis on female experience. In *Crossing the Peninsula*, you were exploring diverse themes, but the imagery used was almost always limited to flora and fauna, the land and the sea – to nature. How much are you influenced by Japanese poetry? The Haiku for instance?

SL: Hardly at all. I've read some which I think are interesting. *Crossing the Peninsula* is very Malaysian. The book came out in 1980, but most of the poems were written in the 1960s and 1970s. As a child, I was very much ... physically within the land. I loved the streets of Malacca, the flowers, the smells, the sounds. Some poems were written when I was in America, so there's a great deal of homesickness in them, a longing for home. The poems came out of an intense love and longing for a certain kind of landscape. What you call nature is what I call Malaysia.

NF: I thought that by incorporating this 'nature' you actually bring harmony and unity to yourself and your work.

SL: I would agree with you. I had a strong notion that there was a different wholeness to my experience as a human situated in Malaysia, the land I was born in, the land I grew up in as opposed to my situation in the United States where I saw myself for a very long time as a transplanted human being. The kind of wholeness that one has when one is living in a space

in which one is born, which feels natural and loving, is different from the sense of being when one is transplanted from that space.

NF: As a short story writer, do you see yourself as writing autobiographically?

SL:, Yes and no. Those short stories I published in *Another Country* had some autobiographical perceptions but they were not autobiographical. They were all untruths, stories, narratives ...

NF: Observations ...

SL: They were based on observations but they were all fictions. Even narratives which are not realistic are based on observations on human behaviour. In that way, the stories are local fiction but not autobiographical fiction.

NF: Do you see yourself as speaking mainly for the Chinese-Peranakan community in Malaysia and Singapore?

SL: That's a very good question. Until very recently, yes. I felt that I had a special – I won't use the word 'mission', but a special voice. I came from a special kind of community, the Peranakan community, which had been predicted as 'dead' or 'dying' for the longest time. The scholars of the Peranakan community have been saying for a long time that this society is dead, that people make lots of fuss about it because it is dying, like trees give out beautiful leaves when they die. I wanted to put that community down in writing because writing makes more permanent a community that is passing out. I thought that it was my fate to record this.

I'm writing a novel now with a Peranakan protagonist, but the novel is a huge strategy to incorporate a Bakhtinian dialogism. I'm able to incorporate multiple points of views, something which I have wilfully, deliberately planned. I have some Malay characters in the novel representing recent issues of identities, and of course I have to speak also from the Malay characters' mouths. What comes out from the Malay characters' mouths are statements from another point of view. In the novel, the 'I' or the autobiography of the writer disintegrates. What takes place is a multiplicity of positions. In my novel, I think I'm moving into a different kind of expression.

NF: When do you hope to publish this novel?

SL: I started writing this novel over 17 years ago and because I've been working so hard as a critic, a teacher, a mother and a poet, I've set it aside. I've 200 pages written. I've one more 100-page section to do and I hope to finish it next year.

NF: Do you find that what you have written changes over time? Aren't you afraid of that – that it may get outdated?

SL: Yes, sure! But this novel is written in three books. The first book is set in 1969-which is almost a primal date for Malaysia. The second section is set in the 1970s. It has an American protagonist, and is set in New York. The third book which I'm writing now is set in Singapore in the 1980s. The novel does not get dated because it is already dated within each book ...

NF: Yes ... it's got its own time frame.

SL: That's right, its own chronology. I don't think I've outgrown this novel, since the two books have come out of specific historical moments which are still fictionally accurate.

NF: In your collection of short stories *Another Country and Other Stories* (1982), you wrote of many themes but ostensibly of the Chinese women's struggles in the troubled landscapes of Malaysia. The stories. which were written within a 14-year span (1967-1981) had many portrayals of the 'tough but suffering in silence' kind of woman. 'The Journey', as an example, highlighted the sacrifice made by a woman who had to play the perfect mother and the perfect wife until her last breath – in her sickness, she still managed to cook and keep warm her daughter's meal while her husband sat gambling with his male friends. At her death, the daughter-narrator said, 'Her mother, that strong protective woman who had hugged her whenever she woke up from a nightmare. Tonight she was gone' (41). The story was written in 1967. Way, way back then, did you see the women in Malaysia-often in the roles of mothers and wives-as the backbone of family stability or did you see them as chained in the men's world of domestic slavery? I suppose your answer to this question will reflect your idea of feminism in Asia.

SL: I wrote 'The Journey' as an undergraduate. It's a very old story. As far as I remember, my focus was on the daughter and the daughter's initiation into women's suffering-obviously modelled on the mother's experience. The daughter is an innocent travelling into that evening's recognition of suffering on the part of woman. I had no notion of constructing women as the backbone of the family. This story was written before criticisms of the perceptions of women as victims arose. I was a young woman, then ... an undergraduate, looking up and thinking, 'Gee, women really do have a hard time.' That story is about an abortion – a mother who had too many children, who takes herbs to induce it and suffers through the pains of abortion. The daughter does not know she's seeing an abortion, but she recognises how poverty and a woman's body lead to this ultimate suffering. That's all the story tries to be.

NF: You were not trying to be a premature feminist then? Well, in a way, you were I suppose ...

SL: I attended the Malacca High School for my HSC, and I applied for a scholarship. I was quite poor as a child. We had a principal then, Colonel Wade – he was once from the British Army, but lived on in Malaysia.

NF: It was an all-girls school?

SL: No, it was a co-ed school, but it was the only 6th Form in Malacca, so either you went to the High School or didn't do your HSC. Colonel Wade was British but he has continued to live in Malaysia. He's now in Penang, you know, in his 70s or 80s. I guess he just loves Malaysia and stays on. He wrote a letter for me to get my fellowship – which I never read. Later, when I was living in America, my father sent me some old letters and record books. I opened the letter and he had written, 'Miss Lim is this kind of student da...da...da...da...da...and, I predict, she will be the foremost feminist in her country when she grows up.' (Laughs)

NF: Really?

SL: Isn't that amazing? Of course, at that time in the 6th Form, I didn't even know the meaning of 'feminism'.

NF: Well, I suppose in Asia, feminism has always been there ... but without a name.

SL: We've always had strong women in Asia. How did mothers feed their children when they had six, eight, or twelve children? We've always had strong women in Malaysia but we have not always been organised as women. We're always organised as part of a family system, a kinship system ...

NF: I suppose we're more into practice than into theories ...

SL: Yes. Our practice was limited to kinship, and so we had not organised ourselves as women, although we're organised as members of groups.

NF: You once said Asian women were invisible in the US in terms of feminist criticism. Are they still today?

SL: I think Western white women try harder to include different points of view because Western feminism has now taken race as a primary category. That is itself problematic, if you think race is a problematic category. But it does mean an attempt to include multiple subjectivities. Asian women are not much more visible, but they are heard more often.

NF: Do you have problems in getting your work published in the US?

SL: No, I'm sometimes a little uncomfortable with being published in the US. Because of the way in which ideas get circulated, there is the tendency for someone to be picked up as a representative, the way that Toni Morrison is perceived as the representative of African-American women or Sandra Cisneros becomes the representative of Chicano women. I am careful that I do not allow myself to be used as a representative. I mean, who do I represent in the United States? Do I represent Asian women? In Malaysia, I can't even represent Malaysian women writers (laughs). I'm very particular. I can only speak for myself and for those women who wish me to speak for them. I never claim to speak beyond that. I never claim to speak for Malaysian women because I know that in Malaysia, there are different

kinds of women-different ethnic identities. Although I do not claim to speak as an Asian woman, I have not had problems publishing.

NF: That's good. In the Western literary women's world, humour, politics and experimentation energise their writings. Do you see similar phenomena taking place in Asian women writers – be they writings in English or otherwise?

SL: I speak only for Anglophone writing. When I write, I begin with that statement because I don't wish to give the impression that I'm speaking for women who are writing in other languages. I recognise that women writing in Bahasa have different experiences and different ideologies. Women writing in Chinese in Singapore come from a cultural background different from the Anglophone culture in which I choose to write.

Speaking about Anglophone writing from Malaysia/Singapore, I don't see much Anglophone writing coming from Malaysia, or if it is, it's not being published and circulated. There's quite a bit coming from Singapore. With the younger writers (and by younger, I mean a generation younger than me) women writing in their 30s display a playfulness, boldness, and experimentation which is quite marvellous and wonderful.

When I was in Singapore last time, they were talking about a popular book by a model called Bonny Hicks called *Excuse me, are you a model*? I couldn't get a copy of it. It is popular writing, not like Charles Dickens' or Jane Austen's books. It's all about being a model in Singapore, a narrative confessional including sexual encounters ... quite shocking in puritanical Singapore. I find that kind of transgression impressive. I think it's wonderful that the younger women are doing that.

NF: Emma Tennant once suggested that women writers should break away from traditional forms to see if the thriller or science fiction can release an unsuspected voice in oneself. Tennant believes in exploring the potential of many genres to look at the psyche of women. What are your views on this where Asian women writers are concerned?

SL: I think it's absolutely positive. Look at Ursula LeGuin, who writes science fiction. A lot of women are now writing detective thrillers with the woman as the brain, you know. However, I don't know if Asian women now can approach the science fiction or the detective thriller genre as a form that is natural to them. After all, the detective genre is not something that is part of many Asian societies. We don't have detectives in Asia ... (laughs) ... do we?

NF: Yes ... no ...

SL: We don't pay for the gumshoe to check on a husband who's cheating, or the wife who's cheating. It's not part of our culture. Science fiction is not much part of our culture either. I am not sure that science fiction could be the way for us to go. But there are other Asian forms. I think the popular women's romance can be taken as a much more serious genre. The story of mother and daughter is very common. Asian women can pick it up again. There are

other stories, myths. Women tell lots of fairy tales and myths. It's been part of a woman's tradition to tell those kinds of stories.

NF: Children's literature?

SL: Children's literature, songs, lyrics. Many alternatives are part of Asian cultures.

NF: When you started writing in the 60s in Malaysia, you were among the few women writers – even fewer who wrote in English. What was it like?

SL: I had always wanted to be a writer from a very early age. I wrote my first poem when I was ten years old. As a student in the English Department, I'd seen myself as a Malaysian writer and being young, I was naive and not aware of the different political and social movements that were happening around me. I never thought that there was something strange about wanting to be a Malaysian writer writing in English. I just assumed it was OK ...

NF: It was a natural thing to do for you ...

SL: Yes, I was studying in English and I wanted to be a Malaysian writer. But of course, historical moments change. These moments don't stay forever. It was quite discomforting as a young woman to come to a historical moment where I felt I could not be a writer if I was writing in English. I thought it was unfair. I felt personally attacked by that kind of position. It was one of the major reasons for my decision not to return to Malaysia, because for me, writing is very, very important. It's part of my construction of self and ego. I had a vocation to be a writer. I could not write in anything but English and if I could not write in English and be admitted into Malaysia then I would write from outside Malaysia. I hear now, but don't know if it's true ... that it is possible to be in Malaysia and write of Malaysia in English.

NF: Yes, it has been encouraging.

SL: I hope that will continue to be true.

NF: Were you influenced by the male writers/poets/educators of the 60s? – in terms of form and subject matter?

SL: Yes...unfortunately so...

NF: Poetry was considered a very male thing...

SL: Yes, unfortunately. so. I once met an American woman biographer, Nancy Milford, who had written the biography of Zelda Scott Fitzgerald. I met her at Princeton at a Summer seminar there when I was already in my late 20s. She said to me, 'When American women poets were writing in the early twentieth century, they always constructed the 'I' as a male 'I'

because they had read Keats, Byron and Wordsworth. Every time they wrote 'I', the poem's 'I' was the voice of the male poet.' And I thought, 'she's right, she's right!'

For me, it was even worse because it's not just the male poet, but it was the male WHITE poet ... It was doubly uncomfortable for me to recognise it then. It is true that when I was growing up this was the voice I heard in my head. It was the only voice which I was allowed to listen to. It's been a struggle for me to get away from that. That's what critics call the decolonisation of education.

NF: Do you think you have gone through the three phases of (i) imitation of a dominant tradition, (ii) protest and advocacy of minority rights and values and (iii) self discovery? Elaine Showalter calls the three phases the feminine, feminist and female.

SL: (Laughs.) I am amused that anyone would set forth a system of evolution that suggests we pass through stages seamlessly. We have regressive tendencies in ourselves, just as much as the most regressive people have progressive impulses. We are a mass of contradictions and conflicts, and things that happen within us happen in swirls rather than in a linear fashion as in moving from primitive to most advanced and modern.

I reject looking at such movements as linear. I've moments of conflicts and contradictions. I have regressive and progressive impulses. I don't see myself as progressing through stages although I am undergoing the process of decolonisation – understanding how my colonial education has constructed my sense of self as a subject; my voice as a writer; trying to break out of that narrow interlocking structure; looking for liberal and liberating ways to construct an alternative sense of self in relationship to society. I do see the decolonising process at work, but I do not see a linear sequence ...

NF: Thank you. Finally, what is your vision of the future of women writing in English in Asia, especially in Malaysia and Singapore?

SL: My vision is that it will always be a contested space, and maybe marvellously so; it should be contested. There is something absolutely wonderful about writing in other languages – national, ethnic, and sub-national. A language makes certain groups special. If all of us spoke in the same tongue, we would lose that particular individuality that makes the world so beautiful, hybrid and gorgeous. I do see a multiplicity of languages in Malaysia happening.

At the same time, the world has become a smaller world. At one time, to travel from Malaysia to London would have taken months, then weeks. Now, it takes hardly 12 hours. It's a smaller world not only for travel but in terms of consequences. Where people burn coal, another country suffers pollution. Where people eat too much meat, another country suffers poverty and they both are related to one another. They are not separate. The whole world has become one spaceship. What someone does has consequences on someone else living thousands of miles away.

The more we recognise this new vulnerability of humanity, how we are vulnerable to each other, the better it is for all of us as a species. English is now a world's language, transnational, partly because technology is communicated in English. For any country to

become a technological society, it has to use English. One of the reasons why Japan is falling behind in the computer communications race is that people do not buy and work on internet and communications structures in Japanese. We have to learn English. English is absolutely essential for any country, society, a group of people to function as a part of the global unit. In that way, writing in English will always have a space in any society. But it will be contested. I hope that the contestation will produce a great deal of excitement and instruction, and no bloodshed and violence.

NF: Let's hope so. Thank you for a very interesting interview. I wish you well in your...

SL: In my poetry, I hope.

NF: Poetry ... memoirs ... novels ... Thank you.

SL: Thank you.

Postscript: Shirley Lim in 2020

The interview above was done in 1994. A lot had taken place in both our lives. I reconnected with Shirley Lim once again recently and was happy to know that she continued writing creatively while still keeping herself busy as Research Professor at University of California in Santa Barbara. She continues to write poems, short stories, novels, memoirs as well as critical essays and continues to be published across the globe, from the USA to Singapore to Australia, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia and so forth.

Shirley Lim was recently honoured on her 75th birthday with a Festscrift edited by Mohammad A. Quayum and published in the Journal of Transnational American Studies - https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jz853hc

Some of her writings include the following:

Work in Progress

Interviews with Women of a Certain Age: chapters in progress, 'Nisei Life Stories: An Interview with Mitsuye Yamada,' co-authored with Caroline Hong and Sharon Quan-Tang; 'An Interview with Florence Howe: A Feminist Life in Writing'; Maxine Hong Kingston: A Retrospective Interview.'

Poetry, Fiction, Memoirs

Do You Live In? Ethos Books: Singapore, 2015.
Ars Poetica for the Day. Ethos Books: Singapore, 2015.
The Irreversible Sun. West End Press: Albuquerque, 2015.
Embracing the Angel. Department of English: City University of Hong Kong, 2014.
Mall Ballads: Hong Kong Festival Walk Poems. Department of English: City University of Hong Kong, 2013.
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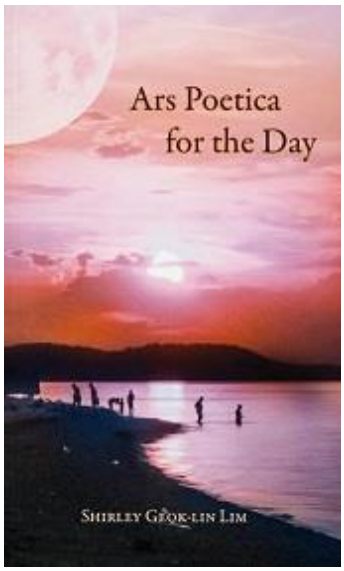

The Ice Ball Man: Children's Poems, by Margaret Leong. Co-ed. with Angelia Poon, 'Introduction,' Ethos Press/National Book Development Council, Singapore, 2011.
Sister Swing, A Novel, Singapore/London: Marshall Cavendish, new ed. 2011; Marshall Cavendish, 2006.
Walking Backwards: New Poems, West End Press: Albuquerque, 2010.
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'I Remember,' From 'Divorce,' 'Silence,' 'Evenings,' 'On Hearing a Woman Poet Read,' Pantoum for Chinese Women,' 'How Does a Building Collapse?' 'The Source,' 'Ah Mah,' 'Open Beach,' 'Public Reading,' 'Letting off Steam,' 'Ah Pehs,' 'Tuesday Morning Noon,' 'Ice Skating in Kowloon,' 'Mother in the suburbs,' 'Our People's Wish,' *Unfree Verse*, ed. Tse Hao Gung, Joshua Ip, Theophilis Kwek, Singapore: Ethos Books, 2017:58, 74, 76, 77, 83, 110, 143, 145, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 222, 238,
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Faridah is also a published poet and short story writer who is currently finishing writing her historical novel entitled Wanita Rawa Terakhir *which is part of her FRGS research grant on the contribution of the Rawas in the early nineteenth-century Tanah Melayu. Her edited book with Dr Aimilia Ramli*, English Literary Studies and the Islamicisation of Knowledge in the era of Islamophobia and Westernophobia, *was published by IIIT in 2017. She has just launched two anthologies:* The Bridge: Emerging Writings from Pakistan and Malaysia *(a project with a university in Pakistan) and* Travel Poetry *(her second collection of poems in English).*